

Is Depression a
Spiritual Failing?

The Violent Pastor

No, We Can't Rush
Jesus' Return

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THE
HERETIC
HUNTER



features

7 Losing My Fire, Finding My Purpose

By Lindsey Abston Painter

10 For Adventist Use Only?

By Stephen Chavez

DEPARTMENTS

3 Guest Editorial

The Heretic Hunter

By Edwin Torkelsen

12 The Exegete

2 Peter 3:11-12: Can We Hurry the Lord's Return?

By Clarence Pamphile

15 World Church

Rethinking the Evangelistic Crusade Culture

By Cherri-Ann Farquharson

18 Health

Is Depression a Spiritual Failing?

By John R. Landgraf

22 Book Review

Ronald Graybill's Vision of Ellen White

By Jonathan Butler

26 Alden Thompson

The Mystery of Personal Faith

29 Story

Abuse in the Pastor's Family

By Treye McKinney

31 Contributors

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The Heretic Hunter

by Edwin Torkelsen

I CONFESS MY SIN. I ADMIT THAT I HAVE SOMETIMES committed one of the worst sins we can be guilty of: I fell victim to the ugly temptation to brand others as heretics.

I deemed my verdict on heretics to be to the point—well-founded and valid. With such confidence, I compounded my sin by sharing my accusation with others.

What was the sin of these heretics? What merited my judgment of them?

Very simple: she or he held an opinion on some religious matter that differed slightly from my own.

The Truth!

I had, at that time, a great burden for correctness, both doctrinal and behavioral. No compromise regarding the Truth, please! The Truth is white. All else is black. No gray zones, no slack in sanctified holiness.

Without realizing it, I was emulating Saul's zeal for God before his Damascus Road experience. I was, like Saul, blind to the fact that I not only put up myself as a judge over the unfortunate-but-honest people I perceived as heretics, but I also promoted myself to supreme authority of the correct understanding of the Bible and all of its different texts.

L'état, c'est moi. I held the ultimate power of definition. My hermeneutic is plain and simple. My reading is the correct one. On that basis, I could with assurance determine individuals who deserved a place among the remnant elect and those who did not.

I was not alone in this. I could generously say “we,” including all who shared my way of thinking, and excluding “they,” who did not. To us, everything was so simple. The Bible was a cookbook for whatever theological idea had crossed our minds. Don't bother to ask critical questions, least of all regarding our own perceptions of the Bible texts. I could even say that the word “critical,” when connected with

“thinking,” was anathema. Never mind what the Bible authors had in mind or what their situation and intentions were!

If in doubt about something, we could always ask our pastor. And if our questions challenged his (never “her” back then, please) mental capacity, we could turn to the gold standard: *The Church Manual* and the 28 Fundamental Beliefs.

Cookbook Faith

We did not realize that reading the Bible literally, without concern for context, was no guarantee that the Bible's central theme of grace and salvation would appear on our radar. What *did* appear was no jewelry, no cinema, no theater, no coffee, no Christmas tree, no alcohol, no long hair, no short skirts, no skiing, no playing games with balls, and no swimming on Sabbath.

No wonder so many of my friends left the church! And what a miracle it was that some of us voluntarily chose to stay!

Not until later in life did it dawn on me that this cookbook approach was counterproductive to understanding the Bible. Those who encouraged us to read the Bible sincerely wanted that book to influence our lives, but the literal proof-text reading they advocated did not help us to understand God's mind and purpose. Instead, it elevated an immediate, uncritical, and superficial literal reading to be the Word of God. In short, it caused me to believe that my opinions were God's Word.

The conviction that my opinions were God's Word led me to go heretic hunting, which was actually a surprisingly satisfying mission. Knowing that I was led by the Holy Spirit to search out those dangerous heretics, whose ideas deviated from mine, provided a warm and rather pious emotional reward. After all, I was right and the others were wrong. *My* ideas had unquestionable divine approval. *Their* ideas were

Those who encouraged us to read the Bible sincerely wanted that book to influence our lives, but the literal proof-text reading they advocated did not help us to understand God's mind and purpose.



I try to keep the door open for the possibility that no matter how many proof texts from the Bible I can quote, I may still be dead wrong, even if I happen to be strongly convinced that I am right.

false, proving by their very erroneousness that we really were living in the end times.

Understanding the world became so simple. Most things could be seen as a dichotomy: us vs. them; truth vs. falsehood; obedience vs. rebellion; righteousness vs. sin; purity vs. defilement; inside vs. outside; saved vs. lost; the perfect church of the last generation vs. the lukewarm Laodiceans and apostate Babylonians—that is to say, white vs. black, with no gray zones.

It was simply impossible to imagine that it could be the other way around—that they could be right and I wrong. And believe me, nothing tastes so good as self-righteous piety that is seasoned by the contrast between my rightness and your wrongness.

I don't know where Jesus Christ came into this. It was difficult for me to catch a glimpse of him among all those dichotomies. But he must have been there, somewhere in the shadows, because I eventually sensed him knocking at my door. In the midst of my self-elevating exclusiveness, I met real Christians who carried a burden for the salvation of sinners and who reflected the mind of Jesus Christ. Thanks to them, I remained in the church and have no plans to leave.

The Sales Pitch

Medieval history was my subject during my seven years of study in the university. Being a Seventh-day Adventist, I was naturally interested in the history of the church from

about 500-1500 CE, the period referred to most often in our prophecies. I carried with me a heritage that focused on beasts and horns in Daniel and Revelation.

Like other Protestants, Adventists in the latter part of the 19th century and for most of the 20th century held a dim view of the church in that period, especially of the western part of the church that was in obedience to the Bishop of Rome. For many Protestants, including Adventists, the pope became the centerpiece of their interpretations, the key to understanding Bible prophecies. For some of us, the pope was a more prominent figure than Christ.

Along the way I discovered that few if any of our preachers, leaders, and evangelists had any real knowledge of—much less a genuine interest in—the origin and development of the largest Christian denomination. They weren't historians, but rather salesmen who reduced the Roman Catholic Church to a propaganda tool to bolster their sales pitch.

They offered their audiences what they claimed was the Truth, and to make that truth attractive and convincing enough for their listeners to join the Adventist Church, they needed to show it against a somber background that made *their* variety of truth stand out. The papacy and the Roman Catholic Church became the great villains of European history and Christianity. Their focus was entirely on the dark side of the Roman church and its leaders.

In so doing, they were merely stepping into a long tradition dating back to Petrarch (1304-1374), Martin Luther (1483-1546), and the Renaissance humanists who, for different reasons, created the idea of a “dark” period in history, the millennium between a glorious antiquity and the glorious present. The term *Middle Ages* was coined in 1469 and first used in its modern sense in the late 1700s, but the idea was older. It was a propaganda term before it morphed into a more neutral description for that particular period in history.

What Shaped the Church

While evangelists usually focus on the bad doctrines of the Roman church, which in Luther's and their opinion hid the true understanding of righteousness by faith, I gradually came to see that this was not necessarily the whole story, or even the most important part of it. Doctrinal development was important from the second century on into the Middle Ages. Luther's Reformation was equally important as a catalyst for change, maybe most of all in the matter of church authority. Righteousness by faith can be traced back to Augustine (354-430), and Luther was an Augustinian monk. He credited his friend and spiritual mentor, Johann von Staupitz (1468-1529), with helping him to better understand salvation.

But the driving forces in the development of the Christian church into a strong institution had, in my study, more to do with socio-political circumstances and the emergence of a certain mentality and practice in church leadership. This mentality is characterized by a mix of personal piety, a love for organizational structure, a bureaucratic urge to make rules, and above all, an obsession with control of the believers.

As we move into the High Middle Ages (about 1000-1300) and the Avignon period in the 1300s, we see a church that struggles to free itself from control by secular rulers. The church became like the secular governments, with attributes of a secular state and a willingness to govern by force.

The church as a simple community of believers struggled to survive the aspirations of the church as an institution that provided career opportunities and high social, economic, and political status for a privileged clergy class and its top leaders. During the High Middle Ages, the doctrinal foundations were already in place and the focus shifted to maintaining, defending, promoting, and controlling the organization itself.

In order to maintain control of the system, you need to control the minds of the people. The church did that through its doctrines, its sacraments, the power of the confessional, and with the help of the mendicant orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans who traveled the highways and byways to preach the

gospel of personal piety and obedience to the church organization and its leaders.

During this period, lay movements emerged that adopted teachings and ideas challenging the doctrines and the authority of the church. Most Adventists know of the Albigenses and Waldenses, and some have heard about the mystic Thomas à Kempis. The Brethren of the Common Life, a branch of the *Devotio Moderna* movement, also focused on personal piety. All of them in different ways challenged the established church.

The church had two options. It could control these movements and incorporate them into the church or, when that failed, it could suppress them. During the 12th century, the Inquisition was launched to counter heresy, and the Albigenses and the Waldenses were severely persecuted. The Albigensian War (1209-1229) devastated Southern France.

The ambition for control, combined with focus on preserving the purity of doctrines and the unity of the church system, drove the Christian church into what Adventists have always regarded as its great apostasy.

What dawned on me as I studied the medieval church was that the thinking of the leadership of the church, as well as most of its lay members, made it what it was. The leaders used control, demands for compliance, and force to secure those aims. Individuals who allowed themselves to think unauthorized thoughts, whose consciences did not align with the church leadership, were considered heretics. Soon fires were lit all over Europe as heretics were brought to the stake.

Me, a Persecuting Zealot?

As I learned about the history of the church and discovered the mentality that undergirded its aspirations, I began to examine myself and where I was standing. I was not among the persecuted saints but was one of the misguided and persecuting zealots. I was thinking like the medieval Roman church! My inclination to identify heretics was the mentality of the Inquisition.

I was thinking like the medieval Roman church! My inclination to identify heretics was the mentality of the Inquisition.

I was becoming an Antichrist, one who usurps the powers and prerogatives of God. James writes that “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy” (James 4:12, NIV). But, of course, I do not hold the position of omniscient lawgiver or judge, nor does any other mortal human being.

Slowly did Paul’s words sink in: “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, ... but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2, NIV). Even more importantly, he drove home to me that “we know in part and we prophesy in part.... For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror.... Now I know in part” (verses 9-12, NIV). Paul convinced me that my opinions and ideas are at best only bits and pieces of the greater picture. My understanding is imperfect, uncertain, and foggy, like the image of a face in an ancient bronze mirror.


