Misinterpreted Interpretive Texts

Compassionate Bible, Compassionate Church

Can We Have Assurance of Salvation?

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HOW READEST THOU?

Why All Bible Reading Is Interpretation

Features

DEPARTMENTS

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A Compassionate, Practical Bible About a Compassionate, Practical God

By Loren Seibold

I AM A HOMILETICAL EXEGETE: THAT IS, I HAVE interpreted texts to preach Jesus to my congregations. I've done very few academic papers—the kind with Greek and Hebrew words—on biblical exegesis.

It isn't because I couldn't do them. It's because I don't want to. I have serious and well-thought-out concerns about the limits of the biblical text. I know things about the text of the Bible that have always kept me from getting immersed in the micro-analyses I hear from those Bible scholars who take every word of the text seriously.

I know, for example, that humans (all men, as far as we know)—not God—wrote the words of the Bible and that the given or traditional authors aren't even necessarily the real authors. Subsequently, the texts were copied hundreds of times by hand, copies made from copies, and although the copyists were generally conscientious, mistakes were inserted along the way.

I know that to create the canon, Jewish rabbis and Roman Catholic churchmen selected from hundreds of *biblios* (manuscripts) floating around, in an era without tools for rigorous authentication. Some of those selections were argued by political factions for political reasons, made official in councils whose authority on other decisions we now reject.

I know that what was written in one culture may not mean the same thing—in some cases not even a *related* thing—in the culture that reads it. The passage of 2,000-3,000 years and dead languages make for an understanding gap. Big principles might remain the same, but most of us are unaware of how differently even those big principles have been applied (for example, what "adultery" meant in a world where women were property, not romantic companions).

I know that interpretation happens in translating. Once we understand a scripture in the way we first learned it—say, in the King James Version—it becomes more difficult for us to accept the original meaning, even if read in the original language. The Bible is large enough and vague enough in a lot of its parts to spark a great many quite conflicting interpretations.

Furthermore, I know that many of our cherished biblical ideas can only be proven out of their context, using a proof-texting method.

Private Interpretation

This doesn't mean the Bible's principal message doesn't come through. But it does explain why my mind wanders when people get into excess interpretive granularity. If the interpreter is deciding a point on the basis of whether a vowel of a Greek word had a *dasia* over it or not, or choosing whether to go with a reading from a manuscript from the first part of the 8th century or one from the latter part of the 8th century, or the meaning of a difficult *hapax legomenon* (a word that occurs only once and may lack sufficient context to make us certain of its definition), I can guess a couple of things.

First, the interpreter is probably overreading what the text is capable of telling us. And second, that person (if a member of the clergy) will come down on the side of the orthodox reading no matter what the text says.

Indeed (with reference to that second point), "private interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20)—or, I would say, preferred interpretation—seems to me impossible to avoid. As frightening as the person who says, "The Lord has told me what this text means, so I will entertain no other possibility," is the one who says, "My church tells me what this text means, so I will entertain no other possibility."

And so, another stumbling block in the process is that interpretation is inevitably influenced by the pre-existing beliefs of the churchgoer.

All of which is to say that although many people study the Bible like that, it seems to me as much a test of who you are as what God is trying to

I would rather question the accuracy of the text, in order to maintain the righteousness of God, than diminish the character of God to maintain the accuracy of the text.

say—a sort of spiritual Rorschach test. And the gazillion interpretations of the Bible down through history would back that up.

Perfect Harmony?

Some of you are right now grinding your teeth, thinking: "Yeah, but all Scripture is inspired. It has to all harmonize like a mathematical equation, doesn't it?"

That's impossible. It can't. It was written by human beings—mostly good ones, but still fallible—in their own cultures, addressing their own circumstances.

Adventists don't say that the Bible is inerrant, but we prefer to find no jarring notes in its pages. That's why Adventist Bible students get squirmy when you point out the geological and paleontological difficulties of the six-day creation narrative, or the absence of any biblical prohibition of polygamy, or the clash between the sixth commandment and Israel's violence at God's command.

Any rule that ends up with hateful treatment of people isn't godly, no matter how clearly it seems to be stated in certain passages of Scripture.

One answer is simply to say that everything before the cross was from a different covenant. But that leaves Adventists ill at ease. Key points about the Sabbath (Exodus 20; Isa. 58:13), the state of the dead (Eccl. 9:5), the sanctuary (Daniel 7-9), and diet (Leviticus 11) all stand or fall on our taking the Old Testament not just seriously, but literally. So it's not surprising that we are easily lured into believing that everything in the Old Testament has a reason, such as that we don't eat bacon because it's less healthy than a rare beefsteak.

A Facebook discussion that interested me a few months back centered on Leviticus 15's detailed regulations about menstruation. The point seemed to be that since God gave these rules, they had practical value beyond their time and place. The theory that orthodox Jewish women have less cervical cancer because they don't have sex during menstruation was floated—though the supporting evidence is marginal.

But there's more here than just refraining from sexual intercourse: in verse 19 the Hebrew noun *niddah* plus the feminine possessive suffix, preceded by the verb "to be," has been rendered by many translators as the woman being separated from the rest of the family—quarantined outside the camp.

I chuckled to read one person's application of this: "God was so good: he provided the woman a week of 'me' time every month!" Uh-huh. Trudging across the desert, herding goats, living in tents—all the women got a spa week while their husbands took care of the children and did all of the cooking?

This is how silly we get when we insist that the whole Bible must be made to harmonize. (In the Facebook discussion, it was mostly men wanting to make this point. I was tempted to ask: "Do you provide your wife a week of kid-free, cooking-free 'me' time every month? Send her to a spa in the mountains?" I'll bet not.)

There is no way to make parts of the Hebrew Bible harmonize with Jesus' teachings and actions. Jesus said so himself: "You have heard it said, … but I say to you…" This alone shoots holes in the notion that every word of the Old Testament can be taken as a perfect reflection of God's eternal will.

The Bible writers were self-interested sinners, and many of them admitted it (see 1 Tim. 1:15, for example). They got the gist of godliness—enough to instruct us—but they didn't speak with God's voice. So when we see someone in the Old Testament claiming that "God told me to kill all these people," we should instinctively know that's rubbish.

Why Rules Aren't Sufficient

"But what will happen if we don't take every word literally?" No one does. No one can. Many have tried. Those who get caught up in that become neurotic. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" is as much a psychological statement as a spiritual one: we simply cannot perform to a set of words. That's why "The *gift* of God is eternal life" (Rom. 6:23, KJV, italics mine).

"But what happens if we don't live by strictly enforced laws? We'll all go around doing whatever we want to and descend into chaos!"

There is a myth that all moral principles arise from the Bible and that any world culture that ever did anything good got it from the Bible. Here we have been greatly

misled. Morality is broader than scriptural statements, or all atheists would have murdered one another long ago.

God gave us a native sense of goodness. It is built into our human interactions, which is why Jesus could say, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and people could follow that intuitively. Back in college when I first read C.S. Lewis's essay *The Abolition of Man*, what fascinated me was the appendix, where Lewis found in virtually every religious and cultural system in the world the basic moral principles about how people should treat one another, many predating our Scriptures.

When Jesus said, "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you" (Matt. 7:12, NLT), he was propounding a sort of natural theology: that we have the ability within ourselves (call it the Holy Spirit, if you like) to know the difference between good and evil. We don't always use it. We are often selfish. But sometimes, if we squint at ourselves *through the eyes of others*, we get a glimpse of what goodness is. What would hurt us, we sense, would hurt others. What makes us happy, generally speaking, makes others happy, too. The only way we can slip around that (and we do it often) is to become callous to the needs of others.

No, it isn't that simple. It doesn't always work. But it's a start. "Do unto others" at least undermines the notion that we go around following rules constantly, rather than, as Jeremiah says, putting "my law within them" and writing it "on their hearts" (31:33, NRSV).

The Dominant Principle

When Jesus inaugurated his ministry in Luke 4, what text did he choose?

Had he chosen Nahum 1:2 (NIV), "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath," he would have pleased the fans of judgmentalism.

Or how about, "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing" (Eccl. 9:5, KJV)? That would have saved a lot of questions!

Or maybe "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8, NKJV)—or just quote the entire Ten Commandments?

Or, why didn't he say the words of John 3:16 there, instead of later, in a private conversation?

Jesus could have affirmed the whole of Adventist doctrine at that point! What did he say instead? He quoted the Septuagint version of Isaiah 61:1-2: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, NIV).

This—not any rules about worship or food or dress, no matter how good they might be—is what Jesus wanted us to know about his Father.

So given what we know about the Bible's origins and God's interaction with us, let us consider some fresh hermeneutical guidelines.

Principle 1: The Bible must show God to have a character of kindness and goodness.

Those who read the Bible in a literal way have commandeered the term "high view of Scripture." They say it gives the Bible the ultimate authority to tell us about God. (This is different from "higher criticism," which means understanding where the Bible came from and how it ended up being what it is. Those who use the tools of higher criticism to show the origin and limitations of the text are criticized for having a low view of Scripture, rather than a realistic one.)

The irony is that a high view of Scripture often produces a low view of God. Those who take the Bible literally must try to defend everything in it, even if it is morally repugnant.

Parts of the Bible defame God. You can make no moral defense for the story of Numbers 25 and 31, where God tells Moses to take revenge on the Midianites (Num. 31:1). Moses told the army leaders, "So kill all the boys and all the women who have had intercourse with a man. Only the young girls who are virgins may live; you may keep them for yourselves" (verses 17-18, NLT).

The same with Samuel's telling Saul, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys'" (1 Samuel 15:2-3, NIV).

Uzzah's dying for trying to keep the ark from falling cannot be defended as a godly act. Slavery—often sexual slavery, for females—cannot be defended. "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the

rocks" (Psa. 137:9, NIV) has no defense. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) is indefensible. Stoning a man to death for picking up sticks on Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36) is indefensible.

Yet I have heard church people say that if God did this, or ordered it, it couldn't be immoral. They reason that the Midianites and Amalekites were so evil that even their babies deserved execution and that the Bible must be taken as seriously on these points as we take John 3:16. I even had one conservative minister tell me that he took the Bible so literally that he would defend slavery and polygamy in order to not erode the authority of the Bible on the matter of male headship!

What kind of God are we talking about here? A good God, or a despotic tribal deity?

We sing: "God is love; we're his little children.
God is love; we would be like him."[1]

Really? Would you have your children emulate these actions ascribed to God? This is not a God any moral person would want anything to do with. *I would rather question the accuracy of the text, in order to maintain the righteousness of God, than diminish the character of God to maintain the accuracy of the text.*

Given the options, I must believe that the God referred to by Jesus Christ never said or recommended any of those things. In these points the Bible is simply wrong about God. It's what someone thought about God, not who God is.

So while I may be accused of having a low view of Scripture, I have a high view of God. I will not have God spoken ill of—even by ancient writers who, it turns out, were struggling with their own issues. God must be good, or there is no point in paying any further attention to Scripture.

As Christians we see the character of God in Jesus. The story of Jesus is the lens by which we look at the entire Bible. According to Abelard (1079–1142), "Jesus died as the demonstration of God's love," a demonstration that can change the hearts and minds of sinners, turning them back to God.

Principle 2: A Practical Interpretation

A pastor friend told me of a couple in his church who were among his most active members in a community outreach ministry; he described them as deeply compassionate and committed. Someone raised questions about their belief in the Trinity and wouldn't let the matter go. They left.

How did we get to the point where so much of what we find in the Bible concerns abstract concepts, such as how the One is Three and Three is One, or the philosophical underpinnings of the incarnation? For some of that we can blame the writings of the Rabbi Saul/Paul, later built upon by St. Augustine, then by the early church fathers in their endless councils, then (in a different sort of way) by Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics. By the time we get to the Reformation, Christianity seems to have had a strong enough base of abstract understandings about God that it could be reduced to creeds that people had to subscribe to.

I confess that my own biblical hermeneutic doesn't revolve around such matters. I'm looking for a real, not a philosophical, God.

I was raised under a well-intentioned legalism: salvation was about pleasing God in diet and Sabbath-keeping and tithing and similar performatives. I'm not sure why I had to wait until college to learn that I was saved by what God does, not by what I do.

When I told my pastor back home what I had learned, he warned me darkly about "cheap grace." But after a lifetime of failing to be perfect enough to feel any hope of salvation, I wasn't dissuaded. Throughout my ministry I have preached that what Jesus came to bring us was literally good news about God's goodness and the security of salvation.

But in this latter part of my life, I've nuanced my understanding of righteousness by faith. Just believing isn't enough. If your faith in Jesus doesn't make you a good person, it's probably not worth much. However, my new "legalism" (I think it may be more accurately called "aspirationalism") is no longer about Sabbath-keeping and diet, but the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23, RSV). When Paul says, "against such there is no law," he is saying that to the extent he diminishes law-following as the means of salvation, the fruit of the Spirit is its replacement.

In other words, being a non-Trinitarian won't keep you out of heaven, just as being a nasty Trinitarian will. This leads naturally to the next principle.

Principle 3: An Ethical Interpretation

Please don't get sidetracked by the word "ethical" if, when you studied ethics in college, it was about the kinds of things we ordinary people rarely face, such as liminal situations in a hospital ICU. By ethical, I'm talking about the big picture of how we treat one another, most of which should be fairly simple based on the "do unto others" principle, but it has been sadly complicated by the strange literal ways we read the Bible.

If God's character is goodness and kindness, then a central thing we should get from the Bible is that we ought to treat one another the same way.

