

A 29th Fundamental Belief

**How Many Will
Be Saved?**

**Civil Unions as a
Religious Liberty Issue**

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Adventist *Today*

**Why I Love Atheists,
Agnostics, Backsliders,
Unbelievers, Cultural
Adventists, and
All Who Are at the
Margins of the Faith**





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Why I Love Atheists, Agnostics, Backsliders, Unbelievers, Cultural Adventists, and All Who Are at the Margins of the Faith

By Loren Seibold

I'm a Seventh-day Adventist stretching back for at least four generations on both my mother's and father's sides. My wife, Carmen, and I have more than our fair share of church workers in our families—pastors, teachers, and at least one or two who ascended into the rarefied atmosphere of administrative offices. By far the largest number of our friends (in real life and on Facebook) are what one acquaintance affectionately refers to as “sevens.”

I know these folks—you folks—well. I know how to talk with you. I know what to expect. I understand your language. I've done all of my maturing and learning with you, and I'd be quite lost in the world without my rooting in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

But in my grouchy old age, I've become less patient with many of our assumptions about both theology and culture. It struck me one day that I've always had a set of people in my life who question Adventist theological assumptions, who might once have believed all of it but don't anymore. And I am increasingly appreciating them. Some of them are the most thoughtful, honest, interesting people I know.

In spite of my role as an advocate for the Christian faith, I no longer feel that my unbelieving friends are threatening—or even that they're all going to be lost.

The Unbelievers

Within the biblical context, most people believed in some deity. If it wasn't big-Y Yahweh, it was some minor god or set of them. The Hebrew Bible is occasionally a bit cagey about those other gods, saying only that you should put “no *other* gods *before Me*.” Some of those other gods were probably fairly harmless, but some were horrible: people sacrificed children to them.

To be an unbeliever in that context was to reject the demands of our one God, not to doubt if there was anything out there at all. The closest we get to atheism in the Bible is Ecclesiastes, a book that would be removed from Scripture entirely if anyone actually read it and didn't try to rationalize away what it says.

Atheism had peeked out here and there way back in history, especially in Far Eastern cultures. We in the Western world trace our alarm about it to the Enlightenment. For most of history, God was needed in order to explain how all of us and the world we live in got here in the first place—and why we're conscious of it. No wonder that the first intellectual attack on God was deism, the notion of a creating but subsequently uninvolved God.

Voltaire is the *bête noire* of modern atheism, the thinker whose beliefs (or lack thereof) were briefly tried out in the French Revolution. But the person who chipped away most successfully (though unintentionally) at the foundation of belief in God was Charles Darwin, who came up with a way for the world and all of the life in it to be here without the need for a creating God at all.

I will not, unlike a few of my friends, pretend that I am able to explicate the junction between faith and science. I maintain that in the end, one must accept God without scientific evidence. My belief in God is idiosyncratic, and I expect that probably most people's is, if they've thought about it at all.

We're All Agnostic

The word “agnostic” means “unable to know,” and that describes more than just those who call themselves unbelievers. By definition, faith is not knowing for sure. If you knew, you wouldn't need faith. It would be knowledge. So, all of us are agnostic.

Life frequently requires us to act on what we can't know for certain. I saved money for my retirement, though there was a chance (probably better than most people's, because my parents died young) that I'd never reach it. But even that decision was backed up by, if not proof, at least some evidence: most people like me *do* live into retirement, so it would be foolish for me to assume I wouldn't.

But religious faith is in a category of its own. It posits something we've been told about, and perhaps experienced, but have virtually no stand-up-in-court evidence for.

By definition, faith is not knowing for sure. If you knew, you wouldn't need faith. It would be knowledge. So, all of us are agnostic.

People in the Bible said they had direct knowledge of God, and some today still claim that, saying they've experienced miracles or have talked to God. But this is highly individualized evidence, generally inferred rather than proven. That doesn't mean they're wrong; it just means that they believe it—and act on it—without *proof* they can show to the rest of us. We who gather in churches do so to share such convictions and experiences and to be strengthened by one another. But we still accept our shared experiences by faith, not scientific proof.

Philosophers have tried to prove God's existence, but their arguments always fall short. Nor has science done better. As a child I was told that we could see heaven through a hole in the constellation Orion and could astronomically calculate that missing hour when the sun stood still in Joshua 10. Neither is true. Later I was told that creation was proven by the design of living things. Science has whittled away at that, too. As for miraculous healing, we pray, but we still schedule surgery.

One of the best proofs for God, potentially, would be if believers were unfailingly kinder, happier, healthier, and had better morals than unbelievers. Though the problems of Christian people may be different, I can't say that I have found Christians necessarily *better*. I've certainly seen no evidence of the oft-boasted perfection.

Throughout history Christians have shown themselves adept at justifying their mistreatment of others: racism, sexism, and sometimes even sexual and physical abuse have been defended biblically. Organized religion has made into a science the technique of manipulation to advance institutional success. Jesus' example notwithstanding, churches have defended not a few end-justifies-the-means practices and beliefs. And here and there, Christianity has spawned genuine narcissists and sensualists.

Where I Put My Faith

It can be hard to know, among all of the competing claims by religious people, what one should believe. But one thing—the most important thing—I have faith in is that God is good. That God is neither unreasonable nor selfish. That God's understanding of us is far above our understanding of ourselves, of one another, and of the world we live in. That God is neither petulant nor cruel. That God doesn't double-speak, or hide intentions, or make us figure out things with algebra in order to be saved. That God doesn't base our

salvation on things like food or jewelry or on which human organization records our names on its books. And that, above all, God understands our difficulty to believe in Godself.

This last is essential to me. We recognize when human beings are good, and we love them for it. Isn't God, by definition, better? Jesus made a version of this argument: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matt. 7:11, KJV).

So many unkind Christians describe God as their own alter ego, the big guy up there who just wants to kick unbelievers' bottoms straight into hell. Frankly, the kind of God many Christians describe, and the kind of God they personify, isn't one I want to spend eternity with. I'd rather be destroyed in hell than spend forever with a God who was anything like some of the believers I've known.

Who Can God Save?

A dear friend of mine, a deeply sincere and godly Adventist, told me that his son had confessed to him that he was not only no longer a church member, but he was an atheist. "My son is a good man," he told me. "A kind and wonderful father, son, and husband. But I've accepted that I will not be spending eternity with him."

I found that heartbreaking. Fortunately, I don't believe it, and I wish I could convince him to doubt it, too. In the world in which we have landed, it's hard to believe in God, and one article of my personal faith is that God has to understand that, or he's not a God I'd want to be in heaven with.

There are multiple reasons why one may reject a belief in God, and even more reasons to reject the traditional notions advanced by misinformed Christians. Perhaps this unbeliever is an analytical thinker who can't square the claims of science with the claims of the Bible. Perhaps he was given a wrong picture of God—one he can't accept—and is unable to see God differently. Perhaps he was exposed to the kind of spiritual manipulation that is so common in religious organizations. Perhaps the sin and suffering of the world hurts him too deeply for him to be able to discern a benevolent deity behind it. Perhaps he hasn't the emotional makeup to "feel" God's invisible presence in a "relationship," which is how many Christians confirm their belief in God.

I have to believe, if I am to believe in God at all, that God understands and takes into account all of that. After all, if you and I can understand why people are as they are, why couldn't God? Why would God throw under the bus a completely honest, searching, good man who, because of experiences and personality traits outside of his control, can't accept the kind of God that is meaningful to you and me?

In spite of my role as an advocate for the Christian faith, I no longer feel that my unbelieving friends are threatening—or even that they're all going to be lost.

What We Can't Know

Let's be bluntly honest here. In spite of what the Bible tells us, our understanding of God is necessarily murky. This is because, first, the Bible was written by *human beings* who were trying to understand God. It is an account of the experience of *good men* (as far as we know, all men), but still men. Secondly, it's because God is infinite and we are by definition highly limited. Consider this remarkable passage: "Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?" (Isa. 40:13-14, NIV).

So, the details of what you and I think we know about God may simply not prove to be true—or are true only in some schematic or abstract form. When Paul says, "how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Rom. 11:33, KJV), he confirms that all we know of God are some human-graspable metaphors. And if God isn't a whole lot more than that, I'm going to be greatly disappointed, for "For who hath known the mind of the Lord?" (1 Cor. 2:16, KJV).

Evidence? When the Son of God came as a healer, teacher, and martyr, *the people who knew the most about God didn't recognize him*. God's willingness to save, the Bible says, is far beyond ours, which is something Jesus both said and demonstrated repeatedly in his interaction with the church of his day. So I don't think it's at all far-fetched to suppose that God is willing to save all people

who are honest and true in heart, even if they are unable to believe precisely what you and I do.

The Necessity of Doubt

I will go farther. I submit for your consideration that doubt is a valuable quality, one that Christianity would be impossible without. Doubt is a function of asking good questions, of studying and analyzing, of having an open mind—in short, of having the courage to think things over carefully.

Do we value an open mind? We should. It's what allowed Abraham to leave paganism and become a follower of Yahweh. It let the apostles set aside Judaism for Christianity. It's what the pioneers of our church had when they crafted the teachings that led to the creation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The "present truth" we Adventists proclaimed meant that some had doubted what they'd previously been told.

Even today, all of the best scholars make progress only because they question the conventional wisdom. There can be no accepting of new ideas without questioning—that is, doubting—old ones. Of all the people I know who are connected to Adventism, whether they still fully believe or not, the ones I most respect are those who had the courage to say, "Let's take another look at that."

I am sad to say that we are now reluctant to be that sort of people. At some point—I am of the opinion it began with the death of Ellen White, though it may have happened sooner—our organizational psychology changed from being a seeking people to a defensive people. We are now merely apologists for a 19th-century message, large chunks of which are anything but "present truth."

This has made us not smarter, not thinkers at the cutting edge of faith and culture as we might once have been, but dangerously gullible. All you have to do is look at the number of us who subscribe to every prediction of the most speculative of our eschatologists, such as Walter Veith.

Ask an Adventist what is most important in our faith, and the answer will probably be a series of "ands" that connect everything in our fundamental beliefs and beyond. We tend to see everything in our stable of beliefs and practices as equally important. And when everything is important, nothing is of particular importance, and we wander among uncertainties. Is it any wonder that we lose track of basic ethical principles, even while we defend

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WHY WE SHOULD VALUE A DIVERSITY OF BELIEFS

BY DAVID GEELAN

WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT (AND MANY DON'T, WHICH IS WHY I'll try to persuade you to see it as I do), Seventh-day Adventism is a "broad church." Simple observation shows that a wide range of cultures, beliefs, rituals, expectations, theological approaches, and other differences exist within the denomination.

This breadth, arguably, also includes a range of *degrees* of belief or, at least, of degrees of confidence and certainty.