Paul did not assure me that I would understand everything on this side of eternity. One day I will understand more, but only “when completeness comes” (verse 10). Paul also taught me that the Bible is not a systematic theology cookbook containing the answers to all of our questions—past, present, and future. The Bible is primarily a history book that tells the stories of conversations between God and humans in a diversity of situations. These stories are profitable for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NIV). They inform me that I am not more perfect than the people God talked with long ago.

The Holy Spirit reminded me of the humility of the very imperfect man David, who still was a man after God’s heart. David realized his own imperfections and limitations and prayed: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24, NIV).

Opinions vs. Accusations

Have I stopped having opinions—even strong opinions—that I think are well founded? Absolutely not! I still have my ideas, my views, my perceptions. But I have learned that my understanding is just that: *my* understanding. My sincere wish is to avoid the blasphemy of equating my understanding with God’s thoughts. I try to keep the door open for the possibility that no matter how many proof texts from the Bible I can quote, I may still be dead wrong, even if I happen to be strongly convinced that I am right.

I have stopped looking for heretics. I leave that to God, the one and only judge in such matters. We need no more purges, no more people tied to stakes in bonfires lighted by us. What we need are more open-minded conversations, where we are willing to listen and learn from each other—not demand complete compliance with human-constructed theories or voted orthodoxies.

The ecclesiastical tribunals that tried our doctrinal orthodoxy belong in the Middle Ages. We cannot change the past—but we are not forced to repeat that past. And we must not. 



LOSING MY FIRE, FINDING MY PURPOSE

By Lindsey Abston Painter

I USED TO WRITE WITH AN UNDERCURRENT OF ANGER, AND I would let that anger out through my keyboard as I furiously took on injustice. The sting of yet another General Conference vote against women could inflame me. I wielded my words like a sword, slashing with righteous anger.

But lately I haven't felt that. I can't summon that fire about the church as I used to. My essays now are more clinical, more educational. They don't have the bite they used to have, and I think I'm beginning to understand why.

I'm healing. And part of that healing has involved putting distance between myself and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

What the Church Is

I stopped attending church at the time of my divorce. I assumed it would be temporary, that I would eventually be able to separate the church from my marriage, and I could go back. But as years passed, I felt no renewed desire to return to regular church attendance.

I do remember my church days fondly. I loved the singing. I loved the people. I loved the relationships. I think back now to the last church I attended, and the thought feels warm and lovely in my memory.

But church is more than a group of people who eat together and laugh together and sing together. And that "more" part interfered with my spiritual peace. There is a fundamental difference between the way Jesus loved and treated people—vulnerable people, especially—and the way the church as an institution treats people now.

It matters to me that LGBT+ people have been pushed away from the church. I have too many lovely gay and lesbian friends to suppose they are less worthy of being active in church than many of our self-righteous "true" believers.

It matters that on an institutional level, women are not equal. Not only are they not equal, but the most powerful denominational body, the General Conference, is actively attempting to punish church leaders who try to create gender equality.

It matters to me that Adventists teach people that they are fundamentally bad and that God somehow has to find a way to overcome his overwhelming disgust at "such a worm as I" in order to love the filth that is us.

It matters to me that people who don't fit easily into our churches are often ignored, rarely embraced and included. Adventists are fond of saying that these people leave "through the back door," as though they're surreptitiously

escaping. Nonsense. They walk right out the front door. Good church people see them leave, and if they notice that they haven't returned, they don't care enough to find out why and to attempt restoration.

It matters to me that the church is so inwardly focused that it ignores real suffering in the world, especially when having a powerful organizational voice to advocate for suffering people would make a difference.

There are other places where I can find people to meet with, where I can find relationships. (Fewer where I can find singing, but even that exists). These places don't have the history of theology and practice that make me feel I must ignore a fundamental part of myself to participate.

Adventist Today editor Loren Seibold wrote an article during the pandemic in which he observed that fewer and fewer people seem concerned about what the General Conference is doing.¹

I WOULD RATHER PUT MY TIME AND MONEY AND ENERGY INTO FIGHTING TO CHANGE THE INJUSTICE I SEE AROUND ME IN MY COMMUNITY, IN MY COUNTRY, IN MY WORLD. THOSE ARE PRECISELY THE THINGS I HAD HOPED AND DREAMED THAT MY CHURCH WOULD DO.

The church leadership is becoming irrelevant, he said; they just don't know it yet. For me that rang true, and it may be why these days I'm suffering less when the church does awful or hurtful things.

I've carried my anger for many years. I won't say that the anger is gone, but it has softened. Yet that hasn't led me back toward the institutional church. My concern has transferred to other social issues. I would rather put my time and money and energy into fighting to change the injustice I see around me in my community, in my country, in my world. Those are precisely the things I had hoped and dreamed that my church would do. Instead, its leaders insist on ignoring or actively contributing to many of these injustices, while holding on to the beliefs of a culturally irrelevant past or living in an imagined prophetic future.

Changing the Church?

For the majority of my life, I was the ideal Seventh-day Adventist. I followed all of the rules. I participated enthusiastically in the culture. I was deeply involved in church activities. I attended youth rallies, camp meetings, evangelism seminars, Revelation seminars, church retreats, summer camps. You name it, I participated in it. I regularly taught Sabbath schools, led the singing, and even preached a few times.

And while I felt supported by my local congregations, the global church body—even after being given many chances and lots of reasons to rethink its position—continued to deny my equality. I have written often about how deeply and personally those decisions hurt me.

Shifting my faith and leaving the church was in some ways more painful for me even than my divorce. But I find that now, with some time and space, I am free to choose my relationship

with God on my terms, without the pain I felt from being a part of an organization that was hurting me.

Many have argued that it is more effective to try to change the church from within. I respect that position, but I can no longer hold it. Why should I spend a lifetime trying to change an organization that has not respected or recognized me—neither when I was in it, nor now that I have separated myself from it?

Us vs. Them

One thing that kept me in the church for so long was a lifetime of us vs. them teaching. Seventh-day Adventist people are trustworthy and good; other people are not. Out there in the world, all you'll have to look forward to is rejection and fear. These things, even when not said explicitly, were implied.

And they were partially right: once I ventured for the first time “into the world” outside the church, I had a hard

time fitting in. But that wasn't because everyone outside was dangerous and bad. It was because I was from a different culture. I had different heroes, different ideas about how things worked, different life experiences.

In other words, I braced to defend myself from an army of scary "people from the world" and was delighted to find, instead, a broad and diverse group of pretty great people on the outside. It was like putting on six protective layers to brace myself for the harsh, cold winter and then opening the door to a bright, warm spring day! The people outside the church either didn't care about my distinctions (they tend to be more accepting of differences than those *inside* the church) or they were delighted to teach me basic things about "life outside." For example, some friends introduced me to movies I had never seen, which were a part of the culture. A coworker patiently tried to teach me about fashion and jewelry. An army of women shared their post-divorce dating experiences.

I found thousands of people like me, who were devoted to their faith in their youth but were driven away in adulthood by the stark contrast between the teachings of Jesus and the way the modern Christian church operates in the United States. (I can't speak for other countries, but I believe some churches abroad are experiencing a similar phenomenon).

Pursuing My Passion

Healing means worrying less about doctrine, theology, and church organization and caring more about people. I haven't lost my passion. I just don't feel a passion to defend the church anymore.

I now feel a passion for people. My work is on behalf of vulnerable people: foster children, homeless people, substance abusers, the incarcerated, people with mental illness, cognitive impairment, or who have suffered trauma. Their needs fuel the part inside of me that once was fueled by my devotion to the church.

My work has a direct effect in my community. I teach people in the community, such as teachers and medical professionals, how to understand trauma and its pervasive effects on people's psyche and behavior. I teach compassion for the sick and suffering, help for those who need it most.

In other words, I advance all of those causes that I was taught as a child in church, which Jesus did.

I haven't left the church as a result of not caring about what I was taught. I have left the church because I *do* care about what I

was taught. I care about it down to my bones. I was taught that Jesus loves recklessly and wholly, and that his primary focus is to help the poor, the vulnerable, and the suffering. What I do now benefits suffering and vulnerable people more than anything I have ever done in my entire life inside the church.


An Act of Faith

That model, under which I live my life, is deeply sacred to me. It also no longer fits the church I see in front of me today. My "secular" work now feels more spiritual than anything I ever did within the church.

I have come to believe that mine is pastoral work. Each of the clients my agency helps is, in some way, a reflection of God, and there is deep value in each one. Helping them discover the beauty and humanity within them—even the most difficult cases—is the work of God.

It is, in point of fact, an act of faith: faith that every person is worthy and that underneath trauma and challenging behavior, every person is capable of growing and healing.

I believe that now, more than ever, I have something to contribute to the Adventist conversation. I no longer see myself wielding my anger as a fiery sword of justice to try to change my church. Instead, I am finding a new groove. A new source of inspiration. I'm not reacting to the sting of personal rejection from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. That toxic relationship is behind me. I have found peace and happiness in a new life of service.

Just as my anger resonated with people, I believe my new peace will resonate, as well. My writing has changed as I have changed. And I hope it is for the better. 

¹ Loren Seibold, "How the General Conference Lost Its Mojo," *Adventist Today Online* (Oct. 23, 2020).

FOR ADVENTIST USE ONLY?

We don't control the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit controls us.

By Stephen Chavez

FOR MOST OF THE LAST DECADE, SEVENTH-day Adventist church leaders at the highest levels have hammered the necessity of revival and reformation. The height of this obsession was perhaps demonstrated most starkly in March 2021, when 10 pages in *Adventist World* magazine featured messages from General Conference presidents Charles H. Watson (1930-1936), James L. McElhany (1936-1950), Robert H. Pierson (1966-1979), and Ted N. C. Wilson (2010 to the present). Each urged rank-and-file Adventists to put away worldly interests and pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit so that Jesus can come.

This passion demonstrates a conceit that salvation history—indeed, the fate of the entire universe—depends on the faithfulness of Adventists proclaiming “the eternal gospel ... to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev. 14:6, NIV¹).

It also implies that only Seventh-day Adventists can be trusted with the Holy Spirit, as if the Holy Spirit can be bottled and marketed “for Adventist use only.”

Born, and Born Again

One of the most instructive and descriptive conversations about the Holy Spirit happened during Jesus’ interview with Nicodemus (John 3).

First comes Jesus’ assertion: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (verse 3). Then, after some back and forth, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (verse 5).

Jesus affirms that we don’t control the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit controls us. “The wind blows wherever it pleases,” he says. “You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (verse 8). The idea is that manifestations of the Holy Spirit are as varied as the believers who are born of the Spirit.

This conversation takes us, a few verses later, to one of Jesus’ most unambiguous and memorable statements: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned” (verses 16-18).