One of the most astonishing things about the Christian faith is how well we understand what Jesus did for our own salvation while, in certain situations (with people we don't approve of), we underplay his expansive kindness toward everyone he encountered. Please understand that all of the salvation theory we Christians talk about (i.e., justification and sanctification) doesn't come from Jesus. It comes from Paul. What Jesus did, besides telling us what God is like, was to show people kindness and teach us to do the same. What happened to that?

Here is where people get confused. Since they don't understand "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," they retreat to weak biblical rules—often pulled out of context—that they analyze and apply like a Boston lawyer, which usually ends up hurting people.

Being like Jesus doesn't depend upon rules. (Jesus broke most of the Old Testament rules, as the Pharisees understood them.) What he did was to apply those "Do unto others" principles, over and over again. He treated people with kindness, the way he'd want to be treated.

An ethical interpretation means that we find in the Bible big principles about moral behavior. A lot of people sum that up with the word "love," which is an expansive word but a badly corrupted one. I've begun to think we should replace the word "love" with "kindness," because the word "love" is just too abstract, too easy to wiggle out of—as in "hate the sin and love the sinner," which has been used to whitewash cruelty through the years.

Any rule that ends up with hateful treatment of people isn't godly, no matter how clearly it seems to be stated in certain passages of Scripture. God reserved the privilege of judgment for Godself, remember (Matt. 13:24-30).

Hermeneutical Deterioration

In testimony to Congress about the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol building, Metropolitan police officer Daniel Hodges said: "It was clear the terrorists perceived themselves to be Christians." He then graphically described the physical attacks on himself and other officers. "I saw the Christian flag directly to my front. Another read 'Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my president.' Another 'Jesus is King.'" Hodges said he also observed a rioter in a shirt reading "God, Guns, and Trump."[2]

If you question my assertion that the Bible isn't working for us anymore, I ask you only to look at what conservative Christianity has become in American life. No, this isn't all of American Christianity—but it is a significant part. So much Christianity right now defends power structures rather than people. So much of it is based on passages pulled out of context rather than big moral principles.

A realization that some very immoral notions are defended—using the Bible—in the Christian culture is what convinces me that we need a more compassionate hermeneutic.

I no longer feel any compulsion to defend or harmonize Bible stories and statements that are simply immoral. I will not do pretzel logic to explain the cruelty described in Numbers 31 or 1 Samuel 15. Someone thought it was God's command, but it wasn't. If these things happened, it was because that's what a human being—not God—wanted recorded to justify his actions. If the writer said it was God, he was lying or self-deceived.

Or, to put it another way: I defend God, not a flawed text. If you take the text literally and as an expression of who God is, then you need to explain why your God ordered babies to be murdered and virgins to be raped.

God must understand human weakness. God must be abundant in mercy and forgiveness and must express that consistently. He will not do to us what he would prohibit us from doing to others.

Whatever biblical hermeneutic you choose, it must end up with a God we would want to spend eternity with. AT

[1] F. E. Belden, "'Tis Love That Makes Us Happy," *Illustrated Bible Object Lessons and Songs for Little Ones* (1892).
[2] Lexi McMenanim, "The Terrorists Perceived Themselves to Be Christians," *Sojourners* (July 27, 2021). Online at sojo.net/articles/terrorists-perceived-themselves-be-christians.

FOUR MISUNDERSTOOD TEXTS ABOUT BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

Much of what we say we know about Biblical interpretation is derived from what the Bible says about itself. While the Bible has the right to self-identify as an inspired book, the problem with the oft-used passages is that several are taken out of context, and some are wholly misinterpreted.

Let's examine four commonly misused or decontextualized texts on the topic of biblical interpretation.

1. John 5:39, KJV:

"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."

If reading directly from the Greek, one may find no fault with this translation. However, it is not the only possible translation of the text. When more than one translation is possible based purely upon grammar and word meaning, the context makes the decision, not the doctrinal assumption of the interpreter. The New King James Version uses a slightly different translation than the usual command we got from the KJV: "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."

The word translated "search" as a command in the KJV may also be translated as an indicative: "you are searching," which means a statement of reality. Since it is in the present tense, it could also have a sense of continuation, as in, "*Continue* to search the scriptures...." (italics mine).

A word that many translations have overlooked is the Greek word *kai,* which is typically translated "and," yet it can be translated "but," or "even," or "also." Which is it?

We understand this passage best if we place it in the context from which it emerges. John's Gospel reflects a debate within the synagogue between those who sought to hold on to certain traditions and those who sought reform. This latter group wanted to open up the synagogue to diversity through reinterpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant (i.e., God's covenant is not only a covenant with Jewish males, but with the whole world).

The reform movement became the church, which was viewed by the more traditional synagogue as a threat to its identity and its survival with the Roman Empire. This disagreement led to the eventual separation between church and synagogue. In the immediate context of this text, the traditional group plotted to kill Jesus for not only breaking the Sabbath, but also going so far as to assert that he was the Messianic agent of God.

So this statement can be seen as a retort. Read in its context, it says, "You continue searching the scriptures because you assume you have eternal life in them, but these are the very passages that testify about me." The tense indicates their usual practice: "You habitually search the scriptures...." The term we translate "you think you have" most accurately reads, "you assume you have."

John is reminding us that one enters into life only through the love that Christ manifests.

2. Isaiah 28:10, ESV:

"For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little."

This text is often used out of context as an instruction in how to study the Bible—that is, by comparing one text to another. But a reading of

the entire chapter reveals that it is describing not a hermeneutical method, but the priests' disrespect for Isaiah's persistent preaching against injustice.

Isaiah in this chapter identifies the priests and prophets who are "confused with wine [and] … stagger with strong drink"; who "err in vision" and "stumble in giving judgment" (verse 7, NRSV). He says that the tables of these religious operatives are "covered with filthy vomit; no place is clean" (verse 8, NRSV). In other words, the religious system itself is totally corrupt, and the priests and scholars are the enablers of injustice.

We all read the Bible from where we stand, regardless of what method of interpretation we apply. If we listen to each other, we can learn what one person sees and another overlooks.

This is the persistent theme of Isaiah. From chapter one, the prophet is decrying all cultic sacrifices, observances, and rigmaroles in the face of flagrant injustice and is calling for true revival and reformation (Isa 1:10-20).

Repeated in verses 10 and 13, "precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little" is not a concept from God, but rather, the complaint of corrupt religious leaders. In their drunken stupor (verse 9), they complain that Isaiah is teaching them as though they are mere children.

In the original Hebrew, the repeated phraseology "precept upon precept," "line upon line," "here a little, there a little" is idiomatic, and the English translation does not capture the full meaning. The drunken leaders are mocking the prophet's words, saying that he repeats himself ("line upon line, precept upon precept") and speaks to them as though they were children ("here a little, there a little").

The idiom might best be translated: "blah blah blah, yada yada yada, same old, same old."[1]

3. 2 Peter 1:20-21, NRSV:

"First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

The prophecy about which this passage speaks is the early church's anticipation of the end of the world, which coincides with an era of Jewish apocalyptic expectation. These apocalyptic writings arise out of the church's political oppression. The prophecies offer a message of hope that God will in the end prevail—similar to the lessons we Adventists find in Daniel and Revelation.

Interestingly, when this epistle was written, the Apocalypse of John (the book we call Revelation) was already in circulation. This may account for the statement in verse 19: "So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed."

Yet, the reality is that the end did not come as they expected it. The author is addressing a church community that stood on the brink of division and dissolution. Many were discouraged with the delay of the expected end of the world (chapters 2-3). These cynical church members justified their doubts with false teachings about the end (2 Pet. 3:3-4).

I don't think it is helpful to use this text to shut down diverse views regarding the end of the world. Instead, the thrust of the text is a call to the community to continue to study and remain hopeful in the promise of Messiah's coming.

It is in community that scriptures take on their full relevance and meaning, because scriptures emerge from the life of community. No one person—no single interest group or denominational leader—should dominate, influence, or bully everyone else

into complying with a "private" interpretation. This is, in fact, a dangerous threat to a community of faith.

We all read the Bible from where we stand, regardless of what method of interpretation we apply. If we listen to each other, we can learn what one person sees and another overlooks.

For example, a person from a Native American community may not interpret the Exodus as liberation, because their land and people were ravished and captured by invading forces.

A person raised to consciously or unconsciously embrace social hegemony might see only verse 3 in 1 Corinthians 11, NIV ("But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God"), and read the rest in light of it. But a woman on the underside, acutely aware of the ill effects of being socially dominated, will focus on verses 11-12, NIV ("Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ... But everything comes from God"), and read the rest in light of that. This person may also observe that verse 7, NIV ("[Man] is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man"), appears contrary to the Genesis account of creation,[2] and she may sensitize the community to read and interpret the passage more rigorously and conscientiously.

The point is that only as we read Scripture together, from where we stand in our varying circumstances, and listen to each other can we nurture a community of liberation and mutual respect. Only then shall the kingdom come "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, NRSV).

4. 1 Corinthians 2:14-15, NRSV:

"Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, … because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny."

Biblical passages do not fall as a nugget from the sky, to be used as one wishes. Once again, the context of this passage in the early church gives us a broader meaning.

Paul's call to the early church was away from the temporality of human life, which only serves to divide, as was demonstrated in the schismatic Corinthian church. According to Paul, this would include rituals, ethnic and biological identities (Gal. 3:28), doctrines that pose as irrefutable knowledge (1 Corinthians 3; 8:1-3), and the tendency to put others and their abilities down in order to feel important (1 Corinthians 12). These sorts of things are "unspiritual" and temporary.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says the obsession with such temporal things is childish—what in Galatians he calls "fleshly." This passage is Paul's call away from fleshly temporalities to that which is everlasting: love (1 Corinthians 13).

That experience can come only when one is "in Christ" (Gal. 3:28), which is the spiritual path that makes us all one, regardless of diverse identities and ideas (1 Corinthians 3). To focus on the temporal identities is the path of the flesh that prevents us from discerning what really matters: love.

If believers are on the path of genuine Christlike love, they are "subject to no one else's scrutiny" (1 Cor. 2:15, NRSV). Paul says this another way: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom. 13:8, NRSV).

Because Paul understood the difference between the temporal and the eternal, he was able to say that one does not have to be circumcised or follow a particular diet or observe particular days in order to access the promise of God's salvation (Galatians 3-4; 1 Cor. 10:23-33; Romans 14). Because Paul was spiritual, he could discern that male domination (today sometimes called "male headship") is the way of the flesh—that man and woman are interdependent under the headship of God.

Discernment occurs when an individual or a community places the ego under Christ's subjection and focuses on the spiritual and eternal.

What this passage is not, however, is a blank check to interpret any passage as you wish, because you claim to be the one who is most spiritual. AT

[1] Jeremy Myers, "Is Line by Line Preaching Biblical?" RedeemingGod.com (2011).

[2] This is not Paul's own interpretation of Genesis 1. Rather, he employs the argument in verses 3-10 as a rhetorical device, often used in Greek philosophical schools, to lay bare the argument he wants to oppose before he throws it out (verses 11-12).

WHEN GOD WANTS DIS/OBEDIENCE

WRESTLING WITH GENESIS 22

By Matthew J. Korpman

Few stories in the Hebrew Bible make a modern reader's blood curdle more than the tale of Abraham's attempted(?) sacrifice of his son. It is no surprise, then, that the story of this great test of faith has inspired many diverse interpretations throughout history. By carefully examining the narrative contained in the Hebrew Bible from various lenses, readers can discover what various hermeneutical possibilities exist and then utilize them to navigate such a tale.

This article will demonstrate four critical approaches to the biblical text, each producing entirely different results: (1) Narrative, (2) Canonical, (3) Historical, and (4) Confrontational. It will become obvious very quickly that no single interpretive approach works entirely on its own, but each adds something to the puzzle—a puzzle that readers can complete only according to their own conscience.

Narrative

On a shallow reading, we might see a story that appears to celebrate obedience. It seems simple, if you don't read too closely. One way in which a biblical story can be analyzed is using *narrative criticism*, which forces us to pay very close attention to what the story itself tells us (with no other considerations). If we take out our magnifying glasses, we may notice that although Abraham is told by God that he is to go and kill/sacrifice his son, he tells his servants that "the boy and I will go over there; *we* will worship, and then *we* will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5, [1] italics mine). We may also notice that when Isaac and Abraham travel up the mountain, after Isaac notices that there is no lamb for a sacrifice, Abraham replies that neither he nor Isaac will provide one. "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son," he states, ruling out the possibility that Isaac could be the sacrifice (verse 8). Does this suggest that Abraham doubted God's command? Or does it mean that Abraham is lying to his servants and Isaac? Can either of these possibilities reconcile with the praise of Abraham as faithful?

We may note that although the angel praises Abraham "because you have obeyed my voice" (verse 18), technically *two voices* are present in the narrative: the voice of God ordering him to kill Isaac (verse 2) and the voice of the angel commanding him to *not* kill (verses 11-12). Furthermore, this raises our attention to the fact that the "test" mentioned in verse 1 is not specified. *What* is being tested? Is it whether Abraham would go to kill Isaac, or whether he would stop his attempt when an angel called out and contradicted the earlier command of God? Few spend enough time recognizing how serious this is. Imagine the following scenario: Abraham, faced with the choice of which voice to obey, turns to the angel and says, "I will not listen to anyone, not even an angel, who speaks contrary to the command of God," and then proceeds to obediently kill Isaac. We wouldn't like it if that's how

the story turned out. And yet, isn't this in some way what proper obedience would demand? If obedience were all that was being tested, shouldn't words similar to Paul's have echoed in Abraham's mind: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" (Gal. 1:8)?[1] In order to listen to, entertain, and obey the angel's voice, Abraham had to be willing to put aside the first voice.