Recently I was on a discussion forum in which a short description was linked to each participant's username. One participant, whom I've come to know well through our discussions, uses the description "Nigerian Catholic Agnostic." He was challenged by some other Christians, who claimed that it is impossible to be a Christian while acknowledging a lack of certainty.

The discussion got somewhat heated, and in the end, there really wasn't a consensus. I think most people who are honest with themselves would acknowledge that everyone has 3 a.m. dark nights of the soul, when doubt is hard to avoid. Jesus told "doubting" Thomas that "it would be better if you'd been able to believe with less evidence," but he nonetheless gave Thomas the evidence he needed (see John 14:24-29), and Thomas remained an apostle.

Perhaps what bothered some of the other Christians on the discussion board was my Nigerian friend's naming of his doubt, identifying as someone who continues to live in uncertainty rather than regarding it as a character flaw to be overcome and never publicly proclaimed. Some felt that identifying as agnostic was inherently a repudiation of faith, rather than a cry of "Lord, I believe—help my unbelief."

The *Adventist Today* community cultivates relationships with people who have a range of beliefs, from individuals who consider themselves agnostics or atheists to convinced and confident believers. Yet, I argue, believing or unbelieving isn't that simple, and the complexity is worth closer examination.

Continua of Belief

Even finer subtleties lie beyond the question of whether one has a strong, moderate, or provisional kind of belief that there's Someone out there. For example, a person can hold (1) belief in Jesus Christ as Savior—more than just an historical teacher—or (2) belief in Christianity as a religious perspective or (3) belief in Seventh-day Adventism specifically.

Even within this denomination, some who believe fervently in the organization and identify as Seventh-day Adventists may have issues with one or more of the fundamental beliefs.

For example, Fundamental Belief No. 6 was changed to tighten and limit its meaning to recent creationism only. This alienates members who subscribe to ancient creationism, intelligent design, theistic evolution, or any of a range of other positions on origins, yet still regard themselves as faithful Seventh-day Adventists—even otherwise quite orthodox ones.

Similarly, Fundamental Belief No. 23 limits marriage to a man and a woman, while many Adventists accept same-sex marriages and consider themselves to be members of the community nonetheless.

There is not a simple continuum, then, between absolute certainty in Christianity and absolute certainty in atheism. (Atheism itself can be divided into disbelief in the existence of the Christian God as he is usually understood, as disbelief in the existence of any and all possible gods, goddesses or godlike beings, or a range of other things.)

Instead, we find many continua, in relation to different issues. Some people would place themselves in a particular position on each of those continua while others, if asked, might say, “I simply haven’t thought about that.” And many would wonder whether their position today is fairly stable or in flux in some way. Many of us are on conscious, lifelong journeys as we seek to harmonize our beliefs with the evidence we see around us and with our values.

The Community Needs Them All

“Iron sharpens iron,” as the Book says (Prov. 27:17), and communicating lovingly—but also with careful and thoughtful intellectual engagement—with others who believe differently

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challenges us to think through, refine, and improve our own ideas and beliefs, as well as their effects in terms of how we treat others and the natural world. The diversity of Adventism, and Christianity more broadly, is a feature, not a bug. Faith is not the kind of thing where the ideal is perfect agreement in all points.

Note that I didn’t write “perfect harmony,” because harmony doesn’t exist if the choir members are all singing exactly the same note. The relationships between the pitches of the *different* notes are what leads to harmony. A respectful approach, which accepts that your E is a major third of my C and that the sound is richer and more interesting when we sing together, is much more

powerful than one that insists some sing above and some below their vocal range so that they’ll all sound *exactly like me*.

Indeed, sometimes, the song cries out for a major second!

In addition to a set of fundamental beliefs and a massive international organization with officers, ministers, universities, colleges, schools and hospitals, Seventh-day Adventism is also a community. Quite a few who grew up in Seventh-day Adventist homes, or who have spent time in Adventist schools or churches but no longer identify as members and may not be on the formal membership rolls, nonetheless still identify as members of this community. They’re likely to have friends and family, memories and history together. They understand haystacks and have heard, or perhaps participated in, debates about wearing jewelry and swimming on Sabbath. These people “get” Adventism, and Adventism also “gets” them—and hopefully regards them as assets and fellow travellers, rather than as “backsliders” who are “lost.”

Some of these individuals have moved on to different Christian denominations or to other religious traditions, while others consider themselves Christians but don’t attend a church. Some may fall into the “spiritual but not religious” set, and still others may identify as agnostic or atheist. They’re still, if they choose to be, part of the Adventist community.

Efforts to adjust policies or tighten fundamental beliefs in order to exclude people from the Adventist community are counterproductive, I would argue, and also counter to the example Jesus set. Jesus was radically inclusive. His instruction was to go out into the highways and the byways “and *compel* them to come in” (Luke 14:23, emphasis added). He ministered to those beyond the pale in his society: the ceremonially unclean, such as lepers and a woman with a discharge; the Samaritans and others who “worshipped wrongly;” those in difficult sexual and relationship situations, such as the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery; and even the hated oppressors, including a Roman centurion plus Matthew and Zacchaeus the tax collectors.

Jesus wasn’t drawing boundaries and deciding who gets to be in the club. He modeled the acceptance and inclusion of all humanity—or at least those who chose to be part of the community.

Can this church do less? **AT**



Between Atheism and Fundamentalism: A TAXONOMY OF FAITH

By Steven Siciliano

We live in a highly polarized time, not just in politics but for almost every topic of interest and import, including religious faith. When it comes to beliefs about the Bible in particular, the positions that get the most exposure are the two extremes: a hyperliteralism that argues for the scientific and historical veracity of every verse, or a disparaging atheism that writes off the entire book and its millennia-long tradition as outdated, if not dangerous.

Yet, nuance is important. Less contentious points lie between the poles. So, for the sake of conversation, I've drawn up a taxonomy of faith that attempts to mark points along that continuum. I begin with the position of a complete skeptic and move to what we would generally call a fundamentalist faith stance.

This list is a terse attempt to define and distinguish different ways of viewing the Bible and its teachings. I invite readers to develop, combine, reshuffle, or dispute them. I have a hunch that adopting, or at least ascribing value to, the midway points on the continuum will lessen the level of antagonism between believers and others and will promote a greater sense of respect and appreciation for one another and for the biblical tradition itself, which will be valuable for promoting dialogue and shaping experience.

Please understand that this is not a philosophical research paper, and I'm certain it doesn't exhaust all possible options. My intention is only that it will serve as a starting point for discussion and personal story-sharing. Where along this line do you find yourself?

1	2	3
The Bible's accounts are myths in the negative sense	The Bible's accounts are myths in the positive sense	The Bible's accounts are culturally important stories



1. The Bible's accounts are myths, in the negative sense of being fictitious stories and moral prescriptions deriving from an outdated worldview, which do not correlate with empirical reality but often contradict it. They do no real good but only delude people, impede social and scientific progress, and deserve to be jettisoned as soon as possible.

2. The Bible's accounts are myths in the positive sense, in that they impart moral lessons. The Bible's stories and concepts do not mirror any real, unseen beings or processes but function more like helpful fables or parables.

3. The Bible's accounts are culturally important stories that not only teach life lessons, but also provide a foundational worldview to live by, even though the alleged entities referred to do not really exist.

4. The Bible's accounts are positive myths that provide moral guidance and an overarching worldview and at the same time connect us with otherwise indescribable or undetectable realities, such as "spirit" or the inexorable law of justice. They serve as language and thought frameworks that mirror things that do exist "out there," in the same way that scientific models help us predict outcomes and prescribe behavior even though they may not describe things as they ultimately are.

5. The Bible's accounts are a record of the Judeo-Christian tradition's evolving views about God, morality, and the human condition. Phrased differently, they are a record of God's progressively more accurate revelation of himself, the nature of the world, and how we should conceptualize both. They are couched in language and concepts that suited the people and times in which they were written but can be, and perhaps should be, sifted for principles that apply universally.

6. The Bible's accounts are inspired words that not only connect us with unseen realities in an approximate way (as in point four), but also correlate closely with the principal entities or phenomena to which they refer, such as a personal God who is present and committed to covenant relationship with the world; the reality of alienation from God and from one another due to human unfaithfulness; the need for reconciliation through Jesus; access to the life of God living in us through the Spirit, et cetera.

7. The Bible's accounts are inspired and fully accurate stories and propositions that provide a compendium of true and reliable facts regarding every topic they touch on, including history, morals, and science. For this reason, they both judge and take precedence over all other opinions and worldviews, as well as the claims of various academic disciplines. **AT**

4

The Bible's accounts are positive myths that provide moral guidance and an overarching worldview

5

The Bible's accounts are a record of the Judeo-Christian tradition's evolving views about God, morality, and the human condition

6

The Bible's accounts are inspired words

7

The Bible's accounts are inspired and fully accurate stories and propositions

HOW MANY WILL

SOME 20 YEARS AGO, I WAS APPROACHED BY A DUTCH REFORMED pastor who had heard that I'd translated some theological books from Dutch into English. He had written a profound study about the topic of universalism, the theory that eventually all people are going to be saved. An American publisher accepted the book for publication on condition that the author would deliver an English language version, and since I'd earlier translated some books from Dutch for this publisher, they suggested me.¹ While translating this book, I became acquainted with all of the biblical arguments one can possibly find in support of the thesis that in the end, every man and woman who ever lived on this Earth will be saved.

I must, however, admit that when the job was finished, I was not convinced. Now, two decades later, I feel rather attracted to the universalist position and wish it were true, though it still seems to me that the many statements in the Bible about judgment and eternal loss cannot just be explained away as examples of literary hyperbole. Even though God would want all of his creatures to live eternally (2 Pet. 3:9), the sad reality is that some simply do not want to be saved!

This raises the inevitable question: How many will be saved, and how many will be lost? Revelation 12:17's reference to "the rest" or a "remnant" of offspring seems to suggest that only a small, elect group will survive the final satanic onslaught on God's people in the end of time.

Moreover, did Jesus not pose the ominous question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8, NIV). And did Jesus not say that "the road that leads to destruction" is "broad" and that "many enter through it" (Matt. 7:13, NIV) while, on the other hand, "the road that leads to life" is "narrow," with the unfortunate consequence that "only a few find it" (verse 14, NIV)?

Pluralism and Universalism

Mission experts have long debated the vexing question of who will eventually be saved.² Will only committed Christians be admitted to the heavenly kingdom? Is that what the apostle Peter meant when, "filled with the Spirit," he pointed the Jewish spiritual elite to the exclusive role of Jesus Christ: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, NIV)?