Notice the progression. Belief and baptism—“of water and the Spirit”—lead to eternal life (verse 5). Freedom from condemnation leads to being born of the Spirit (verse 6). How many Adventists believe that baptism is the end-goal of being believers? How many know that living by the power of the Holy Spirit is where the action is—and that living by the Spirit is when the adventure begins?

I’ve spent most of my life being educated by and working for the Adventist Church. It breaks my heart to remember the doubts I had about my own salvation and how often the conversations I’ve had with friends and parishioners have expressed some form of doubt that we are worthy of salvation. We were so obsessed about our salvation that the adventure of living for Christ and being filled with the Spirit was lost on us. When we were encouraged to pray for the Holy Spirit, it was with the understanding that only our lukewarmness was preventing Jesus from returning. Or that if we prayed hard enough, the Holy Spirit would somehow energize our efforts, like a cup of Gatorade helps power a runner to the finish line.

Gifted for Service

During his ministry, Jesus embodied all the gifts of the Spirit. He taught; he healed; he prophesied; he performed miracles; he encouraged, etc. He was limited only in terms of geography, in that he could be in only one place at a time.

When Jesus began to speak about his absence, he told his disciples to expect the Holy Spirit in his place. He said, “The Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you” (John 16:15). When we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, we demonstrate everywhere we go the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecies, generosity, encouragement, etc. Jesus isn’t physically present, but through his Holy Spirit, the church as the body of Christ touches people’s lives with the power of the gospel.

When Christians in the early church went from place to place preaching the gospel, they made themselves available to the Holy Spirit. They knew they didn’t control the Holy Spirit; under the right conditions, the Holy Spirit controlled them. They often saw the restrictions they had placed upon themselves shattered in the process.

Philip, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, found himself on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he met an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). Philip joined the man in conversation and had the opportunity to tell him about Jesus.

Paul, on his way to persecute believers in Damascus, was hijacked by a light so bright that its force threw him to the ground and for a time blinded him. The Spirit said about him, “This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings” (Acts 9:15).

Peter, waiting for lunch to be served, saw in vision a sheet being lowered from heaven and heard the words, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). Three times Peter replied, “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean” (verse 14). Three times Peter heard, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (verses 15-16).

Soon three men were there asking for Peter. He followed them to Caesarea, where he met Cornelius, a Roman

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centurion. Peter stated: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. *But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean*” (verse 28, emphasis mine).

Notice a theme? The Holy Spirit guided those believers out of their comfort zones to serve others in ways they never would have imagined. They understood that their mandate was not self-centered (i.e., Are we good enough? Are we devout enough?); they understood that their mandate was to share the gospel with those who didn’t know it, even if that meant breaking down barriers of race, gender, and social status. Theirs was a mission of inclusion, not exclusion. They knew they didn’t control the Holy Spirit; but when they made themselves available, the Holy Spirit controlled them.

It’s Personal

What about Nicodemus? Did he become a follower of Jesus? Did he go with the other disciples when they went out two by two? Did he invite Jesus to meet his friends? If so, we have no record of it. If not, it doesn’t mean that Nicodemus wasn’t being led by the Spirit. If Nicodemus wasn’t as active as the other disciples, it was because he was being led otherwise.

Nicodemus is mentioned two more times in John’s Gospel. Once Nicodemus asked his fellow Pharisees, “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing

him to find out what he has been doing?” (John 7:51). And after Jesus died, Nicodemus came forward with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Christ (John 19:38-39). It seems that Nicodemus may have been an undercover disciple. If so, it means that we don’t have to serve in the spotlight to have our service for God’s kingdom validated.

It also means that being led by the Spirit isn’t so much to have a particular effect (such as facilitating the second coming) as much as it is simply being faithful to the Spirit’s leading, no matter how significant—or insignificant—the result.

Not long before the pandemic closed the General Conference building, a friend of mine suffered an unexpected and catastrophic loss. I sent a condolence card to her home. A couple of weeks later, I decided to walk to her cubicle to see how she was doing.

Her cubicle was empty when I got there, so I thought, *Oh well, I tried*. As I was heading back to my cubicle, I spotted her in the hallway, headed my way. “How are you doing?” I asked.

Without a word she wrapped me in a hug and started crying. We stepped into a nearby conference room, and I’ll never forget her tears that fell on the conference room table. We sat there for a few minutes without saying a word. When she stopped crying, I asked, “May I pray for you?” I prayed. Then she gave me a hug. I went back to my cubicle, and she went to hers.

Every day I try to make myself available to the Holy Spirit. I’m prepared to have my plans interrupted, because I don’t control the Holy Spirit. But when I’m available, the Holy Spirit controls me. **AT**

¹All Scriptures quoted in this article are from the New International Version.

2 PETER 3:11-12: CAN WE HURRY THE LORD'S RETURN?

By Clarence Pamphile

ADVENTISTS SPEAK, IN VARIOUS WAYS, OF how it is our responsibility to speed up Jesus' return. We may cite 2 Peter 3:11-12 (NKJV): "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God...?"

If the word "hasten" is taken to mean "force to happen sooner," then the answer to the title question is a straightforward "no."

Hastening

According to *The Oxford Greek-English Lexicon*, the Greek word *spoudontas* that is translated "hastening" in 2 Peter 3:12 carries, in its pure verbal form *spseudo*, a variety of meanings—among them: "set in motion," "incite to," "hasten," "obtain rapidly," "search for ardently," "struggle to obtain," "vividly desire," "be anxious about," and a few more.

It is unfortunate that some translators chose the word "hastening," which generally means "to make something happen earlier than planned." Such an idea is contrary to what is affirmed elsewhere in the Scriptures concerning God's lordship and his control of when Christ will return.

The apostle Peter here writes of the coming of "the day of God," a divine action of cosmic proportions beyond all human intervention. It was first mentioned in Amos 5:18, where it's a day of "darkness, and not light," a day when God will inflict terrible things on unrepentant Israel.

Peter gave the idea a larger application when he wrote that "the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat" (2 Pet. 3:10, NKJV). Like Amos, Peter counsels readers to pursue lives of sanctity in order to escape the terrible destruction (verse 11, cf. Amos 5:14-15, 24).

Interestingly, the word "hasten" does carry in French the idea of "ardently desiring." In the expression "Je suis fatigué—j'ai *hate* d'être en vacance,"

it means "I am weary—I *just can't wait* to be on vacation." If it ever had that meaning in English, it has since evolved—and some translators have made the appropriate change. In *The New Testament in Modern English*, J. B. Phillips rendered 2 Peter 3:11-12 thus: "In view of the fact that all these things are to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be? Surely men of good and holy character, who live *expecting and earnestly longing for* the coming of the day of God" (emphasis mine).

But neither Amos nor Peter say that humans may *cause* the day of the Lord to come earlier by their actions. That day will come according to God's own plan.

God's Initiative

The end of human history at the second coming of Christ is entirely of God's doing. Christ affirmed this in answer to a question on the establishment of the heavenly kingdom: "It is not for you to

know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (Acts 1:7, NKJV). And again, in his great discourse on the end times, he said, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matt. 24:36, NKJV).

Here we see that God has already set the date for Jesus’ return. It will do no good to twist or turn the sense of these texts and attempt to reason them into a different meaning. The biblical position is that “the end shall be at the time appointed” (Dan. 11:27, KJV). The same chapter goes on to say that “some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed” (verse 35, KJV).

Those who say, “We know not the day or the hour, but we may know the general period,” and those who claim that the second coming may be made to happen earlier by human activity both accord too much to humankind and rob God of authority.

God does not need our help to bring his projects to conclusion. Our participation in God’s plans is for the benefit of ourselves and our fellow humans. The Father has things already set out, and it will all work as he has planned.

If we say that people may, even by missionary activity, cause the second coming of Christ to arrive earlier, we thereby assert that humans can give God’s program a push. But God is never a debtor to man, and it would be arrogant of humans to claim to be the implementers of God’s otherwise-ineffective program.

Let God be God: omnipotent, omniscient, and the rest. God has all power, authority, and means.

Denominational Tradition

A tradition or theory or enthusiasm must not take precedence over the simple Word of God. But from Montanus of Phrygia (circa 156 CE) down to David Koresh and others of his ilk, many supposedly pious, zealous, saintly souls have gathered followers by announcing a special knowledge concerning the second coming.

Only God can undo certain geopolitical and societal impediments for the finishing of his work.

Often they claim to know not only the time of the coming, but also the way it will occur—that is, they claim to possess the means to bring it about. Christian history is dotted with their failures.

This tendency, already present from the early centuries, received a great boost from the Protestant Reformation. Anabaptists, with missionary zeal, labored for an immediate inauguration of the holy kingdom. William Miller, a Baptist, thought he knew what he didn’t know and resolved to “tell it to the world.” The results are still with us as we continue to make excuses—even biblical excuses—for his debacle.

Victor Houteff of The Shepherd’s Rod thought to bring the kingdom

by conquering Palestine. One of his followers, David Koresh, took Houteff’s fanaticism to Waco, Texas, with well-known consequences.

We need to allow for sober reflection and careful reckoning with what the Scriptures teach. A tradition or new theory not in keeping with the Word of God must be put aside. Only God can undo certain geopolitical and societal impediments for the finishing of his work.

Unfinished Business?

Yet, some persist in imagining they can know the date of the second coming or that they can cause it to happen. Some give the impression that Christ has not returned because of *our* unfaithfulness. If we had been faithful, Christ would have come a long time ago—or, as I heard one preacher assert, “Our generation would not have been born!” That declaration left me cold. Don’t we sing: “Long before time began, you were part of His plan”?¹ And what of Psalm 139:16, which says that “all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (NIV)?

The idea that believers’ faithfulness will bring the end of time is a false idea that causes unnecessary guilt. Of course, we are never as faithful as we should be! That is the result of human sinfulness.

Yet in spite of human *unfaithfulness*, Christians have done tremendous work, taking the gospel almost to the ends of the world. Christian missionary activity in the 18th and 19th centuries was matched and bettered only by the apostolic élan

of the first century. With Bible societies and missionary societies in Europe and the United States of America sending preachers, translators, and educators far and wide, one-third of the world was gathered into the Christian fold. The Great Awakenings produced stalwart preachers such as the Wesleys, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and others. The sometimes-fanatical Anabaptists, to their credit, were also missionary minded. The gospel went far and wide.

Still, the work as we understand it remains unfinished. To this day there are knots that we can't untie. Militant Islam is like a wall, having its own agenda of world evangelism. Hinduism has invaded Christian lands. Buddhism is now a household word as people seek to be "Zen."