Finally, we might seek new insights by comparing this story to previous tales about Abraham, such as where God states in Genesis 18 that he has "chosen him … to keep the way of the LORD by *doing righteousness* and *justice*; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (verse 19, italics mine). In other words, for Abraham to become what God wants him to be, he must embody righteousness and a concern for justice. In fact, this is the very reason why God tells Abraham about his plans regarding Sodom, and it's the same reason why Abraham rebukes God and threatens to break off the covenant (Gen. 18:25; cf. Psa. 82). When reading the story of Isaac against this backdrop, we might wonder why Abraham doesn't appear to resist God's words as he once did in behalf of Sodom, and likewise we might wonder whether this indicates that he has *increased* in his sense of justice (no need to ask) or *backslidden* (failing to do what he once did)?

In all, a narrative approach to the story of Genesis 22 raises many questions and provocative solutions. It seems possible that Abraham either sought to deceive those around him, or that he had a conviction that God's words would not come to pass.

Canonical Criticism

Championed by Brevard Childs, *canonical criticism* refers to studying a text's meaning as it is found within the context of the canon (or collection) of Scripture. In other words, it welcomes the rest of the biblical tradition to help contribute to our understanding of a passage. For example, we may note that child sacrifice is condemned throughout the Hebrew Bible (Lev. 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut. 12:31; Ezek. 16:20-21; Jer. 7:31; 32:35; 2 Kings 23:10, etc.). In fact, the Psalms say that any divine being (god, angel, or otherwise) who asks someone to do a child sacrifice is a demon and to be rejected (Psa. 106:37-38). Likewise God, through the prophet Jeremiah, explicitly denies that he requested child sacrifice (7:31). To underscore this, God states that never has it come into his mind—even hypothetically—to request a child sacrifice, since it is an "abomination" (Jer. 32:32-35). What does this mean for the presentation of God in Genesis 22, if what he asked for is an "abomination" and something only demons would request? Also, what would the Psalmist or Jeremiah have believed about the story of Genesis 22, given their views?

Moving to the New Testament, we find a famous passage from the anonymous letter of Hebrews in which Abraham's faith is described as wonderful because "he considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead" (Heb. 11:19). The argument is that Abraham was willing to kill his son because he knew that no matter what horror Isaac suffered, Abraham could trust that his abused and tortured child could be resurrected and allowed to live the rest of his days with the image of a father who had slit his throat and murdered him. Not enough people dwell on the reality of that scenario, nor do most realize that it is anachronistic: biblical scholars know there was no belief in resurrection, either during the time of Abraham or the period of the writers and readers of Genesis. (The concept of resurrection first appears in the Old Testament within the book of Daniel's visions.)

While the passage in Hebrews is well-known, a far more important passage is overlooked, if not outright unacknowledged. In John 8, we get a different perspective on this foundational narrative. According to John, the Jewish leaders claim in conversation that "Abraham is our father" (verse 39), but Jesus rejects this, noting that their actions toward him are *contrary* to what Abraham did (verses 39-40).

Following this proclamation, Jesus uses the story of Genesis 22 to point out that Abraham didn't intend or desire to kill, whereas the Jewish leaders are proving that the devil is their true father, since they are imitating him, a "murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). Only the devil seeks to kill Jesus in order to bring about salvation for the people (cf. John 11:50; 18:14), whereas God blessed Abraham for avoiding death. In short, Jesus rejects the classic and flawed typological approach that assumes he was foreshadowed by Isaac in Abraham's story. And since Jesus is affirmed in the New Testament as the criterion for interpreting the Hebrew Bible (Luke 24:13-32 and John 5:39), his interpretation of Abraham's story matters as an important (perhaps *the most important*) contribution to a Christian understanding of it.

Historical Critical

Obviously, any attempt to understand a story like Genesis 22 will require that we pay attention to the historical context. We might note that child sacrifice, while widely condemned in the Hebrew Bible, is not universally presented in Scripture as intrinsically bad. In fact, according to Jeremiah 32:32, the Israelites/Judeans in Jerusalem had an ongoing history of committing child sacrifice, believing God wanted it.

In the Pentateuch, two texts appear to stipulate child/human sacrifice: Exodus 22:28 and Leviticus 27:28. According to Ezekiel, God *did* give them commands to kill their children as a punishment, perhaps alluding to the tradition of those two texts (Ezek. 20:25-26). Unlike Jeremiah, who says that God cannot even imagine child sacrifice, the book of Numbers declares that the Levites were set apart only because if they hadn't been, God would have demanded that every firstborn child be sacrificed perpetually for him instead (Num. 3:12). In the book of Judges, the hero Jephthah (Judg. 11:30-39; praised for his faith in Heb. 11:32) appears to offer his daughter as a sacrifice due to his vow to honor Yahweh. The prophet Micah suggests that killing a firstborn child is normal to *seriously contemplate* in Israelite faith (Mic. 6:7). And when the king of Moab offers his child

What does this mean for the presentation of God in Genesis 22, if what he asked for is an "abomination" and something only demons would request?

during a battle, the writer of Kings reveals that the child's death had supernatural powers and the Israelite army had no hope of defeating the Moabites (2 Kings 2:27; cf. 6:24-30).

So, within the Hebrew Bible we find rival perspectives on whether child sacrifice was something Yahweh wanted and demanded (Ex. 22:28; Lev. 27:28; Num. 3:12), expected but allowed substitutions to replace it (Ex. 34:19-20), didn't want but used as a punishment for Israel (Ezek. 20:25-26), or never wanted and never asked for—even as a test (Jer. 32:32; cf. Micah 6:7; Deut. 12:31). Which do *you* believe theologically? Which appears to agree with the image of Jesus, God's revelation of his true character?

Since opinion was sharply divided over the issue of child sacrifice, it is plausible that various groups would have interpreted the story of Abraham and Isaac differently. Those who believed that God wanted sacrifice would have found the story shocking; why did God stop Abraham? Those who believed that God allowed a substitute would have found confirmation in the presence of the ram. Those who assumed that God sometimes gives commands that are "not good" (Ezek. 20:25) might have understood him to be punishing Abraham, perhaps for his treatment of Ishmael.

For those who, like Jeremiah, rejected the idea that God ever wanted or thought of such things, God's test sounds like a demon's proposition and requires denunciation, perhaps leading them to ignore it or reinterpret it. In fact, according to two early Jewish documents—the book of *Jubilees* and a fragment of a lost work in the Dead Sea Scrolls (*4Q225*, variously called either *Pseudo-Jubilees* or *A Paraphrase of Genesis and Exodus*)—it was not God who tested Abraham, but Satan (named Mastemah). If the Psalmist correctly states that only a demon asks for such things, then it appears that Jewish scribes of the Second Temple period decided to rewrite the story to make this clear.

The existing diversity of opinion leads us to another important observation: although child sacrifice strikes us (including Jeremiah and some other biblical authors, too) as immoral, many in the ancient world did not see it as such. Given the difference between our time and theirs, we must recognize that Abraham's *willingness* to accept the command to kill would *not* be as unique in his own day as it would today. It appears that any Moabite or non-Israelite father would have been able to *consider* and potentially fulfill a test designed to see whether he loved his god(s) enough to kill his own child. As Jeremiah pointed out, lots of Judeans were not only willing to do so, but were in fact carrying out such sacrifices (much to his and our own horror). In other words, Abraham had no reason to lie to his servants, who would have understood the religious norms. On the other hand, what *would* have been quite noteworthy is the idea that Abraham knew in his heart that God's initial command wasn't God's true desire, despite God never having yet revealed a disdain for child sacrifice to his servant.

Moving from the historical background to the text itself, many scholars have noted indications that the second angel's speech in Gen. 22:15-18 was added later by some scribe/editor of Genesis. Both its language and its placement after the affirmation of the name of the mountain point to another author. Recently, Omri Boehm published a study of the passage[2] in which he argues (persuasively, I'd add) that not only is the second angel's speech

secondary, but so too is the first speech in verses 11-12. With those verses removed, the story flows like this: "Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide;' as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.' So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba."

In this shorter version of the story that Boehm reconstructs, Abraham is not dependent on some divine voice for direction, but rather wrestles as did Jacob in the dark night of his soul against the violent words that God has spoken. When Abraham sees the ram, he *interprets* the presence of the ram on the mountain as an answer from God to his affirmation to Isaac that *God* would provide a lamb. Abraham's test, in this version, would be whether he would rightly interpret God's character: Does God actually desire the death of a child, or does God desire Abraham to know that God's justice requires a substitution?

Why would anyone edit the story? One possible suggestion would be that an editor did not like the idea that Abraham *appeared* to be disobeying God's initial command on his own, and so he added verses 11-12 to ensure that Abraham appeared to do what he did only because God explicitly told him. Subsequently, another editor (or perhaps the same one) thought to add an additional speech that explained his reward.

Having reviewed three approaches to the text, we clearly see two paths we could walk down in our interpretation. Either Abraham was tested on whether he would be willing to obey God and kill his child, or God was testing whether Abraham had faith strong enough to believe that God didn't want it. Depending on one's text-critical decisions, this faithful dis/obedience would be demonstrated either by obeying the second voice of the angel or (assuming Boehm is right) intuiting the ram as an answer to prayer.

Hermeneutics of Confrontation

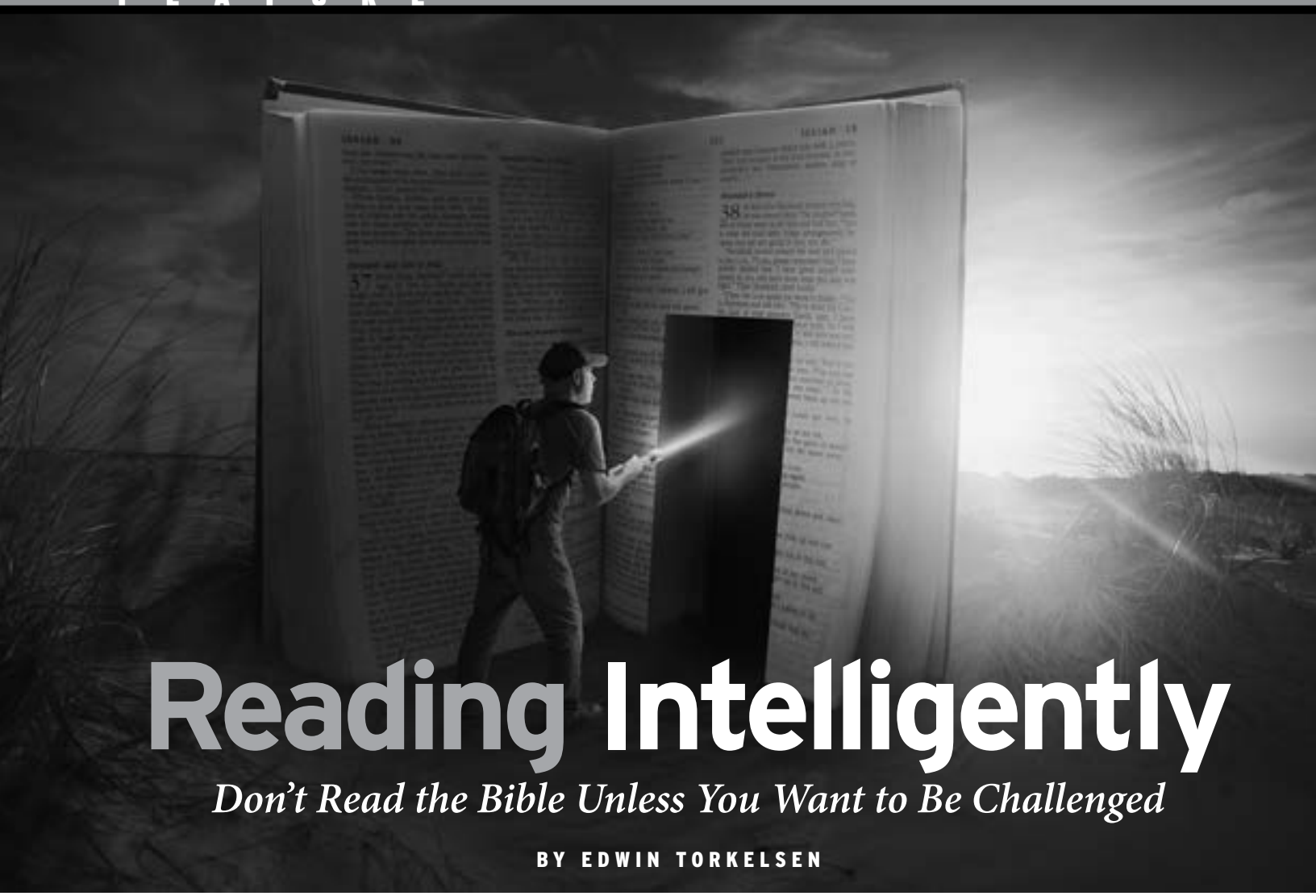
Finally, as we come to the synthesis of these approaches, we must make the brave choice of which path we will walk down (metaphorically speaking). We must *confront* the interpretive choices and wrestle. Each reader must engage with the story of Abraham and Isaac, similar to how Jacob fought with God by the Jabbok River (Gen. 32:22-30), or how Moses argued with God (Ex. 32:7-14), or how Abraham had earlier confronted God: "Far be it from you" (Gen. 18:25). We must make a stand regarding God's character and, gathering theological courage, defend the heart of God from misrepresentation.