"No" is the answer of those who are convinced that God has revealed himself in all religious traditions and that there are many different paths that lead to the Beyond, even though these

are all conditioned by historical developments and cultural circumstances. Those who, like my Dutch Reformed pastor friend, defend *universalism* emphasize biblical passages that appear to stress the all-encompassing impact of divine grace. A favorite is 1 Corinthians 15:22-28, which ends with the magnificent promise that all of God's enemies will face defeat and that, at long last, God will place everything under Christ's authority, "so that God may be all in all" (verse 28, NIV).³

At the same time, however, texts that speak about judgment and damnation are played down and explained as hyperbolic. Some universalists, citing statements in 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6, believe that those who have not chosen rightly in this life will have a *post mortem* chance.

Many, however, reject the view that all religions are fundamentally of equal value (*pluralism*), as well as the idea that all people will ultimately be saved (*universalism*) and argue that, if this were the case, the command of Christ to go out into the world and persuade as many people as possible to accept the gospel message has lost all meaning.

Exclusivism

Exclusivists (sometimes also referred to as *restrictivists*) defend the view that salvation is only through Christ. They say that people need to hear the gospel and must get the opportunity to respond, and that there is no road to salvation except through Jesus Christ! The Bible is clear, they say: "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5, KJV). If some "honest" people, who never had the chance to hear the full gospel, are going to be saved, it will—whether they realize it or not—be through the merits of Jesus Christ. We cannot escape the conclusion, however, that people can be lost and that somehow our missionary efforts do make an eternal difference.

Adventists are among those who believe that when all biblical data are considered and weighed, the only defensible view is a form of *exclusivism*. If all religions were equally valid, a fully secular worldview would be just as acceptable. Adventists defend the uniqueness of Christianity because of the uniqueness of its Founder: Jesus Christ. They admit similarities between most of the world religions but stress that crucial differences exist between Jesus and the founders of other religions. No other religious founder ever claimed to be the eternal Creator-God, claimed to be able to forgive sins, or rose from the dead.

BE SAVED?

By Reinder Bruinsma

The postmodern tendency toward total relativism ignores the fact that when different theories offer propositions that contradict each other, we must make a choice. The truth claim cannot be brushed aside. Since religions make mutually incompatible claims, they cannot all be true at the same time.

This does not mean that all non-Christian religions are totally bad and that we cannot learn anything from them; neither does it mean that all non-Christians are going to be lost!

Adventist Attitudes

The official Adventist position denies that membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church provides a guaranteed entrance ticket for heaven, even though some church members come perilously close to that view. Almost a century ago, Seventh-day Adventists went on record that they do not believe they are the only agents in God's plan for the salvation of mankind. Since 1926 the following paragraph has been in the *General Conference Working Policy* (O 100): "We recognize those agencies that lift up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for the evangelization of the world, and we hold in high esteem Christian men and women in other communions who are engaged in winning souls to Christ."

Adventists have traditionally seen themselves as key players in the end-time missionary thrust and, therefore, have regarded mission as a major reason for existence, but they do also recognize a role for others. The official viewpoint is not that only Adventists belong to God's invisible church.

The Wideness in God's Mercy

When push comes to shove, we must accept that only God knows which individuals are his and that he (fortunately) has not given us the responsibility to establish the criteria as to who will enter his kingdom and who will remain outside. Christ told a parable in which he compared God's kingdom to a dragnet in which many kinds of fish and other creatures are caught. In everyday life in New Testament times, the fishermen would pull the net ashore and start sorting their catch, collecting the good fish in baskets and throwing away the bad.

There will also be a sorting at the end of time, but that job has been assigned to angels and not to us humans (Matt. 13:47-50). We do not know the results of this final sorting and cannot calculate or estimate percentages of the saved versus the lost.

But we are not completely in the dark, for we know that God is love. We know that he will continue to reach out and do all he can to draw people to him. If anyone is lost, it is not because of God's lack of trying to save that person.

The church father Origen (ca. 185-254) may have gone overboard when he claimed that not only all human beings will be saved, but that this will even be true of Satan. However, I can certainly agree with one of his fundamental premises: "We maintain that the power of Christ's cross and of his death ... is so great that it will be sufficient for the healing and restoration not only of the present and future ages, but even for those of the past."⁴

The gospel is good news: "It is not an announcement of terror, but news of God's boundless generosity."⁵ A song written over 150 years ago by Frederick W. Faber (1814-1863) states truth never to be forgotten: "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea," and "the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind."⁶

The God I worship is a God of grace. He entered our world in his Son, Jesus Christ, who was adamant that his Father's house has *many* rooms (John 14:2, NIV)! If we want to continue to use the concept of the "remnant" as a description of those who are going to be saved when Christ comes, we must be prepared for a big surprise. The remnant may be astonishingly large, simply because God is a God of mercy and his grace has no limits! Henri Nouwen (1906-1978), whose books have been an inspiration for millions, said it better than most of us could express it: "God's kingdom is a place of abundance where every generous act overflows its original bounds and becomes part of the unbounded grace of God at work in the world."⁷

It is this boundless grace that one day will find its tangible expression in "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9, NIV). Thank God for that glorious vista of the future! **AT**

¹ Jan Bonda, *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (1998).

² In this section I rely on my treatment of this topic in my book *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (2009), pp. 182-183.

³ Other oft-quoted texts that supposedly support universalism are 1 Timothy 2:3-4; Romans 2:6-16; 1 John 2:2; Romans 5:12-19; and Philippians 2:9-11.

⁴ Quoted in Bonda, p. 90.

⁵ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (1992), p. 178.

⁶ "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" is part of a 13-verse poem originally published under the title "Come to Jesus" in *Faber's Oratory Hymns* (1854).

⁷ Henri Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (2011), p. 25.

A 29th Fundamental Belief

By Greg Jones and Loren Seibold

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST fundamental beliefs, organized propositionally and phrased pedantically, carry the implication that those who do not subscribe to all 28 are non-Adventists, sub-Adventists, not-quite-Adventists, possibly even wine-sipping California Adventists. At the very least, they might be assigned to the dismissive category of cultural Adventists, which is reserved for those raised in Seventh-day Adventist families who are just a bit too open-minded to escape a condescending label of their own.

Many of us have examined those 28 fundamental beliefs and asked ourselves whether or not we agree with them. The evangelical Adventists—particularly those old enough to remember Glacier View—may trip over the notorious No. 24, about Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. The scientifically minded Adventists stumble over the inexplicably reformulated No. 6. The LGBT+ people and their supporters, not to mention people who are divorced and remarried, struggle with No. 23.

On the other side, women’s ordination opponents ask why the denomination includes a clause in No. 14 saying that “differences between high and low, rich and poor, *male and female*” ought not to affect the roles in which they are to “serve and be served.” In addition, we even have a small anti-Trinitarian crowd who, like a few of our denominational pioneers, would be happy to be free of that troublesome No. 2.

While we Adventists-on-the-outskirts accept some or even most of the 28, we may reject others for (it seems to the authors) understandable and fully justifiable reasons. God’s first rule, if we understand it correctly, is to give his creatures as much freedom as he can in spiritual matters.

Even if they disagree with certain beliefs of the mainstream church, most Adventists who’ve been hyphenated or otherwise labeled are amicable toward it. They wish the church well. After all, they may hold degrees from Adventist colleges. Their friends and family, people they care about, are still True Believers. They know the culture, know the people, and are comfortable with those who are former and current Adventists. It is understandable that many regard the Seventh-day Adventist Church as their home, even if they have moved on—just as when people still love their hometown after they move to a different city.

They may, in fact, be full participants in their congregation, recognizing the value in being part of a good church community—even if it is clearly not a perfect one. Imperfection, after all, is the nature of human organizations.

It seems unjust to dismiss questioners of some part of this faith as if they had no place among a people of whom Ellen White said: “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished

view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed.”¹

A Modest Proposal

Rather than regarding some as lesser Adventists, or dissenters, or silent hypocrites, we propose a 29th fundamental belief. This 29th statement would say that people can embrace or reject any one or more of the previous 28 and still remain loved and active members of our community, as long as they are kind, respectful of others’ feelings and opinions, and behave toward others according to Christian principles.

This may seem counterintuitive at first read. We’re used to our religion being tightly defined by doctrines; indeed, we are reminded of them at every evangelistic campaign. However, we defend this addition for the following five reasons.

First, it merely admits what is already the case. Not all Adventists wholly subscribe to every church belief. Fundamental Belief No. 29 would acknowledge the agnosticism that a great many have about some of these points. To admit that moves our questions out of the shadows, where they can’t be discussed, into the open for examination. It erases the shame of analytical thinking and allows all to feel part of the body rather than like hypocrites hidden in plain sight.

Second, it defines the church as a

community rather than a creedal body. New Testament metaphors for this simple but profound notion include a body of people, working together with Christ as the head, or a house constructed of people with Christ as the cornerstone. It is who we are together, not merely what doctrines we hold, that make us a church.

Adventists have departed from this in crafting a long, complex, and specific doctrinal statement. John Wesley, whom Adventists hold in high regard, preached in a sermon: “My belief is no rule for another. I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, Are you of my church, of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of church government, and allow the same church officers, with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God? I inquire not, Do you receive the supper of the Lord in the same posture and manner that I do? nor whether, in the administration of baptism, you agree with me in admitting sureties for the baptized, in the manner of administering it; or the age of those to whom it should be administered. Nay, I ask not of you (as clear as I am in my own mind), whether you allow baptism and the Lord’s supper at all. Let all these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season, my only question at present is this, ‘Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?’”²

Third, the addition of this No. 29 would make us more in line with the convictions of our pioneers about doctrinal statements. James White, J. N. Loughborough, and others all objected to crafting any kind of creed, favoring instead remaining continuously alert to God’s guidance. James White wrote: “I take the ground that creeds stand in a direct opposition to the gifts. ... Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement. ... The

Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed. We take the Bible and the gifts of the Spirit; embracing the faith that thus the Lord will teach us from time to time.”³

Fourth, it opens up a new freedom for churches to do ministry in ways most comfortable to the congregation. It lets some be the broad churches that they want to be, while others can define

Not all Adventists wholly subscribe to every church belief. Fundamental Belief No. 29 would acknowledge the agnosticism that a great many have about some of these points.

themselves as narrowly as makes their members comfortable. A congregation would no longer need to apologize for taking a different stance on some issue than the General Conference does. Adding No. 29 would pitch a broad tent, covering traditional Seventh-day Adventist congregations as well as those that are progressive.

Finally, adding this 29th fundamental belief wouldn’t specifically repudiate anything Adventists have believed. It does not ignore the historical basis for—nor the subsequent hard theological work that has gone into crafting—these teachings. It discards nothing. It merely gives people permission not to pretend they believe what they don’t believe. Adventists remain, as believers in a “present truth” ought to be, open to learning more or to gently setting aside what we have ceased to find truthful.