How shall we preach the gospel in Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, or in Israel? Does having a "presence" mean that a country is evangelized? How shall we finish the work? We have tried big-tent evangelism, Sabbath School evangelism, the 10/40 Window, and small-group evangelism. We have tried attracting the world through ADRA, Adventist schools, and hospitals.

We used to think we were on track to "finish the work." Based on statistics showing that the ratio of Adventists to non-Adventists was declining, we imagined that we would indeed finish the task. But things have changed. The

world population is growing faster than our church. Large-scale evangelism is disappearing, and our enthusiasm is flagging. We realize that the task is not as simple as we had thought.

Yes, we are to keep doing all we can, but no degree of faithfulness can undo certain geopolitical structures. God must step in at his predetermined time and open the doors for the finishing of his work. Only he can remove certain

Large-scale evangelism is disappearing, and our enthusiasm is flagging. We realize that the task is not as simple as we had thought.

obstacles that hinder the worldwide proclamation of the gospel, a prerequisite for the second coming (Matt. 24:14).

God's Work

God prepared the world for the first advent of Christ. To the human onlooker, the world was going about its business, with empires coming and going, social structures arising and changing, humans moving over land and ocean across the globe. But to the believer's eye, it was the "fullness of time" for God to send his Son into the world for human salvation (Gal. 4:4, NRSV).

Have we come to the fullness of time for the second coming of Christ? Is the world now being warned through modern communication technology? Perhaps, but we don't know. Only one thing is certain: Christ will return. This is our faith and our hope. We truly need Christ to return. The world is a mess, and life gets messier by the day.

Yet, believers are to await his coming in joyful, patient expectation (Matt. 24:13; Luke 21:19) amid life's changing scenes, even in the midst of conflicts and social or religious pressures. We may not bring him down earlier than the Father has planned and determined, yet it is legitimate that we long for his arrival. The entire Christian church sighs and prays with John, "Yes, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20, WEB). **AT**

¹ The song "Tenderly He Watches" was written by Scott Wiseman and was first released by George Beverly Shea in 1952.

Rethinking the Evangelistic Crusade Culture

BY CHERRI-ANN FARQUHARSON

AS I WRITE THIS, MORE THAN 30 Adventist evangelistic series are taking place across Jamaica. This has been the outreach strategy of choice since the arrival of the first missionaries to the island, Pastor A. J. Haysmer and his wife, in 1893.¹

My mom grew up in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In her early adult years, she visited other churches. Her older sister invited her to a crusade, and that's when she recommitted her life to the Lord and also began going back to the Adventist church regularly. One Sunday night, she asked my older cousin to accompany her—I later found out that she was baptized that night—and thereafter we started going to church on Saturdays. She has remained faithful and active ever since, so I believe there is—or at least there was—a place for such meetings.

For many years a set of outreach meetings was called an evangelistic *crusade*, until the term was revealed to carry negative connotations, notably with Islamic people. We then called the meetings evangelistic *campaigns*—but that sounded too political. Now evangelistic *series* is the descriptor.

Aside from the name, not much else has changed since my mom started taking me to church 34 years ago. The format and themes of these evangelistic series have been perfected with time:

You pitch a tent. You get the requisite

permits for electricity, water, and portable hygiene facilities. You pull together a team of deacons for setting up and maintaining the property, as well as providing security for the site. Later the same team will pull down the tent and facilities and pack up everything.

You print colorful promotional material that the Pathfinders will hand out on the streets, inviting all to come for a Spirit-filled encounter, along with health nuggets and weddings and baptisms.

Singing groups, choirs, and praise teams are organized to thrill the audience; a grand gospel concert will mark either the end or the beginning of the series. Only when the stage has been set and the prayer warriors and Bible workers are in place will the evangelist stand in the pulpit.

As the series progresses, the team will say, with apparent surprise, how well the series has been going and will announce an additional week or two beyond the originally scheduled termination.

The Fear Factor

The messages are centered around prophecy, particularly the role of America and the Roman Catholic Church in the end times, and the need to accept Jesus before it is too late. Stories of persons who refused to get baptized and then had fatal car accidents are often shared—a reminder that even if the imminent return of Jesus doesn't bring this world to

an end soon, as we have been preaching for decades, your own death or disrespect of the Holy Spirit could seal your fate. You must, therefore, make your calling and election sure and step into the watery grave of baptism today.

In the book *Servant God*, Tom Ewall gives this as a parable of how the fear-motivated approach to telling others about Jesus Christ actually sounds: “Dwight purchased a ring and reserved a table at the best restaurant in town. He and Monika had been dating for more than a year, and he was convinced that she was the one. At just the right time in the conversation, he leaned forward and asked for her hand in marriage. She seemed to hesitate, however, and there was a period of awkward silence. Dwight had considered this possibility beforehand and, because he wanted to ensure he received a “yes,” reached into his coat pocket, took out a gun, and placed it on the table. The message was clear: “Marry me—or else.”²

This kind of evangelism is built on a restriction of freedom. It highlights a list of things you should not do—or else.

It *doesn't* teach the loving relationship God wants with us. Yet the Bible says: “There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love” (1 John 4:18, MSG).

Benefits and Blessings

What if we presented our message in light of its benefits, rather than holding a gun to the heads of those who do not believe as we do—in effect saying to them, “Accept Adventism or perish!”? What if we explored forms of evangelism where we sought, as Jesus did, to first meet the needs of people before inviting them to make a religious commitment? Couldn’t we present the gospel in a more loving manner that would be relevant to the current struggles people face in their lives?

In 2005 when the General Conference declared a worldwide effort to reach people in cities, I was excited. Studies had determined that health and stewardship were our gateway into the lives of busy city folks who would not likely be reached through traditional evangelistic efforts. Churches around the world set up cafés and similar centers of influence. They hosted seminars teaching people how to prepare vegetarian meals and live healthily in general. This, it seemed to me, marked a paradigm shift in how we spread the message.

Leaders in the West Indies Union Conference at the time chose the city of Kingston for a combined effort. To my disappointment, though, they decided to do what they’d always done: pitch a massive tent and announce a series. I saw few of the creative efforts to reach busy city people that I had seen in some other cities around the world. All of the research suggested that we needed a different approach to reach people in cities, but church leaders ignored it and did what they have always done—just on much, much bigger scale.

A few of my friends and I calculated that based on the approximate cost of that campaign, we could have built a homeless shelter and run it for a year. After this series, the East Jamaica Conference of

Seventh-day Adventists did team up with Adventist Lay-persons Services and Industries (ASI) to build a homeless shelter, the Good Samaritan Inn, which the church now operates.³ But what if that project had begun earlier and we had been able to show the citizens of Kingston how we bless the community, how our church had created a center of influence, instead of just hosting another crusade?

We knew the young professionals we were trying to reach. We knew their cynicism and skepticism. We knew they would not likely attend traditional meetings—whether called crusade, campaign, or evangelistic series.

A Sabbath Opportunity

In March 2021 the prime minister of Jamaica announced a series of weekend curfews to slow the spread of COVID-19 on the island. The curfews would begin with the closing of businesses at midday on Friday, so people could prepare for the weekend. This would be followed by total lockdown on Saturday and continue through to 5 a.m. on Monday.

Many of my Adventist friends saw this as a sign of the end, preached about it in

the pulpit, and fretted about it on social media. Quotes from Ellen White such as this one, about how Scotland instituted a similar curfew, were used as supporting evidence for this assertion: “In Scotland, as in England, a greater regard for Sunday was secured by uniting with it a portion of the ancient Sabbath. But the time required to be kept holy varied. An edict from the king of Scotland declared that ‘Saturday from twelve at noon ought to be accounted holy,’ and that no man, from that time till Monday morning, should engage in worldly business.”⁴

It seemed to many of us that other narratives would have better served our mission. For example, a friend of mine posted on Facebook that all of Jamaica was about to experience what “Preparation Day” feels like. I liked that! I commented that this was an opportunity for our ministers to share the benefits of the Sabbath. But we realized that this would have clashed with the persecution narrative beloved by the crusade generation. One friend quipped, “God forbid we should actually preach the good news when we can be blowing the trumpet instead.”

Yet we know that Sabbath keeping is beneficial. Jesus tells us that the Sabbath was made for us; we were not made to serve the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). That means to me that physical, mental, and spiritual blessings may be ours if we pause from our busyness to observe this period of rest, recuperation, and fellowship. When you resume working, the clarity of mind after the break makes you almost feel as if you didn’t lose any time.

What if we presented the Sabbath in the context of its beauty? Couldn’t we provide the means for people to take a break from their hectic lives, rather than blaming Catholics for institutionalizing Sunday worship and insisting that people must keep the Sabbath or die in sin?

Lessons, Not Threats

What if we highlighted the joy and improved quality of life we experience from becoming healthier, rather than condemning people for eating pork? What if we shared stewardship in terms of the blessings of systematically contributing to worthy causes? Couldn't we share how we can do more good together than on our own, rather than threatening people with the terrors of robbing God?

Might we not highlight lessons such as the fruit of the Spirit as the basis for preaching and reaching others, because we have experienced the improved quality of life that comes with living God's way and we want to share it with others? I'm thinking of this passage from Galatians, as interpreted by Eugene Peterson in his Message translation, as an outreach model: "But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way" (Gal. 5:22-23, MSG).

Targeting Young Adults

A few years ago, I was a part of a team of young professionals planning a Youth Empowerment Series with the tagline #YES. The series would focus on not just our spiritual development but also professional, social, and mental development: "Your Entire Self."

Because we knew what people expected of us Adventists, a planner suggested that

we include in the promotional material the disclaimer, "This is not a crusade." But the pushback we got on that from the church was strong: such a disclaimer would seem as if we were saying there is something wrong with evangelism. In fact, we wanted it because we knew the cynicism and skepticism of the young professionals we were trying to reach. We knew that they would not likely attend traditional meetings—whether called

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crusade, campaign, or evangelistic series. We needed something else if we were to get the opportunity to equip them with tools to navigate the challenges of this life, while preparing them to enjoy the life to come. Isn't that the mission of the church: to reach people where they are and help them to live better lives here on Earth and be prepared for heaven?

In recent years, the Inter-American Division has been losing members more quickly than it has been baptizing.⁵

This suggests that what we are doing isn't working effectively. To infuse our ministry with new ideas and take a more meaningful approach to reaching people, isn't it time for us to do some assessment to see what works, and for whom?

Instead of telling our graduating theology students at Northern Caribbean University to host an evangelistic series, what if we told them to come up with and execute an evangelistic effort that *doesn't* include a sermon series or health fair? What if our young ministers designed evangelism to meet the needs of our community as a means of introducing them to our Lord and Savior?