As a Christian biblical scholar and theologian, I look to Jesus for my first clue. He affirmed in John that Abraham did not seek to kill Isaac and suggested that what made the patriarch a child of God (rather than of the devil) was his recognition that it was not God's desire to kill, but rather to save life. This indicates that Abraham's words to his servants and son did indeed reflect his internal conviction that the God he had followed was *not* like the others who demanded child sacrifice but was, instead, morally superior. This Christ-infused perspective led, in part, to the reinterpretation of the story that I offered in my book *Saying No to God*.[3]

Whether one chooses to accept the innovative and provocative thesis of Omri Boehm for an earlier version of the story, or whether one simply interprets the praise of obeying "the voice" as referring to the angel's cry to preserve the life of Isaac (as I did in my own study), a reader must choose between differing visions of God that each interpretive choice provides. In her recent dissertation at Andrews University, Arlyn S. Drew argues that Abraham fell short of God's ultimate desire for his test,[4] and J. Richard Middleton in his upcoming book *Abraham's Silence* makes a similar case that God had wanted Abraham to argue, as he did in behalf of Sodom.[5] New scholarship demonstrates that more and more readers of the Bible, within and outside of Adventism, are paying attention to their choices.

One can choose to believe that Abraham lied and deceived in order to be faithful and kill his son, or one can believe he had such faith in God's character that he affirmed aloud his conviction that God was not bloodthirsty. One can choose to believe that Abraham fulfilled his faith by being willing to kill his son, or one can believe that Abraham surpassed the faithfulness of the Moabites by knowing his God so well that he knew *intuitively* that God rejects such "abominations," even before God revealed such things explicitly to his servant. One can choose from these options or even find middle ground between them; but be warned, the choice says as much about the interpreter as it does about the text being interpreted. What picture of God are you painting for others by your interpretive choices? AT

[1] All scripture quotations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.
[2] Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Model of Religious Disobedience* (2007).
[3] Matthew J. Korpman, *Saying No to God: A Radical Approach to Reading the Bible Faithfully* (2019).
[4] Arlyn S. Drew, *A Hermeneutic for the Aqedah Test: A Way Beyond Jon Levenson's and Terence Fretheim's Models* (2020).
[5] J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (2021).



Reading Intelligently

Don't Read the Bible Unless You Want to Be Challenged

BY EDWIN TORKELSEN

In responding to a question about the law, Jesus asked: "How do you read it?" (Luke 10:26).[1]

The question is more important than we think, because how we read influences how we understand. Several times Jesus said: "You have heard it was said to the people long ago, … But I tell you..." (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). He also said: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). When Satan tempted Jesus, he quoted Scripture. Jesus answered him by recalling a text that contradicted the meaning Satan had implied in his quote (Matt. 4:5-7).

Interpretations

The meaning we find in texts may vary. While reading, our brains ask, "What do these words mean?" We call this process *interpretation.*

Interpretations are seldom self-evident. We approach the Bible with mental baggage that influences and determines how we understand a text. This baggage contains the sum of our personal history, language, culture, experiences, knowledge, and—not least—a multitude of preconceived ideas and biases. We may not realize how closed our "open minds" actually are.

Some say: "I don't interpret the Bible; I don't read the Bible critically; I simply read it as it is." Such statements reveal a misunderstanding of the words *interpret* and *critical*. The person may think that interpretation is to twist the "plain meaning" of the text and that critical reading means to criticize the Bible in order to undermine its authority.

To interpret critically, however, is to quality-check our reading so as to not misunderstand the text. Jesus demonstrated this in his conversation with Satan and also when he referred to traditional understandings of Scripture in his public ministry.

Language and Ideology

Language offers plenty of room for misunderstandings. The aim of critical interpretation is to understand what the author meant to say, not what readers want the text to mean. The risk of misunderstanding increases with time and distance from when and where the text was written. Languages continually evolve. Even English-speaking people have a hard time understanding a 1,000-year-old text written in Old English.

The Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic between 2,000 and 3,500 years ago. What did the words mean then, and do they have the same meaning today? Words may have multiple meanings. Which is correct? What is the author's concern? Interpreters ask these and many other questions.

Words must be understood in their context—linguistically, literarily, historically, culturally, and ideologically. To understand ancient texts correctly is not child's play. It takes specialized linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as a highly critical interpretation to approach the original meaning of a text. Reading the Bible at face value—claiming to understand it 3,000 years later—is not only uncritical, but also uninformed and showing little care about the author's message.

Piously debunking critical reading of the Bible as "secular" and "nonspiritual" is risky. Doing so opens the door to reading into texts idiosyncrasies that serve our own agendas. Satan quoted his text correctly but interpreted it out of context to promote his own agenda. Jesus pointed to the broader context, and its overarching principles revealed Satan's conclusion as incorrect.

Reading God's Mind

We need humility to realize that others may understand certain texts more correctly than we do. Saying that only Adventists correctly interpret the number 666 in Revelation 13:18 reveals no lack of doctrinal arrogance. Has our urge to be right made us indifferent to understanding correctly? Do we think self-critically? Has our humility been obliterated by our doctrinal superiority complex?

Some assert that their interpretations are "the Word of God"—their words God's words, their thoughts God's thoughts. We boldly label our beliefs and statements as "biblical." Before we claim to have privileged access to God's mind, we ought to think twice and reflect on Isaiah 55:9: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Two Modes of Reading

Some insist that a literal reading of the Bible is the only spiritually correct one. Only then will the Spirit guide us and give us a clear understanding of the text. Reason must submit to the text by removing all of our presuppositions. Everything supernatural must be accepted as reality. Nothing critical may enter the mind. Such claims are found in the document "Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles and Methods,"[2] which seems to be based on the irrational, biased, self-contradictory, and polemic presuppositions of its authors.[3]

Others think differently. Honest reading of the Bible searches for the genuine meaning of its authors, not to bolster readers' pre-existing ideas. The Bible presents the message of salvation in many ways: prose, poetry, allegories, object lessons, metaphors, symbols, narratives, laws, stories, history, wisdom collections, psalms and songs, biographies, sermons, prophecies. All modes of expression must be identified and interpreted within their own contexts.

Texts have faith-based spiritual import. The Spirit may guide us to identify and apply principles embedded in the text, but I doubt that the Spirit will warn us against avoiding misunderstandings and misinterpretation. It is hardly good advice to cherry-pick certain texts out of context in order to build doctrinal constructs and to defend traditions that we cherish more than our love for God, truth, and neighbor.

Historical Background

The Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and birth of modern science from the 1400s challenged the traditions of the Middle Ages with the discovery of new continents, technology, insights, concepts, and ideas. Established authorities who were opposed to critical thinking reacted to these challenges, made by many outspoken individuals including Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Although the religious establishment opposed and condemned both men, the "modern" world gradually emerged.

The medieval Western church claimed that it had a monopoly on interpreting the Bible and defining its teachings. Clergy decided "truth," and all else was "heresy." Bible interpretation was authority-based.

The watchword of Renaissance humanists was *ad fontes,* back to original sources. The principle first applied to the literary heritage from antiquity; then, gradually, scholars called Bible humanists also applied it to Christianity and the Bible. The *ad fontes* principle posed serious challenges to the authority of the church.

The Western church's authorized version of the Bible was the *Biblia Vulgata,* a Latin translation made around AD 400 by Jerome (Hieronymus), who died in 420 CE. The Western church used the Latin language (in contrast to the Eastern church, which used Greek), and its clergy were mostly unfamiliar with Bible manuscripts originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Bible humanists preached that Scripture ought to be interpreted on the basis of its *original* languages, not according to Jerome's Latin translation. They challenged theologians to learn these languages, and their suggestion was not well received.

Johann Reuchlin (1456-1522), a German linguist who mastered Hebrew and Greek, became embroiled in controversies with traditionalist clergy who wanted to destroy Jewish books

written in Hebrew. He wrote two pamphlets that ridiculed his opponents, portraying them as ignorant obscurantists. Reuchlin wanted to promote the Bible but would not be tied to the Latin Vulgate. As a humanist he promoted going back to the original sources, which meant that the Bible should be studied in the original Hebrew and Greek languages.

Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) was a theologian, priest, and linguist who became the most renowned of the Bible humanists, thanks to the publication of his Greek New Testament in 1516. His edition revealed discrepancies between Greek manuscripts and the Latin Vulgate. Like other humanists, he thought the church needed reform, and like many of them, he wanted to promote reform from within the church. Martin Luther was influenced by both Reuchlin and Erasmus. (Reuchlin was a great-uncle of Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560), the Reformer who was Martin Luther's collaborator, but neither of them endorsed the radicalism that led to Luther's break with the church.)

Modern science was also evolving. Knowledge of nature, according to these early "scientists," ought to rest upon observations and experiments, not upon quotes from ancient philosophers or Bible texts. The heliocentric understanding of the sun and the planets was promoted by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), followed by Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). These ideas upset the church's guardians of truth. Bruno was tried, incarcerated, and executed; Galileo was forced to recant and condemned to lifelong house arrest.

The Enlightenment in the 1700s exacerbated the confrontation between traditional authority-based faith and a worldview built on observation and reason. Thanks to Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the conflict intensified into a power struggle between religion and science.

Many theologians felt that reason and science seriously threatened their traditional perceptions of Christian faith. But the theologians were not united. Some crawled into their trenches to fight the new ideas. Others were not sure this was wise. After all, they had proof that the Earth was neither flat nor at the center of the universe. It had been demonstrated that the Earth was a globe without corners that circled the sun.

The Bible was placed on the front line—not only between science and religion, but also between two groups of theologians. Both groups focused on the question: *How do we read the Bible?* One group promoted a traditional, defensive, faith-based understanding of the Bible. The other group promoted an exploratory, knowledge-based understanding. Their views focused on what the Bible is and how it should be read.

Conservative and Liberal

One group believed that faith and reason could not be harmonized, nor should it, and that reason must be subordinated to faith. Only then could theology be "biblically" and "spiritually" sound. It claimed the Bible was verbally inspired—"God's Word" in a literal sense—and endowed the book itself with an aura of holiness. A belief that God had dictated the content of biblical texts word by word meant that each must be perfect, infallible, and without error—not only in content, but also linguistically. Those who held to such views called themselves conservatives or fundamentalists.

Others recognized that the Bible conveyed God's message of salvation. But the texts were also historical documents written over a period of time, by human authors who wrote within a historical context that influenced the format of the writing process. Bible texts were selected and collected into a canon by human beings who exercised their reason and spirituality in the process.

For an interpretation to be "true to the Bible," it must also be correct to the original meaning of the text. Reasoned and informed studies were necessary to establish the factual, probable, and sensible understanding of the text. The origin of the Bible must be taken into account in order to know what the writers had in mind.

Methodology reflected the modes of science with their focus on structured, consistent, and verifiable exploration. Some radicals in this group denied any divine influence and reduced the Bible to merely a human work. These theologians were labeled liberals.

Ellen White and the Bible

Adventist co-founder Ellen White understood the Bible to convey divine messages. As was common in her day, she called the Bible "God's Word." She believed that it was inspired by God, but she did not have a grand systematic theory of inspiration.

On certain points she was more in the camp of the liberals than the conservatives. She did not subscribe to the idea of verbal inspiration, either for the Bible or for her writings. She stated that the words of the Bible were not inspired, but that the writers and the thoughts they conveyed were. The Bible was a product of cooperation between God and human beings, with both divine and human elements—and, she added, *nothing human is perfect*. She acknowledged that the Bible contains passages that are not in full harmony with each other, explaining that the differences were due to the fact that the authors were fallible, with different backgrounds and personalities. She suggested that those who become confused and doubt their faith when they discover human elements in the Bible have a weak faith. She did not think that flaws in the Bible undermined its veracity and reliability.

White put it this way: Bible writers were God's "penmen" but not his "pen." She tried to harmonize the best of both theological camps without ending up in the ditches of either extreme. (See *Selected Messages*, Vol.1, pp. 19-21.)[4] This approach was her strength.

Conscience and the Bible

The Bible is not as simplistic as some of us might wish it were. It provides guidance in many areas (2 Tim. 3:16-17), but it is not a divine cookbook providing recipes for all aspects of theology and spirituality. Readers are left to choose how to read, interpret, and apply the guidance given.

Our confirmation bias tends to make us believe what we want to believe. Organized religion has, through its creeds and politics, tried to control how we understand the Bible. Early Adventists were skeptical of all creedal statements and believed that such documents would prevent further growth in our understanding. They feared such statements could be weaponized and used to persecute those whose understanding differed from our own. This fear has been vindicated, both before and since.

It is difficult for creeds and conscience to cohabit without clashing. We must ask: How truthful is a creed, and how reliable is our conscience? If we elevate creed to be divine, conscience is threatened. If we elevate conscience to be infallible, we become arrogant and intolerant.

White's observation is helpful: "The idea is entertained by many that a man may practice anything that he conscientiously believes to be right. But the question is, Has the man a well-instructed, good conscience, or is it biased and warped by his own preconceived opinions? ... Men may be conscientiously wrong as well as conscientiously right."[5]

To doubt both human creeds and our own ability to understand perfectly reflects a sound faith that leads us to trust God more than ourselves (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8-12).