Ought We to Be Afraid?

Can the church survive these “twenty-niners”? Any group that regards itself as special and unique is going to struggle with this fear. However, we argue that to say you can choose what to believe is not to say that there is no Seventh-day Adventism, or that the Adventist church disintegrates into something indistinguishable from all others.

Congregations, as the holders of memberships, are the fundamental building block of our denomination. They, not the denomination, hold people accountable to the community. As long as we use our denominational name and study the Bible, neither the history and ethos of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor the basics of Christianity will go away. We will remain believers who speak of Jesus’ return and worship on the Saturday Sabbath.

Furthermore, the new fundamental belief specifies that we live by commonly accepted moral and ethical standards, such as “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23, NIV). In this respect, No. 29 is deeply conservative. It insists that the most important part of being a member of our community is that we must treat one another kindly and with consideration, respecting others’ feelings and opinions.

Those who are most rigid about the first 28 beliefs have shown a tendency to reject people who don’t believe as they do. “Twenty-niners” would find such a stance ungenerous, unmerciful, and unlike a righteous God. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Review and Herald* (July 26, 1892).

² John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit” (1750), 1872 edition.

³ James White, *The Review and Herald* (Oct. 8, 1861).

GROWING UP ABOUT GOD

BY WARREN NELSON

Circa 1975. Fade up to a lecture hall at Pacific Union College.

I am in a Pauline Epistles class that I need for a religion minor. The teacher, a well-known Adventist theologian, asks a question about a passage from Romans.

A student raises her hand and offers an acceptable answer. The teacher replies: “A very good *Adventist* answer. Anyone want to tackle what the text *really* means?”

Ding, ding, ding! An alarm goes off in my head. *Two* answers to a Bible question? The Adventist one isn’t right? How can that be?

Fade to black. Time passes.

Circa 1985. Fade up to the balcony of my church.

I finish college, do a stint of denominational employment at the Adventist Media Center, add two kids to the family, and move back to my hometown and the church I grew up in.

I’m sitting in a young adult Sabbath School class. We’re kicking off a study of the 27 fundamental beliefs (up from the original 22 in the 1930s, but one short of today’s 28). The teacher is a young, very bright lawyer whose opening question sets the tone.

“Are there any of these beliefs that you would be willing to die for? If so, raise your hand.”

One hand goes up in the class of 30. It wasn’t mine.

Ring-a-ling. A small mental alert, but an alert, nonetheless.

Fade to black. Time passes.

Circa 1995. Fade up to a hotel meeting room.

The church I was raised in turns into a massive mess; I’ll spare you the details. We move our membership to another Adventist church, 30 miles away. My marriage teetering, my faith uncertain, I am searching for solutions.

After dinner with a mentor, during which I described the challenges I was facing in my marriage, he suggested I attend this workshop.

It is a personal growth training seminar. My first.

I walk into the room with 15 or 20 other attendees, and there is a large poster on the wall. It reads, “Would you rather be right or happy?”

CLANG CLANG CLANG! This is a klaxon I can’t ignore. In my life, for all of my life, being *right* was all there was!

Fade to black. Time passes.

Circa 2005. Fade up on a sunny beach in Oregon.

I’m walking on the beach with a friend and our wives. He’d invited me to the last church I attended, but by this time, I’d been happily *not* attending church for five-plus years, while he’d stayed heavily involved.

Nonetheless, he has remained my friend. He is one of a couple of friends from my Adventist days who stayed in touch. The conversation slows, and our wives walk on ahead.

Finally, I get the courage to ask a question I’ve had ever since I quit going to church. “Why have you stayed friends with me? Everybody else kind of got on with their lives.”

After a beat he answers, “I couldn’t imagine my life without you.”

My takeaway? You don't need to lose your faithful friends just because you lose your faith. My friend and I had worked together for years when I was in church. It turns out that the contribution I made to our joint efforts meant a lot more to him than I'd realized.

Fade to black. Time passes.

Circa 2020. Fade up to the present.

Leaving the church is hard. I was a fourth-generation Adventist. My great-grandfather was Ellen White's groundskeeper at Elmshaven. The roots go deep; the Adventist culture is pervasive. But there came a point when I could no longer endure that certainty of belief, that never-ending need to be "right."

So I made the decision to be happy.

Since that decision, I've made choices—some painful and terrifying, others exhilarating and freeing—and learned from the consequences. I learned that I could still find love and peace and happiness without carrying the burdens of guilt and fear that had suffused my life in the Adventist Church.

These days I happily serve as a technology strategist with *Adventist Today*, because that cadre of still-in-the-church friends asked for my help. We all get along well, despite my black sheep status.

There are some—certainly more than there used to be—open-minded Adventists. These "new" liberal Adventists advocate for gender equality, even in ministry, and the full acceptance of LBGTQ+ people. They even go as far as getting involved in social justice issues, such as marching in Black Lives Matter protests.

At this stage of my life, I have fewer firmly held beliefs. I have learned to hold beliefs lightly and challenge them regularly.

And, yes, they'd make room for me. But I'm done with church as an organization. I take interest in some of the public issues the church is facing—after all, I still have friends and family in the church, and I have compassion for anyone who is struggling with organizational issues that threaten their deeply held beliefs, even if those beliefs aren't mine. At this stage of my life, I have fewer firmly held beliefs. I have learned to hold beliefs lightly and challenge them regularly.

What God Looks Like Now

One of the last Sabbath School classes I taught was a discussion of the nature of God. The first question I asked was "What did God look like to you when you were 7 years old?" The discussion was fun, and the images people had were very vivid and solid.

Then I asked, "What does God look like to you now?" After 20-plus years, their image of God had become far less vivid than the one they'd had in the first grade. They all still "knew" he existed, yet I noticed less response, and a bit of tension seemed to pervade this part of the discussion.

The final question was "How do you know if the image you hold of God now is right?" There was a considerable silence, and we were saved by the organist signaling an end to class time.

I'm quite sure that people wiser than me have a psycho-social explanation for what has happened to my faith. Still, my Adventist culture remains deeply ingrained, some version of "You can take the boy out of church, but you can't take the church out of the boy." Some have even suggested that I'm playing a version of Pascal's Wager, which I reject because of its inherent dishonesty.

I do have an idea, however, about what has allowed me to remain at least within the orbit of the Adventist community. All of us in my circle of Adventist friends have adopted this as our operating belief, in one form or another: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8, KJV).

I don't know for sure if there is a God. I dare say that none of us does. But walking humbly as we live our beliefs is always good advice, even for us agnostics. **AT**

I am a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. Or, I used to be, until I made a choice to honor my convictions and my calling.

Being a double-minority pastor in this denomination was already a challenge: as an African American woman of Southern heritage, there's a lot about myself I had to suppress. And always hanging over me was the question of women's ordination.

But neither of these was my biggest challenge. The real challenge was a constant question about the nature of my calling, one that churned in my soul. Specifically, I was an Adventist

The Crossroads

I'm a first-generation Seventh-day Adventist. My mother, the first Adventist in our family, was the daughter of a Methodist minister, and my father was the son of a Pentecostal mother. So, while I experienced faith outside the Seventh-day Adventist context, my personal spiritual experience was shaped by Adventism. Called by God, I pursued a career in ministry.

In seminary I overheard a professor tell a classmate, "If one does not wholeheartedly believe in Ellen G. White and the

PASTOR AT THE CROSSROADS

By *Stephanie Whitley-Ferguson*

pastor who had a deep sense of calling to preach the simplicity of the gospel. But the denomination that was training me had quite different expectations.

What happens when an Adventist pastor is convicted that the cross is enough?

Calling and Expectations

Do you remember when you were in the first grade, and the teacher told you to stay in line? Children who didn't comply were spoken to sharply or straightened out with a hand to the shoulder. Persistently out-of-line students might even get a punishment.

This is not unlike Adventist pastoral ministry, as I've perceived it. The expectation, implicit and sometimes explicit, is that all involved will walk the line and remain in sync with the mission and beliefs of the denomination. I experienced this as I did lining up in the first grade—only, as an adult, it felt very confining.

Perhaps I should have known that that's what it means to sign on as an Adventist pastor. But my calling was from God and belongs to God, not the institution. While some leeway is given in how a pastor implements the mission of the Adventist Church, little freedom is given for his or her spiritual or theological growth. As I grew, the church's expectation didn't fit anymore.

One day a church member, who was "tired of all the preaching about Jesus," approached me with a complaint. The congregation needed more "meat." I was perplexed. Meat? Specifically, the person wanted to hear more Ellen White, more prophecy, more end-time theology. *When did Jesus stop being enough?* I wondered. *When did His life, death, resurrection, and promise of return stop being sufficient?*

Adventist doctrines, then that person has not been called to Adventist ministry. He or she may have been called to ministry, just not Adventist ministry."

That was when I first recognized the reality of my conundrum. It wasn't that I didn't believe in the prophetic gift of Ellen White. Rather, it was that as I understood my calling, I was to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, to grow disciples, and to shepherd the flock, if one should be assigned to me. The notion that I had been called to preach distinctives bothered me. Why did Adventist ministry have to be different from other ministries? Wasn't Jesus' commission to all of his followers to teach what he had taught and work to grow disciples?

This overheard conversation confirmed my fear that I might not belong. There was a certain way one was supposed to be in order to be an Adventist pastor, and I began to feel an angst in my heart, because I was not that. Maybe I wasn't called to Adventist ministry? I was at a crossroads between my conscience and the construct of Adventist ministry.

I'm sure now that my calling to the gospel ministry doesn't match Adventist expectations. Imagine being convicted to preach Sabbath rest as a gift, yet being expected to teach it as a seal. Or being called to preach the saving power of God's grace, yet expected to preach doctrine that fosters fear of judgment. I'd been called to proclaim the love of God and the joy of relationship with God, yet I was expected to proclaim prophecy, charts, and dates.

The Construct

Lest one thinks I'm exaggerating the expectations that our denomination has for pastors, consider the implications of the 2016 "Unity in Mission" document, which allows for "steps of

reconciliation with entities that appear to have overlooked or ignored the biblical principles as expressed in the Fundamental Beliefs, voted actions, or working policies of the Church.”¹

Please note that the document sought to protect not the Bible, not “mere Christianity” of the biblical sort, but fundamental beliefs *and* voted actions *and* working policies *as they explain the Bible!* No wonder my church friend thought that Jesus wasn’t enough “meat”! It appears that the church has defined the gospel as denominational distinctives, not Jesus.

And if you still don’t believe me, attend an evangelism planning meeting to survey the priority of topics discussed. Adventist ministry is constructed around its eschatological mission of proclaiming the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14. While it is important for any organization to have a clear mission statement, how that mission is carried out becomes its identifying factor. In general, Adventist ministry places its emphasis on proclaiming the second coming of Jesus yet pours on top of that quite a few additions, making long-held distinctives the ultimate truths necessary for salvation.