Crusade evangelism has its place. It has reached many people, including my mom. But when I reflect on the path the Jamaica Union is determined to chart for this mission field, my question to the church remains: Can we envision a way of reaching people other than a crusade? In the interest of the people we hope to reach, we must not be so heavenly (or prophecy) minded that we are of no earthly good. It's still true that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar! **AT**

¹ Read "History of West Indies Union Conference" at <https://jmunion.org/about-2/history-wiu/>.

² Larry Ashcraft, Marco Belmonte, Scott Bennett, Gregory A. Boyd, Cherilyn Clough, Brad Cole, Dorothee Cole, Virginia Davidson, Tom Ewall, and Timothy R. Jenkins, *Servant God: The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Trustworthiness*, edited by Dorothee Cole (2013).

³ Read "What's Our Story" at <https://goodsamaritaninn.interamerica.org/about-us>.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1911 ed.), p. 577.

⁵ Daniel A. Mora, "Why Is the Inter-American Division Losing So Many Members?" *Adventist Today* (Sept. 11, 2020). Online at <https://atoday.org/is-the-inter-american-division-growing/>.

Is Depression a Spiritual Failing?

By John R. Landgraf



SOME CHRISTIANS DISTRUST psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals. Their wariness may include counselors who identify as believers: pastoral counselors, marriage and family therapists, licensed clinical social workers, child psychologists, even career counselors. Why?

A quick answer is that psychology is a “soft” science. A soft science, such as sociology or anthropology, deals with humans as its principle subject matter and is therefore not seen as based on rigorous experimentation

using objective data. In fact, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to establish strictly measurable criteria at all. Think of philosophy as an example. “Hard” sciences such as chemistry, mathematics, geology, etc. are considered much more trustable.

The soft sciences require faith. And we Christians say that our faith is to be in Christ alone. I grew up singing:
*My faith is built on nothing less
 Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
 I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
 But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.
 On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;*

*All other ground is sinking sand.*¹

Theology is, in fact, the oldest soft science. Psychology/psychiatry is the youngest, harkening back to Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist who forsook practicing physical medicine to invent psychoanalysis. Freud, who lived until 1939, is the father of psychotherapy as a science. All therapists acknowledge freely that what they do is an art, too, as well as a science.

Pastoral practice is also an art. We pastors are taught in seminary that theology is something we do and that “theologizing,” with the Bible

as our primary source (backed up by commentaries and other aids), is our calling. We are to master the arts of teaching and preaching so as to communicate the message of the gospel as persuasively as we can, and in Christ's name, we are to meet people lovingly wherever we find them in need—artfully, but also “scientifically” in the sense that we preach and teach what we know to be true and effective.

So which science do we rely upon?

Meeting a Need

What happens when one of our family or friends gets physically sick? We do everything we can to connect them with a physician who can help them regain a full measure of wellness!

But what if they get mentally/emotionally sick? Here, the picture gets more complicated, especially among Christians. Overcoming depression or other emotional problems is regarded by some believers as a do-it-yourself project. Something to “pray away” or wait for Jesus to fix. Does it make sense to regard emotional problems and depression as crises of faith?

A pastor I know told me about an elderly friend of his who refuses to use any medicine a doctor prescribes for his depression. He is a very sincere, disciplined, conservative Christian. His approach to solving his depression is to get up early in the morning to pray and study for an hour. He devotes another hour to prayer each

Overcoming depression or other emotional problems is regarded by some believers as a do-it-yourself project. Something to “pray away” or wait for Jesus to fix.

evening. He's naturopathically savvy and will talk about over-the-counter herbs and supplements, such as St. John's Wort and cannabidiol (CBD). He has changed his diet to foods that purportedly fight depression. He faithfully exercises.

But if you were to say, “You might get a lot of help from a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor,” this gentleman would change the subject. Or, he'd say that he doesn't want to use anything that would alter his consciousness or could become addictive.

However, if one pushes him a bit, it becomes clear that this man's depression represents a *spiritual* failure for him. The medicine would

squeeze God out of the space that only God should have. His body is after all, God's holy temple (1 Cor. 6:19), and all of his feelings and thoughts are God's domain. He may even harbor a belief that he *should* be suffering this way—that God has something to teach him or something he must overcome to become more deeply spiritual. Didn't the Bible characters go through dark nights of the soul? Didn't they suffer in their quest for God? Why should he be any different?

This believer has suffered greatly from his depression, but no one can induce him to accept what he considers a shortcut to happiness. It would be, somehow, too easy and possibly even unChristian. Meanwhile, he goes to incredible lengths to find what he thinks are *Christian* ways to fix it—which, he admits, never really work.

Burndown and Burnout

Lenore is a wife and mother, as well as pastor of a local church. She is good at all of these roles and is devoted to them. My wife, Laura, and I met her during the pandemic when we held biweekly Zoom meetings with approximately 30 pastors of churches large and small, from big cities to little towns. All of these pastors were forced into long days once COVID-19 struck—on call 24/7. It hit their congregations hard and affected some of their families personally.

These pastors were forced to learn new skills and master time-consuming

workarounds in order to pastor grief-stricken families and conduct memorial services and funerals virtually all winter. Many of them suffered “burndown.” Others agonized over their work to the point of *burnout*—an exhausted ego—and, in some cases, downright depression.

Lenore and her husband have a special needs child, plus a younger set of twins. Lenore’s brother, who lives in a different part of the country, got cancer and required life-threatening surgery. Several key church families moved away because of their careers. Her husband’s work is also stressful and demanding. Lenore worked day and night. She burned *down* and then *out*. She was ready to call it quits as a minister.

That is, she became deeply depressed.

All of us who are Lenore’s ministry colleagues prayed like mad and did whatever we could to help her and her family and her congregation. She is a jewel of a minister in every respect. None of us wanted to lose her as a practicing pastor, let alone as a beloved friend. But for a time, darkness fell fast upon her.

Spiritual Failure?

In case you are wondering how I answer the question that titles this essay, “Is Depression a Spiritual Failing?” my answer is: almost never.

However, it’s complicated. Depression unavoidably triggers crises, which include spiritual crises. This can confuse spiritually minded people who, when they are blue, tend to ask, “What did I do wrong?” and by interpolation, when someone else gets the blues: “What did he/she/they do

wrong? How did they disobey God?” They may add: “Where is God? Why has God forsaken me? Why isn’t my faith strong enough to handle this?” This is particularly true for Christians who are not psychologically minded and who tend to see theology and psychology as oppositional rather than complementary.

Let’s try to untangle the knots of confusion about this. Plenty of

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research and myriad case studies shine light on multiple paths to depression.

- There’s overwhelming evidence that genetics matter: some people inherit a physical propensity to biological depression, generally having to do with the way the chemical serotonin and related chemicals act upon the nervous system.

- One’s temperament matters. A

whole body of literature explores “the sensitive personality”—people endowed with antennae that catch every vibration in the air. Sensory overload and getting overwhelmed, sometimes called overstimulation anxiety, come easily and often. The ministry and other helping professions are filled with people with sensitive personalities, because they are naturally sympathetic. It’s a God-given gift—but depression is its shadow side.

- Chemical imbalances in the brain in the wake of severe trauma can lead to negative thought patterns. We all know about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is commonly present in combat veterans, those who survived natural disasters, or victims of sexual or physical abuse.

- Although merely blaming your parents when woes come your way (i.e., “It’s all mother’s fault!”) is rather useless, there’s no doubt that how you were (or weren’t) nurtured predisposes you to respond to tough times in certain ways.

The question remains, *Why are so many in the Christian community hell-bent on seeing depression as nothing more than a spiritual problem?* Is it because we think that feeling dispirited is ungodly? Consider Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41).

We do not look at a severe physical problem—say, a heart attack—as sinful. Why do we look at severe melancholy that way? Are we trying to avoid the shame of needing to seek help, which is perhaps seen as unspiritual? Or maybe we’re being too arrogant to accept help that God is sending our way?

Indeed, there may well be something arrogant about insisting

that “natural” cures, such as herbs and rigorous physical exercise, will heal all thought disorders. Or that prayer alone will always do the trick. As a marriage and family therapist for many years, as well as a minister of the gospel, I can tell you unequivocally that the damage wrought upon families who refuse to address depression in their midst, intelligently and intrepidly, is incalculable.

Paul wrote to the Philippians: “Don’t worry over anything whatever; tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer, and the peace of God which transcends human understanding will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7, Phillips).

It’s a wonderful promise. But does it mean that God wants us to never seek counsel from helping professionals when we are anxious or scared or melancholic? Of course not. To the contrary, God’s peace in our hearts and our rest in Christ’s work at Calvary are what enable us to confidently tap the expertise of doctors and dentists, lawyers and money managers, architects and homebuilders, skilled helpers of all kinds.

Whatever we need, we are in God’s mighty hands. He wants us to have joy, not debilitating sadness, and to that end he expects us to use whatever help he sends our way. Does that include prayers, ours and others’, on our behalf? Absolutely. But prayer is not the only tool God has given for our healing. Think of antibiotics, for example. Or insulin. Or vaccines.

The important point is that all of these causes and more—including spiritual missteps or outright “running away from the Lord,” as demonstrated by Jonah the prophet—can be addressed by various kinds of therapy. Every pastor keeps a list of trusted therapists. Ask!

How Lenore Overcame

Here’s the good news: Lenore is okay now, transcending her horrific, traumatic year, regaining health and balance, and living above the clouds, thanks to God and his allies. What happened?

First, her friends and family got actively, positively involved. Her husband and several close friends, including me, staged an intervention with the gist of our message being: “Take time off, all the vacation due you and then some, now. *Now.* This is not optional; it’s a matter of life or death. Please, love *yourself* enough to do this.” Her church board approved—enthusiastically, I heard—and gave financial help to enable her and her family to go to a coastal Airbnb for at least a month with the caveat: “Don’t come back until you are really well and truly ready. We do not want to lose you.” Thank God she heeded the caring confrontation.

Second, we suggested she use a therapeutic “crutch”—an assist to help move healing along at a pace. We urged Lenore, with the helpful referral of her primary care physician, to visit with a psychopharmacologist, which she did. The psychiatrist asked good, incisive questions and prescribed a medication to reduce her anxiety, lift her mood, and help her keen mind think. It allowed her body to recover the robust physical health she’d lost in the 14 months of ignoring her own needs while expending all of her energy tending to the needs of others. She may slough off the medicinal crutch when she needs it no more, or maybe she’ll find it helpful for the long term. That’s between her and her physician.