When the Spirit Leads

The Spirit manifests itself in "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). If our doctrines, statements, and opinions do not promote this fruit, we may rightfully doubt their biblical validity.

If we claim to be 100 percent certain that we are right, we attempt to make ourselves divine and shut the door to the Spirit's attempts to show us where we're wrong. Those described in the Bible as being after God's heart have all been willing to learn and change their minds (cf. 2 Sam. 12:7ff; Psalm 139:23-24).

If I believe exactly as I did 60 years ago, where has the Spirit been? Did I really, back then, receive all of the light I could have? Have I learned nothing since? Is what I believe today absolute, infallible, and unchangeable? I do not see the Spirit leading in such attitudes.

Ellen White had something to say about a stale and unchangeable faith: "The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, *is not a proof that our ideas are infallible.* Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. We are living in perilous times, and it does not become us to accept everything claimed to be truth without *examining it thoroughly*; neither can we afford to reject anything *that bears the fruits of the Spirit of God;* but we should be *teachable, meek and lowly of heart*" (italics mine).[6]

She also wrote: "But as real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. *Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's word* and discourage any further investigation of the Scriptures. They become *conservative and seek to avoid discussion*" (italics mine).[7]

Again on the topic, White remarked: "*We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn*. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, *never have occasion to change an opinion,* will be disappointed" (italics mine).[8]

Progress in understanding means movement from point A to point B. This applies not only to our personal lives, but also to our understanding of Scripture—how we read it and what we learn from it. It took time for the disciples to discover this (John 14:5-9).

If we want the Spirit to guide us, we must be willing to learn and change our minds about cherished opinions. Isn't that what Jesus tried to teach when he asked, "How do you read it?" AT

[1] All Bible quotations in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).
[2] "Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, and Methods," voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee at the Annual Council Session in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Oct. 12, 1986).
[3] See my article, "The Historical-Critical Method Revisited," *Adventist Today* online (posted Aug. 17, 2020) at atoday.org/the-historical-critical-method-revisited/. The document "Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles and Methods" is self-contradictory. It warns against everything "critical" connected with Bible study, then proceeds to list all of the "critical" tools that should be used when interpreting the Bible. It also suggests clearing the mind of all presuppositions, preconceived ideas, and biases while clearly showing the polemic intent, preconceived ideas, and biases of the document's authors.
[4] See Alden Thompson's books *Inspiration* and *Escape From the Flames.*
[5] Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality,* Vol. 1 (1977), p. 322.
[6] White, "Christ Our Hope," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Dec. 20, 1892).
[7] White, *Testimonies for the Church,* Vol. 5 (1882), pp. 706-707.
[8] White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (1946), p. 37.

HOW DO I READ THE BIBLE?

BY REINDER BRUINSMA

For Seventh-day Adventists, the doctrine of the seventh-day Sabbath is perhaps the most clear-cut of the 28 fundamental beliefs. Many of us might wonder why the average Bible reader does not see the divinely ordained Sabbath as the seventh day of the week rather than the first day of the week. How is it possible that most people fail to understand Bible passages that so clearly refer to Sabbath-keeping?

Many evangelicals are convinced that at the end of time, true believers will be "raptured"—suddenly and miraculously removed from the face of the Earth and transported to the heavenly realm. They wonder why others who read the Scriptures can't see it, since the teaching of the secret rapture is so clear!

Many conservative Calvinists have a similar reaction in connection with the doctrine of predestination. They puzzle over the fact that so many believers can read Paul's epistle to the Romans and fail to see the biblical basis for the belief in God's eternal election of part of mankind and his eternal condemnation of others.

Apparently, people have differing presuppositions when they read the Bible. Doctrinal convictions, which they have frequently absorbed from childhood, influence the manner in which they approach Scripture. In other words, people read the Bible through their own doctrinal lenses—usually without being aware of it.

There is no such thing as a "plain reading" of the Bible. We all read through the spectacles of our own culture, theology, and life experience.

In addition to denominational background, social factors also determine the color of the lenses through which people read. Do they, for instance, belong to the (mostly white) privileged social classes, or do they exist at the margins of society?

Seventh-day Adventists read the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20 through their own particular lenses, depending on where in the world they live, their cultural background, and their employment situation. By and large, it would be true to say that their way of reading has convinced them that there is a wholesome rhythm of six days of work and one special day of rest, which God wants them to respect. But some may wonder about the vast number of people who do not have a job. How are those who cannot find work for one single day supposed to read the commandment that we should work six days? And what about those who have a job that demands they work even on weekends?

Interpreting What We Read

How complicated can it be to read the Bible? God has given us his Word in human language. Those who advocate a "plain reading" approach say that if we read the Bible with an open mind and ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we can understand what God wants to tell us. They suggest that things begin to go wrong when we start *interpreting* the Bible, instead of simply listening to what God's Word tells us. However, there is no such thing as a "plain reading" of the Bible. We all read through the spectacles of our own culture, theology, and life experience.

For many people, this "plain reading" approach means accepting that everything we read in the Bible is historically and scientifically trustworthy. But I do not know of anyone who is fully consistent in this regard. Many will, for instance, accept that God created everything in six literal 24-hour days, at most some 8,000 to 10,000 years ago, but they refuse to accept the ancient worldview of a flat earth and a three-tier universe. Yet, a consistent "plain reading" approach would require them to do so.

Every Bible reader not only *reads*, but also *interprets* what he reads. In fact, the authors of the Bible books often interpreted what other inspired writers had penned before them. Many citations of Old Testament portions in the New Testament are not literal quotations, but rather, interpretations. And when God's Word is translated from the original languages into the thousands of other tongues that have resulted from the fateful Tower of Babel experiment, inevitably a significant amount of interpretation takes place.

Two key concepts must be kept in mind when we try to describe the interpretative process: *exegesis* and *hermeneutics*. Dictionaries define the term *exegesis* as the critical analysis and explanation of a text, with the intention to discover what the author wanted to communicate. *Hermeneutics* has to do with the underlying principles—the tools—that are used in performing this exegesis. Every Bible reader is an exegete of some sort. Many of us need the help of professionals to be able to use the right tools and do responsible exegesis.

Understanding a text hermeneutically requires that we discover how a particular passage fits into larger literary units of the Bible and how the smaller parts help us to understand the entire text better. Experts

Reading the Bible in a meaningful way requires that we not only understand what the text meant when it was written, but also discover how it addresses us where we happen to be today.

speak about the "hermeneutic circle." Analyzing what the author of a particular Bible passage wanted to convey demands that we look at the original setting. Who was the author, and what kind of person was he? What were the circumstances under which a particular biblical passage was written? What was the cultural context? To what literary genre does a text belong? What did the words and images used by the author mean at the time of writing? How has the biblical text been transmitted over time? We must try to find answers to these and many other questions about the author and the original text, if we want to discover its original meaning.

Different Approaches to Hermeneutics

After analyzing what the author of a text intended to say, we must move to the next phase: namely, determining what this text may mean for us who read it many centuries later. Before we attempt to answer this question, it is important to briefly mention a few other things about hermeneutics.

Not all biblical scholars agree what type of hermeneutics should be used; therefore, it is legitimate to ask whether Seventh-day Adventists have their own approach. The answer to that question is affirmative. Recently, the General Conference-sponsored Biblical Research Institute published a compilation of essays in *Biblical Hermeneutics*: *An Adventist Approach*.[1] In a number of respects, this Adventist approach differs from that of many other approaches. In October 1986, the delegates who were assembled at the Annual Council of the General Conference in Rio de Janeiro approved a noteworthy document titled *Methods of Bible Study*.[2] One of the most controversial elements in this official denominational statement is the rejection of the historical-critical method, which is accepted in some form or other by most Bible scholars.

Another crucial issue in Adventist hermeneutics is the role of the writings of Ellen G. White. While the Adventist Church claims that the Bible is "the supreme, authoritative, and infallible revelation of God's will" (Fundamental Belief No. 1), it also maintains that the writings of Ellen G. White "speak with prophetic authority and provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church" (Fundamental Belief No. 18). In actual practice we see all too often that Ellen White's writings are used to determine what a biblical passage means.

Adventist interpreters—professionals as well as believers in the pew—are definitely affected by a trend in hermeneutics that is

part and parcel of postmodern thinking. Postmodern people no longer believe in absolute truth but insist that we all have our own personal truths. Relativism is a key characteristic of postmodernism and, according to postmodern thinkers, we are all entitled to our own interpretation. According to postmodernism, it often remains impossible to determine what an original author intended to convey. But this is no reason for panic, as readers have the right to interpret the text in such a way that it becomes meaningful for them individually, regardless of what it originally meant. Therefore, it is argued, there are as many interpretations as there are readers.

I believe, together with many Adventists and other Christian theologians, that the postmodern view of hermeneutics contains some important insights but gives us no reason to embrace total relativism and to attach so little value to the element of truth. Common sense demands that we accept that some interpretations exclude other interpretations. The truth content of our interpretation continues to be of paramount importance. However, postmodern thinkers have helped us to understand that truth may often have more faces than we earlier thought and that the present meaning of ancient texts may take us beyond their original meaning. French philosopher Paul Ricoer (1913-2005), who made an important contribution to the field of hermeneutics, recognized a number of different stages by which a text is distanced from its origin. It creates its own world, in which the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. The reader "appropriates" the text and thus discovers its meaning in the here and now.[3]

Reading from the Center or from the Margins

All of this may seem rather academic and theoretical, but recognition that we all read ancient texts, including the Bible, through our own lenses—and appropriate these texts in a way that depends on who and what we are—is a very important insight.

In the last half-century or so, disenfranchised groups of people have increasingly demanded that they be allowed to read the Bible "from the margins."

The "distancing" Ricoeur mentions has its limitations, and I agree with those who feel that a definite link must remain between the original meaning of a text (to the extent that we can discover this in our hermeneutical exploits) and our 21st-century experience. After all, the goal of what was written "in the Scriptures long ago" was to teach those who live at some later time (Rom. 15:4, NLT). Paul reminded his disciple Timothy that "all Scripture ... is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training" (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV). Timothy had to appropriate the content of the Old Testament writings in order to make them "present truth" in teaching the new believers, who were spread throughout the Roman Empire. Reading the Bible in a meaningful way requires that we not only understand what the text meant when it was written, but also discover how it addresses us where we happen to be today.

Miguel A. De La Torre, a prominent Cuban-American theologian, points out that we can either read the Bible "from the center" or "from the margins." Those who sit in a position of power are used to reading "from the center." The perspective of white males, who often live in privileged circumstances in the Western world, predominates how the Bible is read in our affluent society. Many of us hardly recognize this fact and fail to see that large sections of the Bible are about the poor and the otherwise disenfranchised. We see no special significance in the fact that Jesus frequently criticized the privileged class and tended to focus on the marginalized people in the Palestinian society of his days.

In the last half-century or so, disenfranchised groups of people have increasingly demanded that they be allowed to read the Bible "from the margins." Theologians and other opinion leaders have given a voice to the marginalized by appropriating the biblical material in a way that addresses the concerns of specific categories of people. The result has been the creation of various *liberation theologies*, particularly in South America and Inter-America and Africa. These theologies focus on God's concern for the poor and the oppressed. They find in the biblical narratives of liberation—especially the Exodus story—inspiration for their struggle to free themselves from the unjust economic and social structures that have kept them in poverty. They decry the

pitiful circumstances in which not only employers and civil authorities have failed them, but even the church seems to have chosen the side of their oppressors.

In the context of persistent racial discrimination, *black theologies* have arisen based on a reading of the Bible that emphasizes God's love for all people and his insistence on the full equality of all humans. They take issue with the theology of most privileged white people, which simply assumes that the first human beings in Eden were Caucasian and often pictures Jesus Christ as a white American or European male.

Believers in many areas of the world have increasingly learned to read the Bible from their marginal ethnic and cultural status. This has given rise to such diverse theologies as *minjung theology* in Korea, *aboriginal theology* in Australia, and *water buffalo theology* in parts of Asia. Men and women with a "different" sexual orientation have found that they can read the Bible in a specific way. Their *gay theology* insists that key passages in God's Word do not require the standard interpretation, which provides space only for heterosexual relationships and practices.

People of different ages read the Bible through different lenses. Adolescents, people in mid-life, and the elderly do not all have the same questions or face the same challenges in their daily lives. Their stage of life influences the way in which they appropriate what they read.

One of the most significant theological developments in recent decades has been the emergence of *feminist theology* and the emphasis on reading the Bible through the eyes of women. Although the feminist movement has produced some rather extreme ideas and practices, we cannot deny that the Bible originated in a male-dominated culture that left most women with subordinate roles and few, if any, legal rights. Patriarchal society left its clear stamp on the Bible, and privileged males in the Western world have traditionally seen little or nothing wrong with this.

When women began to assert their rights in society, many also wanted to defend the right to read and interpret the Scriptures from a female perspective. They asked some fundamental questions, including: Why was God predominantly defined as male and in possession of mainly male characteristics? And does the Bible really tell readers that women in the 20th and 21st centuries must be content with secondary roles in the church? A feminist reading of the Bible has helped countless men to become more aware of their masculine bias when reading and interpreting Scripture.

How Do I Read the Bible?