The result is that a pastor’s focus is expected to be on getting the church’s message out, rather than on its members’ spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. Pastoral ministry becomes a sort of navel-gazing, increasing the gap of irrelevance between God and life. We become so mission-minded that we cannot see when people are hurting, frustrated, or starving for nurture.

During the recent 2020 Annual Council, David Trim, director of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, discussed the “leveling off” of church growth, saying that it is “a trend which, if it were to continue, could have very troubling implications.” He went on to say: “... the people are leaving. Closing our eyes to that is no substitute for closing the back door.” Doesn’t this trend suggest the need for a change of course, not only in our theology, but in the church’s approach to its delivery?

Near the close of his presentation, Trim asked, “Are we giving our local church members effective training in holistic disciple-making?” To which I would add: “Are we giving our pastors the freedom to do holistic disciple-making? Is it possible that people are desperately craving the simplicity of the gospel?”

Conscience vs. Construct

Upon graduating from seminary, I received the call to become an associate pastor. I considered myself blessed! Yet, the angst of my heart from those early seminary days was still with me. I knew that my theology and calling were not perfectly aligned with the institution’s expectations. Though I felt aligned with God’s expectations, I wondered how far I could go in ministry that way.

I didn’t get very far.

I loved the conference I worked for, the people I served, and the colleagues I worked alongside. But I could not envision advancing in Adventist ministry while not fully committed to what I knew was the denomination’s real expectation. It seemed to me inauthentic and unfair to the organization, and I knew I could neither live nor effectively minister that way. I had to make a decision.

My conscience took precedence over remaining in the organization, and I made a new choice. I’d always loved the ministry of visitation and comfort, and I felt I had a special aptitude for it. So, I chose to transition into chaplaincy, where I have more independence to provide good news and comfort to people. Here I can minister to others and be true to my convictions, while still having opportunity to preach as opportunity presents itself.

Maybe this is where God has been calling me all along.

What Is Ministry?

This story is not about my transition from parish ministry to chaplaincy—although that is a key part of my journey—but about the dilemma of Adventist pastors like me, who may find themselves squeezed between the freedom to preach the simple gospel and an imperative to think and act as the institution dictates. When a pastor has committed to God but feels as though that calling is restrained by the institution, it can lead to confusion, frustration, and grief.

Has Adventism stopped growing in its understanding of the gospel? Is the preservation of “uniqueness” of greater importance? Have mission and message trumped the great commission? Have claims of being a “peculiar people” sealed the church’s irrelevance?

Perhaps my seminary professor was right regarding what constitutes a real Adventist pastor. Perhaps I am simply coming to a fuller understanding of my calling and at last finding my place in the body of Christ. But I submit that unless Adventist pastors are encouraged to trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit rather than the institution as they lead their flocks, the church will continue to struggle with growth and retention—potentially becoming obsolete.

I cling to a word of wisdom from another seminary professor, who encouraged us students to hold to this passage as our guide to spiritual truth: “The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day” (Prov. 4:18, NIV). **AT**

That means truth is ever unfolding—and that’s the path I choose to take.

¹See www.adventistreview.org/assets/public/news/2016-10/114G_Unity_in_Mission--Procedures_in_Church_Reconciliation.pdf

Treating CIVIL UNIONS as a RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ISSUE

BY DANIEL A. MORA

“GAY PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO BE IN A FAMILY. THEY ARE GOD’S children and have the right to a family.”¹ This was the statement made back in October by Pope Francis, leader of the Catholic Church, on the legalization of civil unions between people of the same sex.

The pope’s words caused a stir, especially in Latin America. They were unprecedented—revolutionary—for the hundreds of millions of Roman Catholics around the world. But they also surprised Protestants, including Seventh-day Adventists, who follow the pope’s words closely.

Please understand that Francis is not proposing a modification of the Catholic sacrament on marriage. Rather, in this statement he is advocating for the separation of church and state—something we Adventists hold dear.

Roman Catholic Influence

For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church exercised a great deal of control over civil affairs in any country where it had influence. We know from history how Catholic leaders exercised their spiritual power through European monarchs. Later, they missionized the aboriginal peoples of Latin America by accompanying the Spanish and Portuguese in their military conquests. This turned the countries of Latin America into confessional states for more than two centuries. Only in recent decades have some of these countries become secular states—though with a strong Catholic influence.

In these countries, religious criteria have shaped countries’ constitutions, civil codes, and criminal codes. Perhaps their most consequential influence has been on family and sexual behavior. As Diego Valadés points out: “The most sensitive area of normative confessionalism corresponds to health and sexual and reproductive rights. Compulsory maternity, the imposition of suffering on the sick, and the emotional ban on people of the same sex are confessional elements embedded in legal systems, incompatible with contemporary concepts of the constitutional state, that are not removed by the bodies in charge of doing so.”²

Despite the legal and juridical restrictions, there were always couples who cohabited as “family” outside the law. Although

many of these families remained hidden, in recent years some have attempted to gain freedom through social struggle, seeking respect and recognition of their human rights and their status as citizens with constitutional equality.

Civil Unions

In our time the principle of religious freedom has been accentuated, which has led to more of us understanding the separation of civil law from religious teachings. These freedoms have been encouraged by international bodies such as the United Nations and ratified by the judicial decisions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In North America, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America, legislation is opening the way to the recognition of civil unions between people of the same sex. Of the 35 countries in the Western Hemisphere, 10 have approved civil unions for homosexual couples.

Civil rights translate into the protection of individual freedoms, ensuring that people can use their abilities equally and without discrimination.

Although Adventism has taken a religious position regarding civil unions between people of the same sex, it also favors the separation of church and state and respect for freedom of conscience. In a position paper titled “Church-State Relations,” the Seventh-day Adventist Church refuses to make religion an authoritative component of civil law: “Religious influence has not always resulted in the betterment of society, however. Religious persecution, religious wars, and the numerous examples of social and political suppression perpetrated at the behest of religious people, confirms the dangers that exist when the means of the state are used to advance religious objectives.”³

Religious Moral Teachings

Can religious judgment be trusted in civil matters? That is, should sacred texts be used as a source of authority in establishing civil law?

Although many of the Torah’s punishable concepts are still considered crimes in Western society—slavery and polygamy,



for example—today we live not under a theocracy, but in representative or cooperative collegial democracies. The legal concepts of the Torah, including its punishments, had a cultural context, and it is incongruous to insist upon theonomy in modern states. In fact, to dictate civil practices today according to religious teachings would create a conundrum. Which religion would we go by? Christianity? Islam? Or some other faith?

Moral Consistency

There is a lack of consistency in how people understand sexual sins. Religious people—even Adventists—are more tolerant of various forms of moral trespass when they are committed within a framework of heterosexuality. Conservative religious people are highly intolerant of homosexuality, citing prohibitive biblical texts such as Romans 1:26-27. But they rarely apply the Bible with equal rigor to heterosexual or moral sins, which are condemned by the Bible with the same firmness (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-11). They portray homosexuality in such a way that grace and the gift of salvation can only be reached *outside* of the homosexual condition. Yet redemption must work within the context of sinful lives, or else it is meaningless.

Some heterosexuals commit homosexual acts and some homosexuals commit heterosexual acts, but in both cases the “perversion” is acting against one’s own nature, when such acts are outside the divine plan (Gen. 1:26-29; 2:23-24). So the rhetoric of conservative religious moralists who don’t want to allow others freedom to create civil unions between people of the same sex must be discarded as inadequate, particularly in light of our understanding of a separation between religious and civil law—that is, separation of church and state.

Torah Morality

It is absurd to cite the Torah as authority to punish homosexual people (Lev. 18:22) when heterosexual adultery was also punished with death (Deut. 22:22)—and not only these sins, but also incest (Lev. 20:11-12, 14, 17, 19-20), onanism (Gen. 38:9-10), rape (Deut. 22:23-27), or heterosexual sex with a woman during her menstrual period (Lev. 20:18).

If we insist on applying Old Testament rules to modern civil law, should we not also apply the Talion Law (Deut. 19:16-21)? Should we arrange marriages on the basis of the bride price (Exo. 22:16-17)? Similarly, would we allow a raped virgin to be given to the rapist and forced to live with him because he simply paid the price to the girl’s father (Deut. 22:28-29)? Should misbehaving children be stoned to death (Deut. 21:18-21)?

A New Testament Understanding

Divine justice is profoundly different in the New Testament than it was in the Torah. The civil laws of the empires that conquered

Israel supplanted the Torah laws. One of the enduring facts of Jesus’ crucifixion narrative is that capital punishment could be carried out only by the authorities of the Roman Empire, whose laws superseded the Torah, which forced the Jewish leaders to ask the Romans to execute Jesus rather than doing it themselves.

When theocracy was replaced by empire, the Torah bent to the civil laws of the national power. And Jesus validated this annexation: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Luke 20:25, NIV). He did not oppose the Roman civil laws; on the contrary, he found them legitimate in their sphere of influence. After all, he noted, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36, NIV).

The punitive language of the moralists was contradicted by Jesus’ liberationist discourse. The phrase “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first” (John 8:7, NKJV) is within the legal context of Pharisees asking to apply capital punishment to a woman as a mechanism against a sexual act: “In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (John 8:5, NIV). But Jesus refused to embrace theonomy. He redeemed the condemned woman.

If we were to be strict with the Torah rules, almost everyone today would be stoned; to apply the moral law strictly would mean that no human being would be left standing. Realizing this, Jesus distilled the essence of the moral law into a single principle: love (Matt. 22:36-40).

Jesus did not seek to impose punishments or use civil laws to censure those who did not think like him. His greatest contribution to civil society was his liberation of the oppressed and respect for their free choice. Jesus came to Earth to relate to sinners in their sinful conditions (Mark 2:16; Luke 15:2). His reply was: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13, NIV). Salvation is a process that begins within the sinful condition.

Religious rejection of same-sex civil unions must be limited to the ecclesiastical sphere. There isn’t a valid reason for opposing the civil rights of gay people in the public sphere, any more than we do for heterosexuals. Religious freedom does not mean that my religious assumptions are the only ones that deserve respect. In fact, it means defending the right of others to think and do as their consciences dictate.

There must be a separation between civil law (the state) and religious beliefs (the church). We are not called to discriminate or pass judgment, but to raise all souls to a personal encounter with Christ, without conditions. **AI**

¹ Samantha Schmidt, Michelle Boorstein, and Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “What Pope Francis’s Comments About Gay Families Could Mean for LGBTQ People Worldwide,” *The Washington Post* (Oct. 21, 2020).