Third, and certainly of priceless value, we told Lenore that we were holding her in our hearts and prayers daily. She believed us, and she believed God’s promise to never leave her nor forsake her. She told

us that our prayers meant the world to her and expressed the same thing to her congregation. She understood that we would not pester her, but neither would we stop praying until we received the glad word that she was above the clouds, that the depression had lifted.

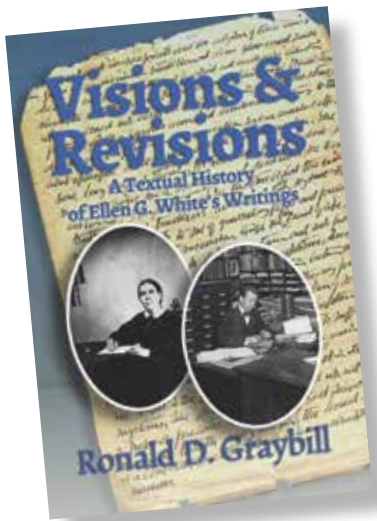
And yes, Lenore’s depression did lift. She shared with us the good news that her brother survived his bout with cancer. Her nuclear family survived the pandemic. Lenore survived, too, not just somehow but triumphantly. She will be a stronger and more effective minister than ever.

Lenore’s depression was acute and situational. Some people cope with the pain of chronic biological depression. They’re not alone. The prophet Elijah, biblical hero and person of faith, was seriously and chronically depressed. Another Old Testament ambassador for God, Jeremiah, is not called “the weeping prophet” without good reason.

But, you might say, Elijah and Jeremiah had no trained therapists or space-age drugs. How did they cope with depression? They did okay—didn’t they? That, my friends, we cannot know. But as one of my mentors said to me when I tried to justify myself by invoking Amos or Hosea, “John, you ain’t no prophet.” He was right.

This I do know: if I fail to avail myself of the tools God sets before me, that’s not God’s bad. It’s my bad. **AT**

¹ Edward Mote, “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less” (1834), text from *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941).



Ronald D. Graybill, *Visions & Revisions: A Textual History of Ellen G. White's Writings* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak & Acorn, 2019), 300 pages, paperback.

Ronald Graybill's Vision of Ellen White

By Jonathan Butler

RONALD GRAYBILL'S GRANDMOTHER was a devout Seventh-day Adventist. She attended a little semi-rural church in Balboa Park of Southern California



Ronald Graybill

and played the piano there every Sabbath. She had her doubts, however, about Ellen White's prophetic gift. When she confided this to a "sister" in the church, the woman tattled on her to the pastor, which led to her being disfellowshipped. She remained a practicing Seventh-day Adventist, but she was no longer allowed to play the piano in church.

Despite his grandmother's ambivalence about Ellen White, Ron's mother came to believe in White's prophetic gift. She read *Messages to Young People* as a college student, and the book transformed her spiritually. Influenced by White, she sent Ron at eight and a half years old to first grade, after which he skipped second grade. She encouraged him, as the prophet had urged, to memorize Bible verses for the "time of trouble." Anticipating a time when Adventists would need to flee to the rocks and mountains with no access to their Bibles, Ron would be able to find solace in reciting the Scriptures. From all of that youthful memorization, he still can recite extended biblical passages.

In his late teens and early twenties, Ron found his own path on Ellen White, which was different from his grandmother's and mother's. In academy he read the White book that his mother loved, but he was disturbed by it. *Messages to Young People* made Ron wonder about White's supposed infallibility. In a college Spirit of Prophecy class, he sharply disagreed with his professor—a man whom students believed would have preferred reciting White's writings among the rocks and the mountains to the Bible. Ron found the professor too rigid, using Ellen White to end discussions that Ron thought should be open-ended.

When he arrived at the seminary, Ron met a young ethics professor, Roy Branson, who challenged him to view Ellen White in new and constructive ways. Branson had joined the Selma march in 1965, after reading White's ninth volume of the *Testimonies*, on race relations. Ron found Branson an inspiration. When his professor encouraged him to write a historical

study of White's views of race in the *Testimonies*, Ron the Adventist ministerial student was reborn as a historian. And for someone so new to the craft, he produced an admirably mature historical monograph, *Ellen G. White and Church Race Relations*, which bore all of the features of his subsequent research and writing. That was in 1970.

In the same year, Arthur White, the prophet's grandson, welcomed the 26-year-old Graybill to the Ellen G. White Estate. He wanted the young historian to serve as his research assistant on her official biography, which Graybill did as a staff member at the White Estate from 1970 to 1983. These 13 years became a momentous period for Ellen White studies. While Arthur White worked away on a six-volume authorized version of his beloved grandmother's life and work, other authors—including William Peterson, Donald McAdams, Ronald Numbers, Desmond Ford, and Walter Rea—produced a radically different unauthorized version of her story.

As a result, the Ellen White known and revered within Adventism underwent a dramatic change. The traditional understanding of her, for well over a century, had been that of a latter-day visionary who wrote prolifically, beautifully, and in all-but-verbally-inspired prose. In the 1970s and early '80s, however, that hallowed view of White met with serious challenges. Suddenly, a credible spate of scholarship called into question the prophet as an iconic and inspired author: for her accuracy, her intellectual and literary independence, and her gifts as a writer. Even her integrity as a person came under scrutiny. The Ellen White of Graybill's childhood and adolescence had given

way to a new understanding of White in his adulthood. And Graybill came to have a good deal to do with the reinvention of the Adventist prophet for a new generation. Believers in this new Ellen White did not forbid grandmothers who doubted her prophetic gift from playing the piano in church. Believers in this new Ellen White did not feel that the prophet had been well represented by *Messages to Young People*.

At the Ellen G. White Estate, Graybill dug into the original documents like a miner digging for gold and dredged up what most Adventists considered to be invaluable historical nuggets. At a time when sharp differences had developed over Ellen White, he found a way of educating and edifying a diverse audience made up of church leaders and laity, academics and general readers. In this difficult—even perilous—moment for the prophet, Graybill proved to be worth his weight in gold. In his 13 years at the White Estate, his output was phenomenal, from popular articles in *Insight*, the *Adventist Review*, and *Ministry*, to groundbreaking academic work in *Spectrum* and in his doctoral dissertation, recently published as *The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Women Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century* (Eastvale Press, 2019).

Graybill has now produced a new book, *Visions & Revisions: A Textual History of Ellen G. White's Writings*, mostly based on research and writing that he did during his White Estate years. In this provocative collection of essays, he tells the story of how Ellen White's books were made. He shows “how her handwritten documents were edited and how

her published works were altered over time.” We learn from him that the visions themselves underwent revisions. We also gain from him a much deeper appreciation for how an inspired writer—with her diligent staff of literary assistants—produced books that took perspiration as well as inspiration. Graybill grapples with this subject so that people “can understand better how to use and interpret her writings.” He does so to illuminate “the errancy/inerrancy issue.” He also pores over White's visions and revisions because the topic fascinates him, and he has considerable talent for it. But this book is far more than a “textual history of Ellen G. White's writings.” Graybill casts new light not only on White's literary corpus, but on her life and her relationships as well. He teaches us that the many pages White wrote serve as mirrors into every aspect of her life and times.

All through the book, he presents fresh and interesting information about White as a writer and as a person. She wrote constantly. She even wrote while in excruciating pain. At times James White felt sorry for her. “Poor woman!” he said. “This almost eternal writing for this one and that one, when she should rest, and enjoy the beautiful scenery, and the pleasant society, seems too bad.” But there was a silver lining to her writing worth more than silver. James recognized the financial benefit to his wife's writing. As he put it, “there is wealth yet in our pens,” which was good for the White family as well as the church.

Over her lifetime, White wrote 5,000 letters, but as Graybill points out, others among her 19th-century contemporaries wrote much more. Novelists Joseph Conrad and Voltaire,

and even Mary Priest, an Adventist secretary for the Vigilant Missionary Society, each wrote 6,000 letters. Darwin cranked out 7,000 letters, and Henry James 10,000. But Mark Twain wrote 50,000 letters in addition to a library of quintessential American novels and short stories. The extent of White's writing has been used as evidence of her inspiration, but Graybill makes clear that there was nothing unique about the volume of her handwritten letters and diaries. Strictly speaking, with respect to how much she wrote, she was no more “inspired” than Darwin or Twain.

What stands out with Graybill is his “third eye” for historical detail that reveals more about the prophet than meets the casual eye. In the initial publication of her first vision, for example, the enthusiasm of early Adventist worship could be heard in the exultant “Hallelujahs,” but as the excitement in Adventist worship cooled—and White's spectacular public visions dwindled in number—her language changed. In place of ecstatic shouts of “Hallelujah,” her first vision recalled the more sedate and liturgical “Alleluia.” This ever-so-subtle editorial change hinted that Adventist life had evolved from its enthusiastic origins to a more upscale and respectable form of worship.

For another eloquent turn of phrase, White seemed to have moved from the less orthodox anti-trinitarianism of her early Adventism to belief in Christ as a full member of the Godhead—“original, unborrowed, underived.” M. L. Andreasen, the leading Adventist theologian of the 1940s, had never embraced the conventional Christian notion of the trinity. He therefore could not believe White herself had written that line, which turned

Adventist theology on a new axis. He suspected that a literary assistant had taken the liberty of inserting it. Unless he saw the trinitarian phrase in White's own handwriting, he would not believe that it reflected her inspired thought. He had to see the *holograph*, the original document in her own handwriting. When the White Estate provided it to him, he was satisfied.

Graybill is passionate about the importance of White's holographs for understanding the prophet. Thus far, however, the White Estate continues to limit access to the holographs. Graybill sees the holographs as a treasure trove for learning about White, especially among scholars, and not just for settling theological questions. Examining White's writing in her own hand can reveal "information and evidence beyond the meaning of mere words the author inscribes." Signs the prophet was trying to save paper may suggest her poverty or her frugality. If one document was written with care and another with "rambling haste," why was this so? How was her mood reflected in her penmanship? "Paper and penmanship become," for Graybill, "a kind of epistolary body language."

In what amounts to x-raying the handwritten text, Graybill deciphers the word *suet*, or meat (not easily read in the original), which turns out to be evidence of White's lapse, in midlife, from vegetarianism. In another letter, she crossed out the phrase *pressed chicken* and replaced it with the more innocuous word *breakfast* so as not to disclose her meat-eating in this period. In a far more significant discovery in the holographs, Graybill

finds that White dates a diary entry in November 1890, at Salamanca, New York. But this was entirely inaccurate. She had actually written the entry in March of 1891, in Battle Creek, Michigan, but wedged it into an earlier, open space in her diary to create the impression that she had seen into the future when, in fact, she had commented on events she witnessed in the present. By scouring the holographs, Graybill had come upon the human peccadillos of a very human prophet.