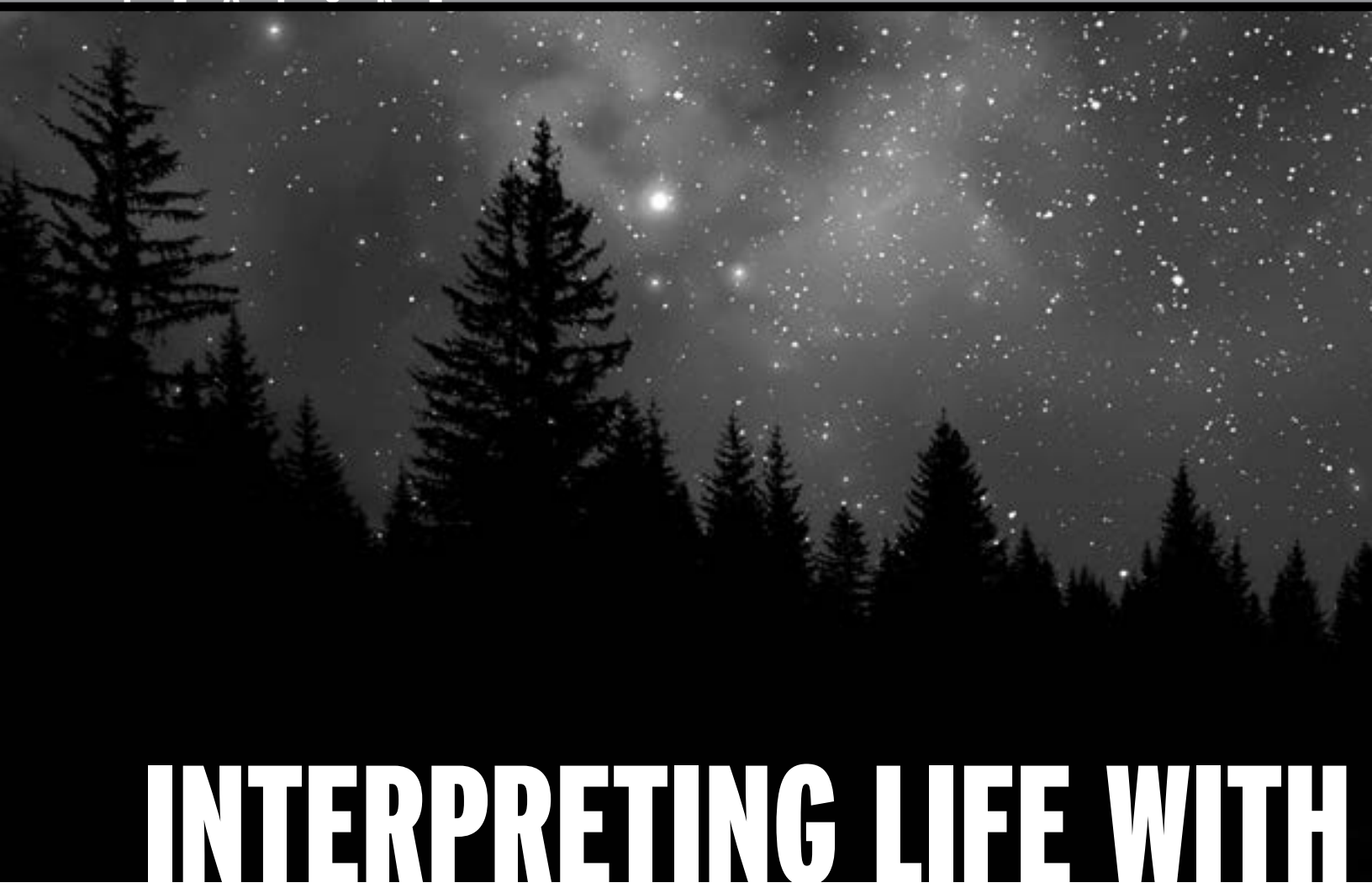
At this point I should put in a word of caution. We must strive for balance in our Scripture reading and avoid being selective by focusing only on the things we like and ignoring what does not agree with our assumptions and preconceptions. Recognizing that we read the Bible through our own specific lenses, we must take care to use a hermeneutic approach that does justice to the biblical message as a whole.

In conclusion, let me bring this closer to home. *How do I read the Bible? How do I use my hermeneutical insights to let Scripture speak to me in my situation?* A "plain reading" approach will not do. And knowing a lot about the original meaning of a biblical passage may be intellectually satisfying, but it may not necessarily nurture my soul as I continue my spiritual pilgrimage.

The way in which I read and interpret the Bible is strongly influenced by my Seventh-day Adventist background and my education and experience as an Adventist pastor. Other influences, such as my contacts with other Christians and my extensive reading, also play a significant role. As a theologian who was born and raised in the Netherlands, I have imbibed aspects of the Calvinistic heritage of Dutch church life. But I must also recognize (more than I often do) that my way of reading the Bible has much to do with my privileged status as a white, educated, upper-middle class, male senior citizen. I confess that I must be more conscious of the lenses through which I read the Bible and be more open to how others read through the spectacles they wear. This means that I must learn to read not only "from the center," but also "from the margins," and to discover important aspects of the biblical message that until now have so often escaped me.

Only when I make further progress toward exchanging my lenses for the lenses of the marginalized can I succeed in better appropriating the message of God's Word for me in 2021. And what about you? AT

[1] Frank M. Hasel, ed., *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach* (2020).
[2] For the full text of the so-called Rio document, see the Appendix in Frank M. Hasel, op. cit., pp. 463-473.
[3] See Paul Ricoer, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976).



INTERPRETING LIFE WITH

By Maury Jackson and Alba Ruth Prato

"The principal objective [of biblical hermeneutics] is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible."[1] This statement by Dutch theologian Carlos Mesters asserts that hermeneutics (the art, science, mechanics, and study of interpretation) is not particular to Scripture. But too often biblical studies (questions of exegesis or the interpretation of scriptural texts) dominate questions of hermeneutics and theology, as if contestants in theological disputes believe that if we can come to the right interpretation on biblical passages, we can arrive at the only truth necessary for salvation.

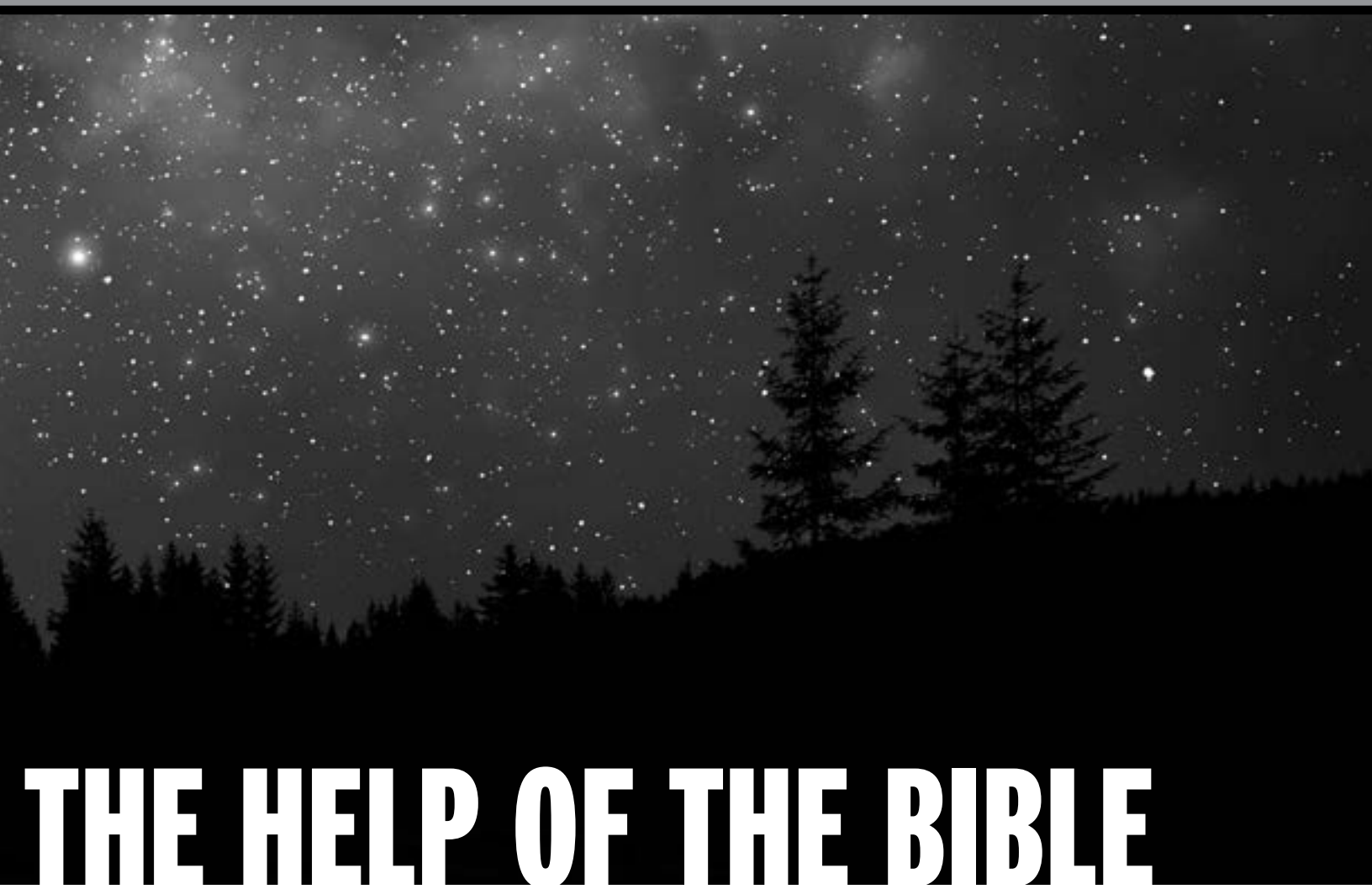
With this logic, theology often goes on holiday, steering away from any practical aims it is otherwise supposed to serve. When biblical studies guide discussions regarding hermeneutics, a gap in theological knowledge reveals a chasm in crafting dogma, doctrine, and beliefs. Under the dominance of biblical studies, sources and norms for theological reflection take a back seat. These other sources and norms—tradition, reason, and experience—must find ways to become alternative primary interpretive approaches.

Cognitive Injustice

The conundrum that results when we subjugate other interpretive sources has been addressed by professor of philosophy Miranda Fricker. Fricker highlights this difficulty by examining studies in social and human sciences. She notes a disparity in interpretive resources and argues that social scientific knowledge is hampered by hermeneutical gaps.[2] Shared resources managed by authoritative majority groups often misrepresent or minimize the experiences of minority groups or individuals.

Consider, for example, a scholar at the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute (BRI) expositing a reading of a scriptural text, claiming to possess its "true" meaning and even presenting the "definitive" claim of that text. According to the scholar, what the text meant to its original readers means the same to readers today.

Yet the personal histories of modern readers are disempowered if their religious communities suggest a different interpretation. If what the BRI scholar says is true about the text, its lesson is irrelevant with respect to the experience of those who hear the explanation. This scenario is what Fricker



THE HELP OF THE BIBLE

calls "epistemic injustice." While the word "injustice" sounds like a moral judgment (can a discussion on epistemology ever produce injustice?), obstacles to arriving at truth are an injustice against truth.

Truth is always defrauded by falsehood. Additionally, imposing dogma on the basis of one's own interpretation of Scripture is an injustice not just against truth, but also against the muting of another's voice. In other words, disempowered interpretive reading is a testimonial injustice, in which alternative interpretations receive an unfair amount of credibility because of the listeners' bias or prejudice.

Personal experience matters tremendously in theology. Evie Tornquist, a Christian recording artist popular in the 1970s and 1980s, performed a song with these lyrics:

"What can be said that hasn't been said about Jesus?
What can be done that hasn't been done in His name?
What can I say to express how I feel at this moment?
This is a feeling that's never been felt quite the same.
Well, He loves me! And that's a brand new story."[3]

Just as our worldview changes with increasing age and educational opportunities, so our hermeneutics is informed by the influence of the Holy Spirit as we grow in putting faith into practice.

The Bibles in our homes are made of parts of a dead cow (bound leather), dead trees (paper), and dried ink. Which is just to say that copies of the Bible are inanimate documents. In contrast, individuals created in God's image are also sacred documents. We are alive. Each of us possesses knowledge and understanding that contributes to the collective resources of our religious community. This knowledge is uniquely represented in our personal stories.

This insight has taken hold in pastoral theology since the work of Anton Boisen, founder of clinical pastoral education. Charles Gerkin, building on Boisen's metaphor of the human person as a living document, employs hermeneutics not as a method for reading dead textual documents, but in order to read the living human document of personal lived experience. He writes: "Anton Boisen's image of the human person as a 'document' to be read and interpreted in a manner analogous to the interpretation of a historical text...meant that the depth of experience of persons in the struggles of their mental and spiritual life demanded the same respect as do the historic texts

from which the foundations of our Judeo-Christian tradition are drawn. Each individual living human document has an integrity of his or her own that calls for understanding and interpretation, not categorisation and stereotyping. Just as the preacher should not look to proof texts to be twisted into the meaning sought for, so also the individual human text demanded a hearing on its own merit."[4]

Life is fused and fixed to language, and in that sense we are each living, sacred documents. Each one in a religious community depends on everyone else within the community to share and have their lived stories read and fairly interpreted.

But when social context favors dead texts over living contexts, our openness to others' testimonies becomes restrictive and their experiences contorted. Cognitive injustice occurs when groups are undermined, discounted, or treated unfairly in their role as bearers of social knowledge.[5] After all, theology is *socially constructed* knowledge as much as, if not more than, any other kind of knowledge.[6] The injury and insult from undermined knowledge-sharing leaves major gaps in what God reveals to us through personal experience, because it rejects the gift of the collective knowledge of each person's lived experience.

