

A 29th Fundamental Belief

Who Can Be Saved?

Civil Unions as a  
Religious Liberty Issue

WINTER 2021 • VOL. 29 NO. 1

# Adventist *Today*

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





## Why I Love Atheists, Agnostics, Backsliders, Unbelievers, Cultural Adventists, and All Who Aren't Solidly at the Center 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.

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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 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 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.

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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 can'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?

### 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, for 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 someone 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 indefensible prophetic speculations?

Far from the need to fully commit to stand for every doctrine “though the heavens fall,” it is time for us to value *not* fully committing to everything, lest we commit to what turns out to be nonsense.

I have a friend who uses the term “cultural Adventist” scornfully, along with words such as “unbeliever” and “backslider.” I dislike all of these terms, because they are meant to disparage rather than describe. In fact, these individuals display the courage to rethink previous opinions, which should be affirmed rather than criticized.

## A Word to the Unbelievers

Some who are reading this are my Adventist-identified unbelieving friends. While I respect you, I want to add this:

I know you’ve been treated badly by some church members, and some of you have staked out your position in opposition. Just make sure you’re not being a jerk about it. You don’t have to point out

every one of our inconsistencies and problems every time we talk. You don’t need to be sarcastic about everything dumb we believe or do. If you think our witnessing gets tiresome, your scoffing is just as tiresome. Try to be as respectful of my belief as I am of your unbelief. Even if you don’t believe in the Bible, that line about “let he who is without sin cast the first stone” is remarkably solid advice.

Perhaps you might learn a bit of emotional distance and replace your scorn with benevolent intellectual curiosity.

## What This Isn’t

I’m imagining someone reading my title and thinking, “Perhaps what Loren is really saying is that if we don’t hang out with the unbelievers, we won’t be able to witness to them—to slip in that hook when they’re distracted by how sweet we are to them.”

It’s true that we can’t have any influence over people we don’t spend time with. Churches today operate as private clubs, not open-door businesses. Set aside all of our talk about winning the world for Christ; I find Adventists more interested in one another than in the world out there. We want our congregations to grow, but only with people just like us. We’re not ready to grow with just anyone who comes to find comfort with us—especially those who make *us* even a *little* uncomfortable.

Still, I don’t bury a barbed hook in my friendships. First, I respect my unbelieving friends too much to do that. If you’ve ever been invited to someone’s house thinking that you’re making friends, and then they hit you up to sell Amway, you’ll realize that there’s nothing less winsome than hidden motives. Second, if you’ve gone far enough in your spiritual journey to make a decision not to be church-ed people, then my evangelistic urging probably isn’t going to help.

So, unbelievers, you’re safe from a scheming Loren. I don’t know if you’re safe from God—but that’s your lookout, not mine. As for me, I’ll offer you only what you ask for and nothing you don’t, other than kindness and honest friendship and good conversation. **AT**