² Diego Valadés, “Secular States and Confessional States,” *Este País* (Mar. 3, 2020).

³ Online at www.adventist.org/articles/church-state-relations/.

GALATIANS 2:16

INDIVIDUAL BELIEF VS. GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

By Olive J. Hemmings

“WE KNOW THAT A PERSON IS JUSTIFIED not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16a, NRSV).

The word “faith” as used in religious systems has carried with it hope and comfort, but also discord and division. We use it to refer to a system of beliefs, norms, and practices that gives a religious community its branding and sets it apart from others in the competition for membership. Christians employ it to exclude from the assurance of salvation persons from all other religions, unless they profess belief in Jesus of Nazareth.

The irony is that the phrase we translate “faith in Jesus Christ,” when read in context, actually refutes religious sectarianism. The term was used by the apostle Paul to oppose the idea that one must belong to a specific religious community in order to access the promise of the Abrahamic covenant.

Righteousness

The use of the word “righteousness” in the Bible reflects the extraction of the Hebrew and Greek words for “justice” from its Ancient Near Eastern mooring in *community* faithfulness. But this concept has been filtered through Western individualism and the Christian prioritization of personal piety and, thereby, rendered with the nebulous word “righteousness.”

In fact, Greek words that English translations render “righteous” (*dikaios*), “righteousness” (*dikaïosunē*), and “justify” (*dikaioō*) actually mean “just,” “justice,” and “give justice”—meaning *liberating* justice. *Dikaïosune* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *tsedakah*, the Hebrew prophetic plea against oppressive structures such as corruption, greed, and, exploitation of the vulnerable.

Jesus, as a Jew, was expressing this Hebrew meaning in the Sermon on the Mount. When he said, Seek first the kingdom of God and his *dikaïosunē* (Matt. 6:33), he was not invoking piety but, rather, the Hebrew concept of right relations in community so that

all may live in peace and freedom. That *dikaïosunē* was more than mere piety is shown by his summarizing it in the golden rule (Matt. 7:12): to *do* unto others as you would have them *do* unto you.

Justification

Foundational to Jewish apocalyptic understanding was the coming of a new age of God's reign through Messiah, who would serve as the arbiter of justice and liberate God's people from oppressive principalities and powers. Paul's contention is that the mediation of justice is not only for Jews, but also for non-Jews, which is why Gentiles do not need to become Jews by circumcision. This seemingly judicial language of “justification” is, according to Terrence Donaldson, “peripheral and derivative”—that is, calculated to defend the (uncircumcised) Gentiles as being included in the covenant relationship between God and Israel.¹

The notion that Judaic identity is prerequisite to the fulfillment of this Abrahamic promise is what Paul calls, in this passage, “works of law.”

Faith as Faithfulness

The Greek word *pistis* is rendered as “faith” in many Bible translations, suggesting that it is an intellectual agreement to the veracity of something.

But *pistis* actually means “faithfulness.” The English word “belief” is not equal in meaning to the Greek *pistis*. Paul’s reference to Abraham’s faithfulness in Romans 4 is about his “commitment, trust and devotion,”² not merely an intellectual affirmation versus doubt, as the English word “belief” implies. In Greek argumentation, *pistis* is the proof of or faithfulness to one’s claim. In social terms, it is the fulfillment of a crucial obligation.

Paul’s statement, “We know that a person is justified not by works of law, but through faith in Jesus Messiah” (Gal. 2:16, private translation), is central to the Christian understanding of heaven and salvation. Crucially, however, “faith in Jesus Messiah” (*pistis tou Iēsou Christou*) literally reads “faithfulness of Jesus Messiah,” both in the Greek and in the context of Paul’s discussion.

Again, in Hebrew prophecy, faithfulness and justice go hand in hand. Habakkuk 2:4, which is referenced in Romans 1:17, says that “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (NIV). There can be no justice (*dikaiosunē*) in the absence of faithfulness (*pistis*).

Understood in context, then, God’s people receive justice through the faithful mediation of Messiah. The Abrahamic covenant as rendered by Paul should read thus: We know that a person does not receive the justice of the covenant because of one’s religious/ethnic identity, but through the faithfulness of Jesus Messiah.

Dikaiosunē for the Outsider

When speaking of salvation, Christian teaching generally contrasts the term “righteousness by faith” with “works of

The irony is that the phrase we translate “faith in Jesus Christ,” when read in context, actually refutes religious sectarianism.

the law” in reference to personal sins. Paul’s message, however, is actually about how the community conducts itself interrelationally. Jews believed that only practicing Jews were heirs of the Abrahamic promise, and as the covenant community, they were inherently free (John 8:31-32). To access that freedom, one had to become a practicing Jew, marked by circumcision and other rituals and regulations. This is what led to the Galatian controversy and to Paul’s subsequent arguments regarding “works of law” vis-à-vis “justification by faith(fulness).”

Ironically, Paul calls these Judaic religious identity rituals, or “works of law,” *slavery* to flesh (Gal. 4:25). Yet, the conviction about circumcision remained entrenched among Jewish followers of Jesus, including Peter, whom God confronted in a radical vision to convince him to enter the house of an uncircumcised Gentile and have fellowship with him (Acts 10).

The Call to Faith(fulness)

While the faithfulness that Paul speaks of in Galatians 2:16 is actually the faithfulness of Jesus Messiah, it does not end there. He calls the community into the same faithfulness with the phrase “in Christ”: “For in Christ Jesus [Messiah] neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6, NRSV).

To the diverse community in Rome, he says: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8, NRSV).

In biblical prophetic narrative, Jesus Messiah is the agent of liberation: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1, NRSV). In the teaching of Paul, the formula “in Messiah” (*en Christo*) finds expression in other ways: in Spirit, or *en pneumatī* (Gal. 3:3), and in Lord, or *en kurio* (1 Cor. 11:11).

The absence of the definite article “the” in places where Paul utters these terms indicates that they encompass and exceed personal identity in favor of a way of being that transcends the egoistic identities of religion, ethnicity, gender, etc. In Messiah, “spirit” overcomes “flesh”—the limitations imposed by the fleshly existence, including religious/cultural identity.

While Jesus fulfills the Messianic mandate, Messiah transcends the historical persona of Jesus of Nazareth. The term signifies radical spirituality, by which the church overcomes its fixation on the temporalities of this age, such as religious rituals and all of the gender, racial, and class divisiveness (Gal. 3:28) that go with them.

Paul describes this as dissolution of the ego (the “I”) by saying, “It is no longer I (*egō*) who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20, NRSV). Here, too, the definite article is absent from the term *christos*. “Christ” goes beyond persona to spirituality.

Love emerges from this spirituality. It outlasts all temporalities of this life: “Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end” (1 Cor. 13:8, NRSV).

Beyond Sectarianism

Faith, then, as Paul uses it in connection to salvation, is not about a set of beliefs and practices, but about the oneness of humanity that comes through love. Paul makes this assertion in Romans 2:14: “When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves” (NRSV).

The apostle Paul was not a Christian in the sense that we understand that word now.

“Law” again refers to the religious system—Judaism, in this specific case. Some don’t subscribe to the religion of the “chosen people,” but it doesn’t mean that they aren’t practicing the faith(fullness) of Messiah—namely, love. Again: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8, NRSV).

In Romans 14:1-15:6, Paul addresses both Jews and non-Jews in their differing religious practices and asks them not to allow religious differences to hinder the work of God. To assert that one must be a Christian and/or believe certain Christian

doctrines in order to get to heaven is contrary to the gospel preached by Paul and the first believers. The apostle Paul was not a Christian in the sense that we understand that word now. The early church was a religion(less) community of people who set out to invite the world into the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus, to love and justice.

To assert that only one religion has access to this is to come full circle to the original sin of religious sectarianism. **AT**

¹ Donaldson views Paul within the framework of Jewish proselytism. See Terrence Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (1997).

² Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (2009), pp. 191-194.

Rejecting Melting Pot Ministry: THE NECESSITY FOR AUTHENTIC CULTURAL EXPRESSION

BY CHRISTOPHER C. THOMPSON

THE PHRASE “THE MELTING POT” WAS popularized as the title of a play that ran successfully in the United States from 1909-1910 and was written by Israel Zangwill, a British author born to Jewish immigrants from Russia. The irony of the metaphor is that the play is about a young man who wants to forget the brutal massacre of his people, envisioning a world where racial and cultural oppression are erased.

I understand why that picture appealed to Zangwill, yet the phrase “melting pot” troubles me. It is an image that is not only violent, but usually applies first to every minority group or culture that is separate from the dominant culture. The apparent purpose is a new homogeneous formulation, but I don’t like that the goal is a composition of melted people. It suggests violence against authentic cultures, forcing them to create something unnatural; in a melting pot, people get melted into assimilation.

A preferable metaphor is the salad bowl. There, ingredients maintain their composition and blend tastefully with the other ingredients to create an organic harmony with a variety of flavors and colors, shapes and textures.

Our denomination, while unusually diverse, does not definitively manifest a salad bowl ethos. One of my undergrad professors, whom I love dearly, often said that “Christ creates a new culture.” But I’d bet that most Adventists assume that mainstream Adventist culture *is* Christ’s

culture. We believe that there is piety in homogeneity. And this homogeneity is almost always Eurocentric.

A friend once joked that Adventism “is like Walmart. You can walk into an Adventist Church almost anywhere and know what to expect and what’s going to happen next.” While tradition provides some level of order and security, we run the risk of melting unique, culturally distinct people groups by superimposing customs and practices that don’t suit them.

Adventist Multiculturalism

In *The Fragmenting of Adventism*, longtime *Adventist Review* editor William G. Johnsson reflected on the challenge of accommodating the various generations in the church. He wrote: “The church is for ministry, and particular groups have particular needs. I support the diversification of ministry that enables more people of all ages and experiences to find fellowship, worship, and nurture. But how do we counteract this necessary segmentation so that it does not become fragmentation? How do we join hearts and voices as one body, one people in the Lord?”¹

I think I have an answer to that question. We begin with indiscriminate affirmation and celebration of the diverse cultures in our church.

Yet I am mindful that this is a very difficult challenge. In the last few years, we have raced toward further fragmentation and nationalism.² Our

news channels are saturated with headlines about the latest developments of xenophobia, tribalism, racism, apartheid, and the like. It appears that while people are much more sensitive to the need for authentic diversity, we have an even harder time being culturally affirming.

I believe that beyond the numbers and the flag-waving at General Conference (GC) sessions, there isn’t enough genuine multiculturalism within the Adventist Church. I remember a choir of Pacific Islanders at the GC Session in 2010 who, though they all wore Hawaiian shirts, sang a traditional hymn. Could they have shared anything more authentic to their culture? During that same session, the Oakwood University Aeolians experienced censorship because their offerings were considered to be “too ethnic.”