For an understanding of the creative and redemptive work of God in liberation theology, the most important lived experience to know and understand is that which is derived from those who live in disadvantaged social settings. Ironically, the virtue in liberation-influenced Christian thought is that knowledge givers who are devalued offer the most value for theological reflection. Marginalized or stigmatized groups or segments of society suffer disproportionately when there is unequal hermeneutical participation; the conceptual resources to make sense of their experience are unavailable. The community as a whole suffers from the loss of this knowledge.

Thus, theological knowledge suffers when the living human document is diminished. God relates to everything, not just the Bible. Theology is the study of God, and to study God, one must approach the study from multiple disciplines: rational, natural, social, human, and applied sciences. Our capacity to convey knowledge of our lived experience and to make sense of those experiences contributes to the collective hermeneutical resources for investigating, analyzing, and reflecting on God.

This is fundamental in the human search for meaning. When we permit hermeneutical marginalization to silence or undermine the capacity of a knower, the knowledge and essential truths that knower possesses are excluded from the corporate understanding of creation and redemption. We not only harm the individuals and groups that contribute to our knowledge of God's work in their lives, but we also hinder their very ability to craft our theological studies.

Life is fused and fixed to language, and in that sense we are each living, sacred documents. Each one in a religious community depends on everyone else within the community to share and have their lived stories read and fairly interpreted.

Hermeneutical Prisons and Prisoners

Liberating hermeneutics from exegesis is like moving a prisoner from solitary confinement into the general population. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a major voice in the study of hermeneutics, frames inquiry into the subject of interpretation without obsessing on textual interpretation, thus allowing us to revisit the living human document as the primary object of interpretation.

Gadamer notes that we are beings of nature and history. As such, we are *conditioned* to interpret. This conditioning does not imply that we are imprisoned in our interpretive worlds. He writes: "It is not only that historical tradition and the natural order of life constitute the unity of the world in which we live as men; the way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions, the way we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened."[7]

We might say that Gadamer looks metaphorically at the spaces between the prison bars of experience, not at the bars that frame the experience. Framed by nature and history, which limit our unmediated access to the "real" world, this hermeneutical universe must add to what we consider "the unity

of the world." It's a component of our existence, and it includes our capacity for meaning—the making of worlds to explore.

Gadamer's optimistic view of this lived condition stands opposed to the sentiment of 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche grounds our senses to the givenness of nature, claiming that our sense perception is that which *determines* (not *conditions*) this hermeneutical universe. Our sensory capacity is the givenness that locks us out of ever knowing the "real" world. According to Nietzshe, we are prisoners of sensation. For him, the hermeneutical universe is a metaphorical prison. He writes, "Logic is the attempt to comprehend the actual world by means of a scheme of being posited by ourselves; more correctly, to make it formulatable and calculable for us."[8]

Nietzsche sees the bars, not the spaces between them. The "for us" clause highlights that even Nietzsche's ideas are important to the living human document as the primary object of and for hermeneutics. Nevertheless, he believes that our interpretive drive is rooted in our sensory prejudice. Moreover, hermeneutical products emerge out of practical concerns "for us."

This brings us back to the quote that began this article: "The principal objective [of biblical hermeneutics] is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible." One biblical writer is helpful in guiding our interpretation of life. The author of Ecclesiastes wrote: "I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Eccl. 3:10-11, NRSV).

The writer suggests that yes, we are *conditioned*—that is, tasked—to possess a hermeneutical universe, "the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with." Yes, we are *condemned* (by our creatureliness) to the prison of interpretive schemes that fall short of pure knowledge: "they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." In this way, the writer of the dead sacred text looks to the living human document as a primary object of (and for) hermeneutical study.

Hermeneutical Freedom

So, what does it mean to unchain hermeneutics from exegesis? The quote from Carlos Mesters, which began our reflection, came from a book that sought to liberate exegesis. This article calls for the liberation of Adventist theological hermeneutics from the captivity of biblical exegesis.

Two examples: The first is the history of Black Christianity in North America. African captives, denied education in basic literacy, joined the oral tradition of the gospel with their personal stories in order to bear witness to truer, more liberating views about the creative and redemptive work of God.

The second is about a conversation one of the authors had with a colleague about the General Conference's Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC). When asked how many theologians were on the subcommittee, of which this colleague was a member, the list included biblical scholars, administrators, and church leaders. The instructions given for the study and its outcome were surprising: the committee members were told not to consider what was taking place in China, where women were being ordained to the Seventh-day Adventist ministry; instead, they were to consider only what the Bible had to say about ordination. When asked if anyone protested these instructions (after all, it was the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, not the Biblical Study of Ordination Committee), the answer was no.

As Adventist Christians, we can do better to liberate theological hermeneutics from captivity to the Bible. The same Spirit of God that moved illiterate Black captives in North America works through women to lead an ordered ministry in China. This is what we should study for a theological interpretation of ordination: the lived experience of women active in fruitful ministry.

There's something rehumanizing about liberating theological interpretation from biblical captivity. Liberating Adventist theological thinking from biblical exegesis alone cannot liberate us from the prisons of our creature nature, our finitude, and our fallible limits. But the Spirit that moves in the lives of men and women calls us to go beyond written texts to interpret the Bible. We are free to hope for—and anticipate—a story of creation and redemption that cannot be captured in any book yet resides in individual members by the grace of a loving God. AT

[1] Carlos Mesters, "Como se faz Teologia hoje no Brasil?" *Estudos Biblicos I* (1985), p. 10, quoted in Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (1989), p. 39.
[2] Miranda Fricker, "Powerlessness and Social Interpretation," *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology,* Vol. 3, Nos. 1-2 (2006), p. 98.
[3] "He Loves Me!" 2013 Word Entertainment.
[4] Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (1984), p. 38.
[5] Fricker, pp. 103-104.
[6] Three helpful books that illuminate this claim are: Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* (1999); Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (1995); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984).
[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 2nd Revised Edition Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (1975), p. xxiii.
[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* Book III, Aphorism 516, notes written Spring-Fall 1887, revised 1888 (first German publication 1901).

PAUL AND LIVING FREE IN CHRIST

By Herold Weiss

Biblical books must be read on their own terms. Their authors reveal different vocabularies, symbolic universes, and theological perspectives, which reflect their cultures.

The Bible is not monolithic literature without context—a meteorite from outer space.[1] What strikes readers of Paul's epistles are his deep roots in Judaism and his well-informed understanding of the philosophical currents in the Roman Empire. On account of his intellectually broad theological vision, the apostle faced opposition from those who thought that Christians were bound to the Sinai covenant and its law, as well as from those who held that Christians were totally free; to them, all things were lawful. It wasn't easy for Paul, while navigating the turbulent waters between Scylla and Charybdis, to explain what he meant when he preached, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1).[2] This short essay seeks to understand this text by reading it in its historical setting.

The Freedom Conversation

Paul understood freedom in terms of the traditions that informed the ongoing discussions about it. Broadly speaking, freedom is the opposite of slavery. It has to do with the condition in which a social group lives. In the Promised Land, the Israelites knew they had been freed from slavery by the power of God. Yahve had taken them out of Egypt with "the signs, the wonders, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm" (Deut. 7:19). The earliest version of the Ten Commandments makes the Sabbath a memorial of their freedom (Deut. 5:15) and also reveals that those who had been freed by God were now slave-owners.

For Athenians living in the fifth century BCE, the opposite of freedom was being ruled by a tyrant. Freedom

meant participation in the government of one's own city. People were free when they had political power and elected their rulers. On this account, Athens is considered the cradle of democracy. The nobility, the breeding ground of tyrants, reacted to this development by pointing out that majorities are likely to oppress minorities. Democracy easily degenerates into anarchy, or rule by demagogues.

To bypass the dilemma created by critiques of democracy, Plato suggested that human happiness, not freedom, was the most important personal value. He proposed that cities should be ruled by philosophers, lovers of wisdom who knew what is good and beautiful. Majority rule brings about confusion, resulting in "subjects who are like rulers and rulers who are like subjects."[3] This gives rise to tyrants who promise order and security. As a result, the city ends up in the condition least suited for human happiness.

After his unsurprising failure to educate a philosopher king for the city of Syracuse, Plato revised his political philosophy. In *The Laws,* he proposed that a lawgiver with semi-divine wisdom should promulgate the laws under which citizens would happily live. Aristotle agreed with Plato that democracy suffers from empowering the poor and uneducated and can, therefore, degenerate into anarchy.[4]

To avoid the dilemma faced by those searching for freedom in a political arena, others proposed that freedom was an ethical rather than a political value. Freedom comes with personal control of passions. This view became central in the teachings of Zeno, founder of Stoicism. A person can be free while living under a tyrant (a view that became central to all apocalypticists). For Stoics, the road to freedom has four stages. It begins with the *proficiens* struggling to discard fallacies from the mind while in the company of the passions-driven crowd, and it ends when *logos* (reason) immunizes the mind from the passions and guides life according to nature, what Jupiter has determined.[5]

Freedom From the Tyranny of Sin

Paul of Tarsus was a well-educated Hellenistic Jew. He knew the difference between the material realm of becoming and the ideal realm of being. Thus, he envisioned the death and resurrection of Christ as an event in the realm of being instead of the realm of existence, where everything becomes something else. In his apocalyptic scenario, the Day of the Lord took place at the death and the resurrection of Christ. Through Christ, God put an end to the pervasive sovereignty of sin and eschatological death. He then established a new creation by the power of the Spirit. In the "fullness of time," God acted personally to open up the realm of being as an alternative to slavery under sin. The risen Christ living in a spirit body is the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45), and a joyful humanity may now live free, "in Christ."

The disobedience of Adam had brought God's creation under the power of Satan, the god of this world (Rom. 5:12, 17; 2 Cor. 4:4). According to Paul, and contrary to Plato,[6] women and men are not free by nature. In their current fallen condition, they are slaves of the powers of the air: sin and death. For Paul, freedom meant liberation for life "in the Spirit." He wrote, "While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (Rom. 7:5-6).

The law of Moses had been introduced to identify sins as transgressions (Rom. 3:20; 7:13). Paul called it the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2). This law arouses the passions and bears fruit for death; it operates in the fallen world, where human beings live "according to the flesh" and are captives of rulers and authorities (Col. 2:15, NRSV; 1 Cor. 15:24) and elemental spirits (Gal. 4:9). On the other hand, "the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

Paul is concerned with freedom as a condition for life in a cosmic scenario, not as a condition for life in the socio-political realm. It is dependent not on the power to vote, but on the power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16). Freedom comes from participation in the death and the resurrection of Christ.[7] At baptism, a person joins Christ in his death to eschatological sin, the death demanded by the law. The law of Moses energizes God's wrath (Rom. 4:15), not his righteousness (Rom. 3:21). It had been "ordained by angels through an intermediary" and was to function "till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made" (Gal. 3:19). Christians have been "discharged from the law" (Rom. 7:6) and, as a consequence, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus ... set[s them] free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1-2). It was a tragic mistake for the Israelites to think that the law of Moses was an agent of life (Rom. 9:31).

Freedom, by What Power?

Paul understood that freedoms are effective to the degree made possible by the power that energizes them. They have no power of their own. He also

understood that Christians, who have been discharged from the law of Moses by their participation in the death of Christ, still live "in the flesh." They are free from the eschatological death demanded by the law but still subject to biological death. This means that, at present, Christians are not totally free. Not until the resurrection of the dead will they receive a spirit body, like the one Christ received at his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:22, 44). The only One totally free is God, "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17, another demonstration of Paul's philosophical acumen). In the fallen world, freedom is a chimera.

Faith is effective only when it is transposed into the realm of politics to transform life in society, when it sparks hope and empowers love.

Stoics understood that the first order of business for a good and happy life was control of the passions, and they devised a method to attain this goal. Paul agreed that life in the flesh is controlled by passions. He realized also that as an agent in the fallen world, the law of sin energizes the passions. He said, "I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness" (Rom. 7:7-8). The law's only power is to provoke and condemn transgressors, and reason (*logos)* can rationalize legal transgressions (Rom. 2:15). Jewish and Stoic ways to freedom were misguided.

According to the apocalyptic perspective, history runs a predetermined course. Its cruelties can be undone only by God.[8] Therefore, Paul does not address the unjust slavery system of the Roman Empire. In his letter, he tells Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (Phm. 16). Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus have become slaves "of obedience, which leads to righteousness" (Rom. 6:16). Paul's apocalypticism relies on the eschatological power of the Spirit, who gave us the risen Christ and who gives life and guides believers according to the will of God.

To the believers in Rome, Paul pleads: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [reasonable, *logiken*] worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be *trans*formed by the renewing of your minds [from above], so that you may discern [determine after examination, *dokimatzo*] what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:1-2, NRSV, emphases and alternative translations added). Paul then elaborates: The faith you have, have it for yourself before God. Blessed is he who does not condemn himself by what he determines after examination.... For what is not the outworking of faith is sin (Rom. 14:22-23, my translation). At baptism, believers are incorporated in the life of the risen Christ, the creation of the Last Adam. The law of Moses has no role; sin is defined by lack of faith in the guidance of the Spirit.