In the early 1880s, Adventists demonstrated how hard it was for them to confront any human imperfection in White. When the *Testimonies* were undergoing revision, the most minor editorial changes provoked a ruckus. Many believed that changing her grammar or making harmless alterations to her wording should be unnecessary, if a manuscript was written by White's golden pen. The toxic fallout over publishing a new edition of the *Testimonies* had made it clear that at the most granular level, many Adventists interpreted White's writings as functionally inerrant. Mary White, the prophet's daughter-in-law, anguished over editing the *Testimonies*. She admitted that "the fear that we may make too many changes or in some way change the sense haunts me day and night." But S. N. Haskell, who was as close to White as any of her contemporaries, preferred no changes at all. He celebrated the rustic earliest edition of White's *Testimonies*, taking a warts-and-all approach to her grammar and style.

Most 19th-century Adventists had no idea what a group effort it was to

produce White's books. It was what she called a "company concern." Graybill's chapter on White's literary staff is worth reading and rereading. Her writings were polished prior to publication and this, writes Graybill, was "completely acceptable in her lifetime." White referred to her various assistants as, in the case of one young woman, her "typewriter," or Maggie Hare as her "stenographer," or Marian Davis, her most important collaborator, as her "bookmaker." White welcomed their input, even when critical of her. "The more criticism ... the better for the work," she said.

Among her literary assistants, however, Frances "Fannie" Bolton became a serious problem. The best educated and most professional of her staff, Bolton started out as "a treasure to me," White said. But once at close range to the prophet, Bolton became disillusioned with her. The *Testimonies* seemed "rude" to Bolton and "unnecessarily sharp." Moreover, the touting of her "beautiful language" as a devotional and narrative writer failed to credit authors from whom White borrowed and the literary assistants on whom she relied. Bolton's criticism of White, often embarrassingly public, wounded the prophet. Indeed, White conceded, "Fannie Bolton can hurt me as no other person can." She repeatedly fired her but then hired her back—four times in all—though they finally parted permanently. Graybill takes an even-handed approach to the White-Bolton falling out, but he does suggest that Bolton may have "entered Ellen White's circle believing in something akin to verbal inspiration."

Graybill's chapter on "Bountiful

Borrowing” provides as careful, concise, and comprehensive a review of White’s literary debts as has ever been written. It is riveting to read, fanning into view for the reader like a kaleidoscope all of the vivid bits and pieces of colored glass of this story. Graybill acknowledges how problematic White’s literary borrowing has been for Adventists and then touches on the topic from all angles. Ronald Numbers published his paradigm-shifting *Prophetess of Health* in 1976, exposing the prophet’s literary reliance on health reformers. In 1981, Graybill spoke to General Conference employees about how White drew on extrabiblical sources in her writing on history, geography, and chronology as well as “devotional material” and “theological concepts.” For example, Kevin Morgan traced one of White’s most memorable and eloquent passages—“the greatest want of the world is the want of men,” which was anonymous until recently—to other authors.


On White’s literary dependence, more shoes would drop. The heaviest shoe was Walter Rea’s *The White Lie* in 1982. Pastor Rea had been so devoted to Ellen White that he committed her writings to memory as if he were a character in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. Then he became interested in the books White read from her own library. Without ever using a computer in his research, Graybill notes, but with a near photographic memory for White’s writings, Rea stumbled onto the most serious challenge to White’s authority imaginable. Rea exaggerated the amount of White’s copying. Fred Veltman, a New Testament scholar, eventually scaled back the percentage

to something more realistic. But no knowledgeable Adventist could view White the same way again.

Graybill reaches much further back than Walter Rea for an awareness of White’s literary borrowing, though nothing as extensive as what Rea uncovered. Ellen White’s account of her first vision employed William Foy for some of its wording. John Andrews, Adventism’s first scholar and first missionary, had noted that White’s *The Great Controversy* resembled John Milton. D. M. Canright, once close to White and a prominent Adventist evangelist, “launched the first attack on Ellen White for plagiarism.” John Loughborough, the first Adventist historian, came to White’s defense against Canright but unintentionally buttressed the defector’s case. Ellen White herself made it more difficult to defend her health reform writings, as Numbers documented in *Prophetess of Health*. She insisted that she had written out her visions before consulting the health reformers. But, as historian George Knight later admitted, she “fudged on the truth.”

In his textual history, Graybill tracks an “overall trend” in Ellen White’s life and writings “from severity to sympathy, from marginal toward mainstream, from enthusiasm to equanimity. Even so, many in her church remained on the fringes of fundamentalism.” It would not be easy for the fundamentalist wing to disavow White’s “scientifically questionable comments in her earliest writings.” But Graybill finds that her dubious ideas on amalgamation, or wigs, or volcanoes “simply disappeared.” In an 1860 letter to her 5-year-old son Willie, she wrote, “wicked, naughty children, God does

not love.” In 1892, however, a softened White wrote, “Do not teach your children that God does not love them when they do wrong.” She changed on race relations, too. In 1892, she insisted that blacks and whites worship together. In 1909, she took a different stance, accommodating to the realities of a segregated society.

Graybill understands the impulse to “explain, even explain away, what appear to be errors in Ellen White’s writings.” But he faults the “functional inerrancy” toward White’s writings of a number of church leaders and scholars. Though he is painstakingly fair and even generous toward White as a person and as a writer, he faults her, too, for making unrealistically high claims of inspiration. Taking her lead, Adventists fell deeper into “functional inerrancy.” Had she admitted more often to being mistaken, Graybill believes, White might have fostered a healthier, less fundamentalist view of inspiration. He concludes his book by saying, “Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, hopefully we can come to a more chastened, more generous definition of inspiration, one that enables us to affirm her ‘prophetic authority’ without equating it with infallibility.” After reading *Visions & Revisions*, with its plea to Adventists at the end, I thought of that little church where Graybill’s grandmother played the piano. Had those church members known the Ellen White Graybill knows, they would have kept his grandma at the piano. 



The Mystery of Personal Faith

By Alden Thompson

MY ROAD MAP FOR THIS ARTICLE IS TO show how incredibly difficult it is for most of us to change our thinking. For many years I have been a great fan of the Myers-Briggs temperament analysis. What particularly attracts me is that Myers-Briggs is nonjudgmental: whatever you are, you're normal!

In that respect, Myers-Briggs stands in sharp contrast with other systems of temperament analysis. Taylor-Johnson, for example, is rigorously normed, making it perfectly clear what the authors consider normal and abnormal. I well remember an episode several years ago when all of our departmental majors took the Taylor-Johnson test, and one student reacted passionately when the test said she was "hostile." "I'm not hostile!" she blurted out, with an obvious edge to her voice. We all had a good laugh at that.

The 16 PF (personality factors) test has the same problem. It actually has the temerity to say that abstract thinkers are "more intelligent," while concrete thinkers are "less intelligent"! Myers-Briggs is much more nuanced, arguing that there are many different kinds of intelligence.

I begin with this explanation about personality because I intend to jump right into the middle of the nature-versus-nurture debate that continues to roil higher education circles. While I am a committed free-will devotee, I have concluded that there is much to be said for the view that our nature determines who and what we are. Indeed, I argue that our initial response to any situation is nonvolitional and that only God knows

how much we can change, a conclusion driven largely by observations from the racquetball court—but that's a story for another time.

While many Adventists are progressive and exploratory, the dominant perspective in the community is a conservatism that borders on fundamentalism. And my experience with conservative students has taught me that change and diversity are two of the most difficult concepts for them to negotiate.

I am eager for my students, and my church, to abandon the myth of a reluctant Father in favor of the one...who welcomes us with open arms.

Adventist History

If you know Adventist history, you will know that our denominational pioneers were not trinitarian; indeed, many were stridently anti-trinitarian. Ellen White's husband, James, for example, spoke of "the old trinitarian absurdity,"¹ and he was no slouch. Not only had James served three terms as General Conference president (1865-67, 1869-71, 1874-80), but he also was the founding editor of two Adventist

journals, *Present Truth* and *Advent Review*.

From a historical standpoint, it wasn't until the appearance of Ellen White's *The Desire of Ages* in 1898 that the doctrine of the trinity began to be an option in Adventism. Though Ellen White never used the word "trinity," these words pointed in the direction of a trinitarian theology and landed like a bombshell in the Adventist camp: "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived."²

Adventist historian George Knight quotes M. L. Andreasen, who was a young preacher when the book appeared. In a 1948 interview, Andreasen said: "I remember how astonished we were when *The Desire of Ages* was first published. It contained some things that we considered unbelievable, among others the doctrine of the Trinity, which was not then generally accepted by Adventists. The statement—'In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived.'—may not seem very revolutionary to you, but to us it was. We could hardly believe it. ... I was sure Sister White had never written" the passage. But at Elmhaven [her home in California], "I found it in her own handwriting just as it had been published."³

From the standpoint of Adventist history, then, we can say that Ellen White underwent a dramatic change in her thinking, a change Andreasen was also willing to make on the basis of her authority.

Adventism in general followed the same trajectory. Our first unofficial statement of belief (1872) was clearly not trinitarian, but our first "official"

statement of belief in 1931 and all subsequent statements of belief have been distinctly trinitarian. Yet a persistent and often vocal minority in the church continues to agitate for a return to the “original,” anti-trinitarian position. Can we bring that minority on board? In the classroom? In the church? I am not as optimistic as I once was.

My Story

To me, the trinity issue is not just academic; it’s personal, experiential, linked to a crucial change in my own thinking that made a huge difference in my understanding of God.

The transition came when I was a seminary student at Andrews University (1965-1967). I decided that I would address a smoldering question that was looming ever larger in my thinking: “If the Father loves me, why do I need a mediator?” So I enrolled in a seminar that allowed me to personalize my topic, and I hoped it would take me to an answer. By God’s grace, it did, for I discovered John 14-17 and the life-transforming truth that Jesus was and is God incarnate: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” Jesus declared to Philip (John 14:9, NRSV). If God himself took human flesh to come to our world, he must really want me in his kingdom!

Somehow, in all my years in Adventism—I’m a fourth-generation Adventist—the mental image of Jesus’ pleading his blood to the Father on my behalf had prevented me from seeing the “truth.” In my mind’s eye, I saw Jesus as my friend and advocate, whose task it was to “convince”

the Father that he should allow me into his kingdom. If Jesus argued long enough and hard enough, the Father would begrudgingly concede: “Alright, let him in the back door.”