Multiculturalism in Prophecy

Revelation 7 depicts a final scene in which Earth’s masses have been brought together. John writes: “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and *all the tribes, peoples, and languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Rev. 7:9-10, NASB, emphasis added).

I have to say that the distinctions specifically mentioned in this

scripture—repeated in Revelation 14:6 as “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people”—don’t sound like a melting pot to me. It sounds as if God has affirmed each culture and allowed members of the multitude to maintain their distinctiveness in order that heaven might manifest a beautiful salad representative of his creative genius, infinite love, and unifying power.

To strip the uniqueness of a people is the work of colonizers. In *Slave Religion*, scholar Albert Raboteau says this was a tool in the transatlantic slave trade. “In the New World,” he writes, “slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African culture because of their power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel.”³ Believers who worship the God who identifies every nation, kindred, tongue, and people must ensure that every nation and all the tribes, peoples, and languages are affirmed.

The big question now: how exactly do we do that?

Ethnosensitivity

Leslie Pollard, president of Oakwood University, states that the first step is to develop a framework that is “ethnosensitive” rather than ethnocentric.⁴ This requires deep self-awareness: do we understand individually the reach of our own personal and cultural history and identity? That’s hard.

Then comes the work of seeking understanding. Ellen White advocated for this: “There is no person, no nation, that is perfect in every habit and thought. One must learn of another. Therefore God wants the different nationalities to mingle together, to be one in judgment, one in purpose. Then the union that there is in Christ will be exemplified.”⁵

Notice, she did not contend for uniformity. White counseled the different

nationalities to “mingle” so that they can communicate and learn from each other.

In *Christ and Culture*, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr surveyed how the church has related to secular society and suggested that we accept a paradigm of Christ as the “transformer of culture,” as opposed to the concepts of “Christ of,” “above,” “against,” or “in paradox with” culture.⁶ As Pollard says, no culture is to be preeminent in the Christian perspective. Christ is preeminent and reserves the right to correct and transform every member of the body.

It is impossible to understand the plan of salvation apart from our cultural experience. Culture doesn’t take preeminence over Christ, but there is no vibrant faith apart from it. We Adventists would do well to formally affirm this with a working theology of culture so that we might identify the role culture plays in contextualizing our understanding of salvation.

Equality, Not Charity

I recently discovered a board game that is designed to promote and celebrate our Adventist global mission-focus.⁷ In my cursory look at the game, what seemed to be missing was acknowledgment of the stories and challenges of diverse peoples in the territories where our church serves. Without those stories and an undying commitment to advocate for those who are oppressed (and to partner with them in sustainable development and agency-building), this game is little more than an Adventist version of Risk, or Monopoly World Edition.

A Google search for the phrase “stop sending aid to Africa” will yield many great discussions. The core of this idea is that the value of charity is grossly overstated when it comes to helping countries combat systemic issues

and overcome them in the long term. Journalist Andrew Mwenda argues that the capacity for sustainable development and wealth-building in Africa is overlooked.⁸ Africa received over \$600 billion in foreign aid between 1960 and 2003 but does not appear to have reaped long-term benefits of such extensive investment. Meanwhile, the ruling class and government systems continue to expand while frontline healthcare and entrepreneurship wane.

By shipping goods and services rather than partnering for systemic change, we treat foreign aid recipients as dependents instead of primary, active participants. That is to say, we donate to subjects and subordinates; we partner and collaborate with colleagues and brothers. Our condescending charity is evidence that we don’t recognize the capacities of these foreign fields.

Instead of sending food, why not partner with farmers to increase production and improve distribution? Instead of sending clothes, why not develop business incubators to support local merchants and develop stronger business infrastructures where they are needed? Instead of simply providing free healthcare, why not establish new medical schools and train new doctors who will set up new clinics and hospitals in various places?

Perhaps we need more advocacy and activism rather than relying on ADRA International.

Worship Diversity

Worship is the celebration of God’s work in the world “as it is in heaven.” Our worship should reflect the ways in which we partner with God to see him at work in people’s lives. Authentic celebration can’t be divorced from the cultural and experiential realities of

everyday people. How can we celebrate the triumphs without fully understanding the challenges? How can we accurately express the joy without the nuances of native languages and local dialects? Adventist educator and diversity ombudsman Pedrito Maynard-Reid writes: “If worship does not have its grounding in people’s lives and cultural experiences, it will be foreign, imposed and irrelevant. . . . It is in worship that the changing felt needs of the community are best met, addressed and celebrated.... Thus for worship to be relevant, it has to be an integral part of people’s lives and culture.”⁹

If we strip the cultural nuances from every group, how can we truly see the complexity of the workings of God in their communities and personal lives?

We’re not well-served by having every group sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” in English at a GC Session. I long to see what makes worship authentic and unique in China. When I see an Adventist haka for Jesus, I’m giving it a standing ovation. I want to hear my Indian brothers and sisters sing about God’s power to save with original songs in Hindi. I want to hear the power of God’s grace with the unique intonations and flavor of Russian language and culture.

The Azure Hills Church in Grand Terrace, California, is modeling a diversity renaissance. The church website and social media show a diverse group of believers. But Azure Hills hasn’t been satisfied with the *optics* of diversity. Their ethnically diverse leadership team has led the church in worship that represents their multicultural family. The church encouraged its cultural groups to sing songs in their native languages, started a gospel choir, implemented new types of instrumentation, and encouraged varied genres and styles of artistry.¹⁰ While Azure Hills doesn’t boast of its diversity

and multiculturalism, its members appear to have strategized to get it right.

Undoubtedly this makes some uncomfortable, but diversity *should* make us uncomfortable. It’s only when we become uncomfortable that we learn tolerance and understanding. Even without the ethnic makeup found within Azure Hills, every congregation can practice tolerance and inclusion so that those within the community know that we value fellowship and family.

Real Multiculturalism

Adventist media, such as Hope Channel, shouldn’t assume that mission stories and token minority hosts make for diversity. Diversity is giving full vent to the beauty, power, complexity, and context of various people—on their terms.

Adventism has long prided itself on being the most diverse denomination.¹¹ Yet, optics matter little. We should not boast mere visual diversity. We need robust practical representations of celebrations of diversity on the main stage at the General Conference and in local faith communities.

William Johnsson’s *The Fragmenting of Adventism* was released the year of the 1995 GC Session in the Netherlands. Twenty years later he wrote another book, in which he wrestled again with conflicts within the church, this one relating particularly to women’s ordination.¹² He reflected on what he calls the promise of Adventism: that we are the followers of a straight-shooting, “no baloney” Savior, who has given us a straight-shooter message and mandate. He contends that Adventism at its best is a “people who build bridges, not walls. Who ensure that everyone has a place at the table—black and white, poor and rich, women and men, illiterate and educated; people who include, not exclude, who are light and leaven in society.”

I believe that while the conflicts have remained consistent, what hasn’t changed is our unwillingness to address the elephant in the room. And that elephant’s name is authentic cultural expression. A salad bowl diversity will be far more useful to us than wrestling about who controls the narrative.

Can we do this? I hope so, but I’m not sure. However, I do know who *can* settle this entire issue with one loud trumpet blast. And someday, our God will. It would be lovely if he could see that we’ve been working on it ourselves in the meantime! **AT**

¹ William G. Johnsson, *The Fragmenting of Adventism: Ten Issues Threatening the Church Today: Why the Next Five Years Are Crucial* (1995), p. 47.

² Donald Trump’s rhetoric greatly intensified debate about tribalism and nationalism. Issues related to disparities in healthcare economics, law enforcement, and more have led to a global increase of advocacy and activism for the underrepresented while, according to the ACLU, hate groups are on the rise. Recent publications highlight the recognition of this growing problem.

³ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (1980), p. 4.

⁴ Leslie N. Pollard, *Embracing Diversity: How to Understand and Reach People of All Cultures* (2000), pp. 20–21.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists* (1886), p. 36.

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951, 1975), pp. 190–229.

⁷ While it appears that the board game GoYe! was developed by an independent, Australia-based company, it is being distributed by AdventSource, an official church ministries resource website.

⁸ Andrew Mwenda, “Aid for Africa? No Thanks,” TEDGlobal presentation (June 2007).

⁹ Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives* (2000), p. 19.

¹⁰ For any non-black church to establish a gospel choir is evidence of an attempt to honor the enduring legacy of contributions that African-Americans (and other people throughout the diaspora) have made to the many forms of music that are manifest in gospel music. Watch Azure Hill’s gospel choir and Indonesian choir online at www.youtube.com.

¹¹ Michael Lipka, “The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups,” Pew Research Center (July 27, 2015).

¹² William G. Johnsson, *Where Are We Headed? Adventism after San Antonio* (2017), p. 136.



Those with Doubts and Those with None

By Alden Thompson

DOUBT CAN BE FRIGHTENING TO DEVOUT Christians. It seems to be a step too close to an abyss from which there may be no turning back. Yet even the New Testament introduces us to a small cluster of believing doubters. Nicodemus came by night to ask Jesus his questions, and Jesus' own disciples included a "doubting Thomas." Jesus himself could perhaps be included among the doubters as he cried from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34)—though it wasn't long before he returned to complete trust: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46, NRSV).

For all that, however, the New Testament seems to ride high on a crest of certainty, with Peter and Saul/Paul leading the way. After his serious denial of the Lord, Peter came roaring back to an active faith. Doubt didn't seem to have played any role at all in his experience. A careless arrogance might be a better description.

As for Saul/Paul, he was the very picture of certainty, both before and after his conversion. I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton's description of Francis of Assisi's conversion: "As soon as ever he had been unhorsed by the glorious humiliation of his vision of dependence on the divine love, he flung himself furiously into battle. He had wheeled his charger clean round, but there was

no halt or check in the thundering impetuosity of his charge.... He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold."¹

In many ways, Paul and St. Francis would have made good soulmates.

The Value of Doubt

Yet some modern believers have been brave enough to recognize the heuristic

We must admit that a world in which no one asks any questions would be as dysfunctional as a world in which everyone was always asking questions.

value of doubt. George MacDonald put it this way: "To deny the existence of God may ... involve less unbelief than the smallest yielding to doubt of His goodness. I say *yielding*: for a person may be haunted with doubts, and only grow thereby in faith. Doubts are the messengers of the Living One to the honest. They are the first knock at our door of things that are not yet, but have to be, understood.... Doubt must precede every deeper assurance; for uncertainties are what we first see when we look into a region hitherto unknown, unexplored, unannexed."²

But we must turn to the Old Testament for a biblical mandate for doubt—though *permission* is a better term than *mandate*, for nowhere does Scripture actually require a believer to doubt. (Indeed, some believers whose stories are told in Scripture seem to be immune to doubt.) The Old Testament, you see, has a whole genre of literature that is mostly missing from the New Testament: wisdom literature, which divides into so-called "higher" and "lower" wisdom. Ecclesiastes and Job are labeled "higher" wisdom; Proverbs is the best example of lower wisdom.

To be sure, a touch of modern conceit lurks in those labels, for doubt (Ecclesiastes and Job) seems to rank higher in the modern mind than certainty (Proverbs). And no matter how one might establish the relative value of doubt over certainty, the labels clearly rank doubt higher than certainty.

But before we become too eager to place one above the other, we must admit that a world in which no one asks any questions would be as dysfunctional as a world in which everyone was always asking questions. In a classroom, for example, every teacher prays that there will be a sprinkling of students with good questions. Too many of such students in one class would result, of course, in a cacophony that would certainly be the enemy of learning.

Questions or No Questions

At the level of personal friendship, the same dynamic can also be at work. I vividly remember a conversation with two women following one of the sessions in a weekend seminar I was holding at the Adventist church in Paradise, California. One of the women was full of questions. The other stood quietly by, listening. After I answered the questions as best I could, I said to the two of them. “Let me suggest the way your friendship works in connection with the life of faith.” Then, turning to the one who was full of questions, I observed: “For you, it is terribly important that you have the freedom to ask your questions. Your friend here does not have the same need but is quite ready to listen and is glad that you are willing and able to ask your questions. Indeed, her more placid perspective provides stability for you, an anchor that enables and empowers you to explore. Thus the two of you, though very different, have bonded together in a meaningful and mutually helpful friendship.”

The two women looked at each other and burst out laughing. “That’s exactly how it works,” they said.

Interestingly, the one with many questions (Ecclesiastes) and the one with no questions (Proverbs) not only sit side-by-side in church, but also are next-door neighbors in our English Bibles.

Ecclesiastes

So let’s take a closer look at each of those authors to see how they viewed our world. Ecclesiastes is the more amazing of the two. Indeed, evangelical author Walter Martin of anti-cult fame went so far as to declare that only the last chapter could really be inspired. He wrote: “It is almost universally agreed among Biblical scholars that Ecclesiastes portrays Solomon’s apostasy and is therefore virtually

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worthless for determining doctrine. It sketches man’s ‘life under the sun’ and reveals the hopelessness of the soul apart from God. The conclusion of the Book alone mirrors the true revelation of God (chap. 12).²³

In many ways, Ecclesiastes is a unique book in the Bible. Nothing even remotely like it is found in the New Testament, and even in the Old Testament it stands alone. Under the heading of “remarkable”

vocabulary, these words and phrases are worth noting: “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” provides the bookends for the book, appearing at the beginning (1:2) and just before the epilogue (12:8). Altogether, the word “vanity” occurs 31 times in the book and only three times in all the rest of the Old Testament. A companion phrase with a similar thrust is “a chasing after wind,” which occurs nine times in Ecclesiastes. In body language that would translate into a massive shrug.

So what’s the author’s remedy or solution? *Enjoy* life! The verb occurs nine times in Ecclesiastes and only 15 times elsewhere. The noun “enjoyment” occurs six times in Ecclesiastes and only once elsewhere. Finally, a phrase that occurs five times in the book is “eat and drink”! In short, nothing makes sense—so one might as well enjoy life while it lasts. Indeed, one could almost see 3:11-15 as the author’s motto: “God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end. So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God” (Eccl. 3:11-15, NLT).

Proverbs

Now let’s look more closely at Proverbs as we ponder how the two authors could see the same world so differently. We have seen that in Ecclesiastes, all efforts to get

wisdom are only “a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation” (1:17-18, NRSV).

In Proverbs, though, “wisdom” is one of God’s best gifts: “Happy are those who find wisdom” is the exclamation in 3:13 (NRSV). And “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight” (4:7, NRSV).

While the author of Ecclesiastes had seen “righteous people who perish in their righteousness” and “wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing” (Eccl. 7:15, NRSV), as well as “righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked” and “wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous” (Eccl. 8:14, NRSV), Proverbs declares that the world makes sense: “Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor” (Prov. 21:21, NRSV).

Interestingly, the author of Proverbs seems to be aware of the mismatch to which Ecclesiastes calls attention; he labels it an abomination! “One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD” (Prov. 17:15, NRSV).

But the reaction of Ecclesiastes to this mismatch is simply a massive shrug: “This also is vanity. So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves” (Eccl. 8:14-15, NRSV). (That is a very close parallel to 3:11-15, cited above as the author’s “motto.”)

Silencing the Questions?

Turning to modern applications in the church, it concerns me that those who ask questions are so readily silenced. In the narrative of his departure from Adventism, Dale Ratzlaff tells how he went to a trusted teacher for answers to his questions about Daniel 8:14. His question was: “What was ‘trampled’ in 457 B.C. that was ‘untrampled’ in 1844?”

Ratzlaff remembers the response as follows: “Suddenly his demeanor changed. He peered at me with a cold, penetrating, lengthy stare, with an expression I had never seen from him before. After a long, uncomfortable silence, he said: ‘Dale, aren’t you studying for the ministry? You should not be asking questions like that!’”⁴

Sometimes there are no good answers to satisfy us, but we must be free to ask our questions. Traditional perspectives often obscure that freedom. Job 13:15 provides a good illustration. The familiar rendering of this verse in the King James Version is deeply embedded in our souls: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” Modern translations capture a spunkier response to the divine presence: “See, he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face” (NRSV). And the book of Job tells us that God affirms those who dare to ask their bold questions. At the end of the book, God rebukes Job’s friends, who say all of the “nice” things about God: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (NRSV).

Affirming truth may not come easily. In his novel *Till We Have Faces*, C. S.

Lewis, that modern “skeptical” apologist for Christianity, expresses the haunting uncertainty that sometimes comes over the believer: “I say the gods deal very unrightly with us. For they will neither (which would be best of all) go away and leave us to live our own short days to ourselves, nor will they show themselves openly and tell us what they would have us do. For that too would be enduring. But to hint and hover, to draw near us in dreams and oracles, or in a waking vision that vanishes as soon as seen, to be dead silent when we question them and then glide back and whisper (words we cannot understand) in our ears when we most wish to be free of them, and to show to one what they hide from another; what is all this but cat-and-mouse play, blindman’s buff, and mere jugglery? Why must holy places be dark places?”⁵

Within a conservative believing community, such as Adventism, those with doubts are likely to be shouted down by those who have no doubts at all. But the presence of Ecclesiastes and Job in our Bibles should encourage us to nurture and encourage those with doubts. They are a precious part of our community. **AT**

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923), p. 96.

² George MacDonald, edited and with a preface by C. S. Lewis, *365 Readings* (1947), pp. 66-67 (#152).

³ Walter R. Martin, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventists* (1960), p. 127 (note #11).

⁴ Dale Ratzlaff, *Truth Led Me Out* (2008), pp. 35-36.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (1956), p. 249.



NEWS BRIEFS

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.

Wilson Bans Clapping During Zoom Services

SILVER SPRING, Md. — This morning, General Conference President Ted Wilson reminded Adventists around the world that clapping in church was not allowed, not even via Zoom.

“Some of the brethren seem to think that using the clap function on Zoom is fair game,” he said in a televised statement. “They could not be more mistaken.”

Wilson added that if he could have a penny for every time he'd seen clapping in virtual Adventist worship services over the last few months, he'd “have enough to make up for the missions offering shortfall” experienced during COVID.

Feuding Men Weaponize Ellen White Quotations

LOMA LINDA, Calif. — Zader Cruise has spent the last couple of hours scouring ellenwhite.org for ammo to give him the upper hand in his long-standing feud with the deputy head deacon at his church. The two never miss an opportunity to leave judgy voicemails or to fire off pointed tweets, targeting each other's greatest weaknesses along with a quote from *Testimonies for the Church*.

Lately, Cruise has been running low on fresh quotations he can recite by heart, so he has committed to spending as long as it takes to prepare the perfect comeback for any of the deacon's favorite lines by Ellen G. White.

ADRA Return Policy Doesn't Cover Goats

ADVENTIST WORLD — A bombshell report from the International Trade Commission (ITC) today revealed that there is basically no return policy on goats secured through the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) gift catalog.

In its report, the ITC revealed that refused ADRA goats have occasionally been found roaming the halls of the General Conference headquarters and grazing on potted office plants; nonetheless, the humanitarian agency has been “remarkably uncooperative” in response to most attempts to return or exchange the gifted goats.

The ITC is considering a mandate that ADRA must issue gift receipts, so that unwanted livestock can be returned for Adventist Book Center (ABC) store credit in the event that some recipients prefer soya milk.

Meal Prayer Blesses Little Debbie Treats

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — Dying to rip open a box of Little Debbie Nutty Bars, local Pathfinder counselor Patch Aittems paused briefly to say grace, asking for the sugar bomb to nourish and strengthen his body.

Salivating, he added that he was grateful to be indulging in the wafer's chocolatey goodness, especially since there were so many starving gluten-free vegans in Loma Linda. Aittems expressed sorrow that even within certain Adventist enclaves of his own town, some would never know the delicious flavor explosion he was about to enjoy.

There's No Problem a Committee Can't Solve

SPINWHEEL, N.J. — The church board at Spinwheel Community sent out a memo of encouragement to its membership this month, reminding them that no matter how bad things get, they can face the future with confidence, knowing that Adventist committees are the answer to everything.

In the message, board chairperson Delly Berrate said there simply was no problem that a committee—supplied with enough noncaffeinated Pero to sedate a horse—could not solve. “Whenever we feel we are up against something we can't handle as a congregation, we should remind ourselves that we have never faced a challenge we haven't been able to talk to death in committee,” she said.

“We have nothing to fear for the future,” Berrate added, “save we forget how committees have bored us past caring about our problems in the past.”

Contributors

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AT EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

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



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has authored two books: *There Is Life After Divorce* and *The Sweetness of a Bitter Cup*. She enjoys laughing with friends, new places, and evenings at home with her husband, Tony.

Read. Watch. Listen

We wish we could be delivering this magazine in person to your door while bringing some much-needed supplies, an encouraging card, or a virtual hug as you "shelter in place" at a "safe distance" from other people. While signs of hope are appearing in some regions of our world, there is still considerable concern in other areas with mutations of COVID-19 and the uneven rollout of the vaccine. 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 at home than to keep up on Adventist Today's eight channels of communication: print magazine, website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Patreon, PDF monthly magazine, and our weekly AT Update newsletter.

We hope you're regularly following our Anticipating AT1 videos every Friday and our streaming Adventist Today Sabbath Seminar every Sabbath. 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 \$100, \$300, and \$1,200, with the option to divide those amounts into monthly gifts over the next year.

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.

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