And that grim view of the Father was reinforced by the vivid Ellen White statement that “we are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator.”⁴ But here again, a passage in John 14-17 came to my rescue, transforming what feels like a threat into a promise: “On that

My experience with conservative students has taught me that change and diversity are two of the most difficult concepts for them to negotiate.

day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you” (John 16:26-27, NRSV). Note the “not” in “I do *not* say.” Why doesn’t Jesus pray to the Father on our behalf? Because “the Father himself loves you.” Astonishing! The reluctant Father exists only in myth.

I am eager for my students, and my church, to abandon the myth of a reluctant Father in favor of the one in the story of the prodigal son, who

welcomes us with open arms. After the long trek home, the renegade son was just beginning to argue that he was not worthy to be a son. “Treat me like one of your hired hands,” he said. But his father cut him off with these astonishing words. But his father cut him off with these astonishing words: “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:22-24, NRSV).

How We Accept Change

A practical question that always arises in a classroom setting has to do with what my students are learning. In particular, I wonder as a teacher how to discover what my students are *really* thinking. After all, I am giving them grades! But how am I shaping their attitudes, feelings, and Christian experience?

A number of years ago, I devised a method that would enable them to speak their minds without jeopardizing their grade. What I particularly wanted to know about had to do with their understanding of change in the church. On the final test in my upper-division class History of Adventism, I introduced questions for which there were no wrong answers, but points would be assigned for answering them and deducted for leaving them blank—clearly, all for the teacher’s benefit to find out how well he was getting his message across.

A key question was this one:

As a result of the class, which ONE of the following best describes your current attitude toward “change” in Adventist beliefs?

A. I remain unconvinced. I do not believe Adventist beliefs have changed.

B. I see the evidence for change but am not yet comfortable with it; the class has left me unsettled in my convictions.

C. I see the evidence for change and am not yet comfortable with it, but the class has been helpful in pointing me in the direction of stability.

D. I see the evidence for change, and it has raised serious questions about the truth claims of Adventism.

E. I see the evidence for change and am quite enthusiastic about the possibilities which these insights offer for the future of Adventism.

I was thrilled when, the first time I tried this in a large class of 72 students in 2003, 46 students said they were “enthusiastic” (E) about what I had presented. But alas! Eleven students marked D: that I had “raised serious questions about the truth claims of Adventism.”

I was troubled by this. Each subsequent quarter, term after term, year after year, I kept experimenting to see if I could positively affect the results. But what puzzled me then and puzzles me still is that no matter how hard I worked at improving the response—at trying to not negatively affect their belief in the truth claims of our faith as they learned about our evolving theology—on that item, the needle scarcely has budged.

Determinism or Mystery?

As I worked through this, a nagging question kept haunting me. My thesis, as I pondered the difficulty in understanding people’s changing faith, pointed to something close to determinism. But what about conversion, new birth, and the role of the Holy Spirit?

Christian history testifies to a number of remarkable conversion experiences: Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9), Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), Martin Luther (d. 1546), and John Wesley (d. 1791).

If it were simply a matter of changing our thinking, I would put my own name at the head of the list and add the names of Ellen White and M. L. Andreasen. Indeed, almost the whole of Adventism has moved in the direction of trinitarian theology. That’s a dramatic change. Did reason and human logic make it happen, or was it the work of the Holy Spirit?

I suspect that we should join Jesus and Nicodemus and their nighttime conversation recorded in John 3.

“You must be born again,” Jesus said.

“How?” asked Nicodemus.

“It’s like the wind,” said Jesus. “It blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”

Mystery, in other words.

There seems to be a link with prayer, too. Scripture declares that Jesus spent all night in prayer before he chose the twelve (Luke 6:12-16). Judas was included in the twelve and at times was a highly effective witness. Luke 9 tells how Jesus sent out the twelve with “power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases” (verse 1, NRSV) and “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (verse 2, NRSV).

Luke concludes his description with these

words: “They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere” (verse 6, NRSV). Judas was one of those miracle workers.

Yet the disciples’ power to heal was erratic. Mark 9:14-29 tells how a father brought his demon-possessed boy to the disciples, but they were powerless. When the disciples asked Jesus why, he replied, “This kind can come out only through prayer” (verse 29, NRSV).

That brings us back to the Adventist classroom and Ellen White’s remarkable statement that our students need a variety of teachers, because the “minds of men differ.” In that same quotation, she states: “It would greatly benefit our schools if regular meetings were held frequently in which all the teachers could unite in the study of the word of God. They should search the Scriptures as did the noble Bereans. They should subordinate all preconceived opinions, and taking the Bible as their lesson book, comparing scripture with scripture, they should learn what to teach their students, and how to train them for acceptable service.”⁵

At the end of the day, we are again back with Jesus and Nicodemus and the mystery of the wind. **AT**

¹ James White, “The Faith of Jesus,” *Advent Review* (Aug. 5, 1852), p. 4.

² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 530.

³ George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (2000), pp. 116-117, citing M. L. Andreasen manuscript (Nov. 30, 1948).

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888, 1911), p. 425.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (1913), pp. 432-433.

ABUSE IN THE PASTOR'S FAMILY

By Treye McKinney



ON CHRISTMAS DAY OF 2002 MY FAMILY LEARNED THAT my father, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, was having an affair with a 27-year-old woman addicted to meth, whom he had supposedly been counseling. At the time, I was a junior theology/English major at Walla Walla University. I told my father that he “should resign tomorrow or I’ll turn you in.”

This was a traumatic time for my family, but it merely started to make public for my father a lifetime of terrible behavior. A particular kind of abuse—sexual—was revealed for the first time, but what few outside of our family knew was that my father had been severely abusing his family for more than 20 years through physical, emotional, and verbal attacks.

Background

As children, both of my parents were abused by their fathers, and from the start of their relationship, they fought intensely. I was born while my parents were still in college at Southern Adventist University in Tennessee. I have been told that my father physically abused my mother while I was still in the womb and that on at least one occasion, my mother took me as an infant and fled. But her mother encouraged her—repeatedly—to return to my father.

I have memories, starting from age 4 or 5, of terrifying events at each house in which we lived. As I got older, my father’s abuse toward me intensified, especially when I would try to defend my mother or myself. My younger brother received a significant amount of abuse, as well. I fantasized about running away or even about killing my parents. My mother was a victim, but she was also complicit and occasionally a participant in the abuse. She did little to prevent what my father did to us.

Let me be clear that I am not talking about spankings that occasionally got out of control—although that happened, too. Horrible scenes took place weekly or monthly for over 20 years, which included but were not limited to kicking, slapping our faces, punching, beating, smothering, body slamming, pinning to the floor, tackling, chasing and charging with threat to harm, throwing dangerous objects, breaking of toys and destruction of property, severe spankings with objects such as wire whips, plastic bats, etc.

At times my father could be a great apologist, but the abuse would continue later. Although my parents tried marriage counseling, this seemed to have no effect on the dynamics at home.

My father and I started fighting more once I reached high school age, especially when I tried to stand up for myself. The family had moved to Portland, Oregon, where my father would pastor his last church. I longed to attend boarding school as a way to get out, and my parents eventually allowed this, although I still had to return home for breaks.

Getting Help

I kept the family secret until my dad's affair came to light. Once he was no longer a pastor, I felt that I could tell my story to a few college friends. I went into therapy, making use of the counseling that was available at the Adventist university, but I still kept the family secret to some degree. An adage from addiction treatment that rings true for me today says, "We're only as sick as the secrets we keep."

People are generally aware of the immediate effects of abuse, but relatively few realize that the long-term effects are probably worse, especially when they involve keeping secrets. Since 2002 I have been in and out of counseling, hoping to avoid repeating my father's mistakes. Most therapists I saw were not trained in or did not specialize in trauma work. In 2010 I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but it would take another 10 years for me to get specific treatment for my symptoms. In the autumn of 2020, I entered intensive therapy for something called complex-PTSD. This diagnosis takes into account that the trauma started from a very early age, was severe, and continued for decades. Therapies have been specifically designed for this type of trauma, but the work is difficult and slow.

Transparency

I sometimes wonder how things might have been different had my family or my church been able to break this cycle early on. It seems to me now that these key techniques would help:

- Screening – People with certain backgrounds (such as mine) are themselves more likely to abuse others. My father had been severely abused by his father, but the cycle of violence was not understood in the late '70s and early '80s when he was training for ministry. I urge Adventist colleges and seminaries to try to identify those people and offer early support.

- Interference – For the most part, abuse in our home was kept secret. Those who knew or suspected—including family members, perhaps a few church members, and some of my early teachers—were willing to ignore the indications of abuse in our family. Could someone who knew, or suspected, have stopped it? School teachers have a unique opportunity to identify domestic

abuse, and access to counselors as support staff would help. Boarding schools are also uniquely positioned to break the cycle, so Adventists could do more to help victims in those places.

- Training – Mental health counselors at my college started me on the road to recovery. Adventist schools need more counselors specifically trained in trauma. Pastoral counselors or school counselors typically do not have the skills required to help people who are severely traumatized.

- Listening – Like so many underage victims of abuse, I did not usually feel comfortable telling adults about what was happening to me. We need to create an atmosphere where it is possible for people to reveal and discuss what have long been hurtful secrets, and where adults come prepared to listen and take action. We also need to make it less of a taboo for potential abusers to ask for help and get professional care.

- Reporting – Once abuse starts to occur, it needs to be reported and dealt with as soon as possible. Some states, such as Colorado, have a state-run hotline where anyone can call to report concerns. Reported abuse does not always lead the state to remove children from families; that's usually a last resort. In my childhood home, however, an investigation would have probably been enough to warrant removing my father from the family or to help us get extended family support.


Healing

Abused people need a great deal of help to heal, so that they do not continue the cycle of abuse. In my case, it is difficult to overstate how bad the abuse was, but certainly the secrecy around it and the fact that my father was a pastor made it worse. Once he left the ministry, my father became very bitter and left Adventism.

During the fallout from his affair, my mother told me, "If I have to choose between my sons and husband, I choose my husband." She has stayed with my father, which has led to strained and eventually broken relationships within the family. And if what I've been told by a relative is true, the abuse has continued in some form to this day.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple articles warned of the potential for more abuse when victims are trapped at home with their abusers, which is terrifying to consider. If people are not talking about abuse and if we are not transparent about it, we really have no idea of its prevalence.

It is time for the world church to create an atmosphere that encourages openness and discourages secrecy—through training in trauma awareness, facilitating reporting, and taking pastors and others in power off their pedestals and holding them accountable if they act inappropriately.

Only then can we begin to end the pandemic of abuse. 

Contributors

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