For Paul, true worship is the sacrifice of one's body, not the sacrifice of an animal at the temple in Jerusalem, which still stood in his day. In Paul's vocabulary, the body makes possible interactions between individuals. By sacrifice of the body, he means participation in the death and the resurrection of Christ, which enacts eschatological death and resurrection in the risen Christ. Those who have died with Christ live guided by a mind that has been "transformed from above." Their standards are not "formed" by what is considered acceptable in a fallen world. They value things from a different perspective, one provided by the Spirit. Paul did not democratize the government of society. He democratized the power of the Spirit that governs the behavior of those who live "in Christ."

Spurious Freedom

From Paul's perspective, those who think that Christians are Jews who must live "under the law" (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 3:23; 4:21; 5:18) make them no different from Gentiles who live "in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods" (Gal. 4:8). Paul cannot understand how it could be that the Galatians, who had been baptized and had received the Spirit (Gal. 3:1-3), were following preachers of a non-gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). By following those who required them to live as Jews, they were turning back to the "weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves [they] want[ed] to be once more" (Gal. 4:8-9).

To point out what makes Christians children of Abraham, Paul constructed an allegory from the stories of Abraham becoming a father (Gal. 4:22-5:1). Abraham had sons from two wives. One son was born of a slave, by the natural course of events in the world of the flesh. The other son was born of a free woman, who was barren and had an impotent husband (Rom. 4:19). Her son was the fulfillment of God's promise, because

Abraham had "believed the LORD" (Gen. 15:6). Paul emphasized the point of his allegory: "Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. ... So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 4:28; 31-5:1, NRSV).

According to Paul, a gospel that does not bring freedom from the ties of a fallen world is no gospel at all. Christians are bound not to the covenant made at Sinai, but to the one made at "the Jerusalem above" (Gal. 4:26). They live guided by the Spirit that gives life now and has promised eternal life. Paul summarized his argument with the Galatians by writing, "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!" (Gal. 6:15, NRSV).

Freedom, for What?

The Galatians had been told that they needed to live under the law of Moses, which Paul considered to have been given by God as a tutor or chaperone hired to keep minors in line (Gal. 4:2). The believers in Corinth misinterpreted Paul to say that they, after having died and been raised with Christ at their baptism, were free to live as they wished. For them, "all things are lawful" (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). With the Corinthians, Paul took a totally different approach. He reminded them that in this world, everyone is limited by the weakness of the flesh. Paul warns both his Galatian believers and his Corinthian converts against allowing their freedom to make them slaves of sin, free to hurt their neighbors and satisfy their base desires (Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 8:9). Human beings are either servants of the power of sin and live "according to the flesh," or else they are empowered to live "in Christ," "in the Spirit," and "according to the Spirit," as slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:16-18). In the fallen world, the question is not "Are we free?" but "Whose slaves are we? Are we slaves to the power of death, or to the power of life?"

Thinking that knowledge is the ultimate *desideratum,* and knowing that pagan gods are only idols (1 Cor. 8:1-2), Corinthian believers overlooked faith in the God who promises that life is not just belief in a theological piece of information. Faith in God gives eschatological life. Christian freedom is not a state of mind, but a way of being in society. Faith belongs in a trinity with hope and love that is empowered by the trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:1-5). The freedom Christians have in Christ is not a subjective, mystical freedom quite unrelated to life in society, even as it does not foster political revolutions. The freedom that comes from faith in God's promise is not only freedom from the power of the law, sin, and death; it is also freedom to make the living Christ present in the fallen world, to hope for life in a Spirit body at the *parousia*, and to love one's neighbor for whom Christ died. It is freedom for righteousness, justice, peace, joy, and life; it has civic responsibilities.

Christian Freedom

Faith is effective only when it is transposed into the realm of politics to transform life in society, when it sparks hope and empowers love. Faith in the God who promises life is not an end to itself. The English language lacks a verbal form of the word *faith.* Using the verb available, it must be noted that faith is not "to believe that;" it is "to believe in." The object of faith is not a proposition, but a person. Christian freedom is freedom *for* God and his creation, including freedom to love neighbors (no exemptions), to expose the contradictions and the divisions that characterize life "in the flesh," and to live by the power of the God who loved us when we were sinners (Rom. 5:8). Christian freedom is energized by the power of the God who gave a son to impotent Abraham and his sterile wife, the Spirit who gave life to the risen Christ, and the gospel that makes human beings slaves of righteousness (Rom. 1:16; 15:13; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:3-4; 4:20; 6:14; 2 Cor. 12:9; 13:4). Christian freedom is not found living under the law of a divine lawgiver, be that Moses or the quasi-divine lawgiver advocated by Plato. Neither is it found by following the Stoic method for the development of reason, to attain wisdom and gain control over our passions.

Children of God are free because we are "led by the Spirit of God" (Rom. 8:14), who enables us to "discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2, NRSV). This definition, deeply rooted in the Torah, is one that Paul's contemporaries would have understood as original and demanding. AT

[1] See Herold Weiss, "The Bible Says," *Spectrum,* Vol. 49, No. 1 (2021), pp. 13-18.
[2] All Scripture quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version, except where otherwise noted.
[3] Plato, *Republic,* Book 8, section 562d.
[4] Plato, *Politics,* Book 6.
[5] Seneca, *Epistles,* Vol. 1, Letter 75, 9ff.
[6] Plato, *Republic,* Book 8, section 562c.
[7] For further details, see Herold Weiss, *Meditations on the Letters of Paul* (2016), pp. 89-97, 147-157; Herold Weiss, "Cultural Identity and Pauline Interpretation," *Spectrum,* Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 17-18; and Herold Weiss, "Paul of Tarsus: An Intellectual?" *College and University Dialogue,* Vol. 4 (1992), pp. 14-15, 23.
[8] See Herold Weiss, *The End of the Scroll: Biblical Apocalyptic Trajectories* (2020), pp. 17-18, 169-170.

CAN WE REALLY HAVE THE ASSURANCE *of* SALVATION?

By Steven Siciliano

We Adventists have, in recent years, evinced a hunger for feeling secure in our salvation.

And I understand why. This desire arises in reaction to our tendency for so long to cast doubt, not only upon an individual's unknowable future, but also upon the integrity of his or her religious commitment in the here and now. Many old-timers in the church attest to having felt unsure, unacceptable before God throughout their lives, as if they were never good enough, sincere enough, or surrendered enough. Adventism's preoccupation with sin, sanctification, and perfection engendered a sense of despair, not only in regard to a possible future apostasy, but also to one's standing with God in the ever-unfolding present, up to and including the point of death.

Prophetically, this was reinforced by the church's identification of itself as Laodicea, that wretched, half-hearted final phase of the seven stages of church devolution.

So, embracing "assurance" has been a personal survival mechanism. Considering the disturbing self-doubt that has characterized Adventist experience, it's no wonder that "you may know you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13) was so heartily, and uncritically, received.

To be crystal clear, when it comes to peace, joy, and security in the present, we can and should have assurance of God's love, approval, and acceptance. But I here make the argument that we can't interpret that assurance as an absolute guarantee for the future.

The Meaning of Salvation

I would contend that the notion of an assured salvation has moved into the Adventist faith for yet another reason: because the denomination has imbibed evangelical terminology, sentiment, and presuppositions. In this case, being assured of an ambiguously defined salvation on the basis of an incomplete definition of faith has provided a sense of peace that was needed—but not vetted. A thorough treatment of this subject, therefore, requires starting with a positive description of biblical faith.

The word *salvation* can refer either to a present or future condition. Salvation in one sense is vindication on the day of judgment and inclusion in the kingdom. This, according to Matthew 24:13, depends on standing "firm to the end" (NIV). Such an outcome is prepared for now, but it is realized in the future. This meaning of salvation is also the most crucial because of its finality: a person needs to remain faithful to the end in order to be saved in the end.

However, the concept of salvation can also refer to a present condition: that of being born again and justified—or, in everyday language, being in a happy relationship with God right now. Indeed, Scripture supports the notion that people can have confidence about their present status with God, in passages such as 1 John 5:13: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (NIV, italics mine).

This simple distinction between the present and future meanings of the term helps to define the question of whether or not "assurance of salvation" is a valid expression. We can say with a high degree of assurance that we are saved in the present, on the basis of God's grace and our conscious, positive response

to God. However, our good intentions and determination notwithstanding, we cannot have assurance that we will endure and be saved in the end, since we haven't lived the future yet!

In order to account for our inability to understand ourselves and our motives with perfect certainty, I say "a high degree of assurance" rather than "total assurance" of our salvation at the present moment. Religious drift happens and can sometimes lead a person out of the faith. However, that qualifier should not imply the opposite: that we live as if we have no clue whether or not we're in Christ. We will never find perfection in our own actions or motives, but if we have learned of God's gracious offer of himself, accepted it, committed ourselves in return, and have maintained that connection, then we can confidently say we are in a saving relationship with God.

This simple distinction between the present and future meanings of the term helps to define the question of whether or not "assurance of salvation" is a valid expression.

The Predestination Connection

"Assurance of salvation" carries emotional baggage for believers in more than one Christian communion. I believe the phrase derives from—and is most at home within—the Calvinist tradition, in quite a different way than Adventists might expect.

Calvin maintained that God had unilaterally predestined both those who would be saved and who would be lost, and nothing a person can do or choose would make a difference. The problem then arose as to how anyone could know whether or not they were among the saved, a conundrum that is compounded by seeing some apparent Christians end up turning away from the faith.

The solution that emerged was the idea that believers could have confidence in their status if they had experienced a tangible, identifiable moment of conversion. Combine that proposition with the idea that God not only decides who will be saved, but then guarantees they will persevere to the end, and voila, believers could now have "assurance of salvation," both present and future.

Relational Salvation

But that's not a tenable answer, for this reason: biblical religion is relational to the core, because it is interpersonal to the core. It always involves a call and response, in which both parties contribute to making the union work. God initiates and provides all, but humans are expected to receive God's offer and return trust and allegiance, which we call faith. Those who have come to know, love, and commit to God can feel confident in their present standing and even believe in God's power and promise to see them through to the kingdom.

But to be saved in the end, that relationship must endure to the end. And until the end (either history's or our own) arrives, we can hope, plan, and strive to make faith-preserving choices, but we cannot logically have assurance that ignores or denies the vagaries of free will.

It seems important to me to analyze all of this, not just to nuance a popular phrase and note its affinity with evangelicalism, but to set out in proper terms the mutually responsible relational dynamic that permeates biblical religion. We are in this debate because of two skewed viewpoints. The Calvinist tradition asserts a predestined, perfect outcome for all the "elect," based on God's sovereign will, apart from any choice individuals may make today or in the future. Adventism has been so focused on sin and behavioral perfection that sensitive souls have lived with a perpetual sense of insecurity in the here and now.

Fortunately, the biblical alternative is more balanced and easier to understand. Salvation is based neither on God's inscrutable decree nor human flawlessness, but on God's initiating love and our response of faith and allegiance, with baptism serving as the visible entry point and the Lord's supper signaling ongoing commitment. Both ceremonies—assuming they are done sincerely—serve as symbols of continuing fidelity, which is what God has always looked for.

This is the essence of true biblical faith, in which God graciously offers himself and, in return, expects trust and devotion for the duration. AT

Adventism's Identity Crisis

"WE WANT TO BE CHILDREN OF GOD, NOT GRANDCHILDREN OR GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN"

BY DANIEL A. MORA

In an editorial published in July in the South American Division's edition of the *Adventist Review*,[1] Marcos Blanco levels a series of rather harsh criticisms about the effect that contemporary social context is having on Adventist identity. Some members, he says, "find our teachings to be too sectarian and feel uncomfortable with them." The author seems puzzled as to why such individuals even want to remain Adventists, when they "advocate a redefinition of our identity." He didn't say in what respect our identity is in danger of change, except for this: these members would reject "any trace of exclusivity or distinction."

These new generations feel burdened by the denomination's rigidity, lack of creativity, and unidirectional leadership that does not allow for diversity of ideas.

Publication of these kinds of statements reveals a latent concern within the Adventist leadership about the reaction of many members toward religious institutions. Church leaders try to address such ideas with a scolding disapproval.

But, in fact, the described concerns are grounded in reality. The dissatisfaction of many Adventists (particularly those born after 1965) is becoming increasingly visible. These new generations feel burdened by the denomination's rigidity, lack of creativity, and unidirectional leadership that does not allow for diversity of ideas.

My experience is that contemporary young Adventists hunger after a real and tangible Christian experience, appropriate to their cultural context. They're not content to merely read about it in books, to hear about other people's experiences, or to endlessly discuss top-down administrative procedures, decisions, and policies. It's not enough for them to hear what happened to a group of New Englanders 200 years ago. As my friend Vertucci reminded me: "We want to be children of God, not grandchildren or great-grandchildren."

The current generations want to experience for themselves what their forebears did: God's loosening of the chains of injustice, inequality, and suffering—as well as dogma and tradition—that bind us. As they meet Jesus, they see the intolerance and intransigence of conservative and fundamentalist religious systems, not only when it comes to effectiveness in the society around them, but also for the spiritual experience of Adventists themselves.

Redefinition

For their part, conservative leaders of the Adventist religious system worry that standards are being undermined and that their authority is threatened. They're partially right: contemporary Adventists *are* challenging old traditions and dogmatic interpretations.

Interestingly, the old ways are being challenged through biblical analysis. Postmodern Adventists are finding in the gospel narrative a Jesus who does not exclude or discriminate against anyone (John 6:37, cf. Matt. 22:9; Mark 2:17; Luke 14:21). They see a Jesus who declared love the principle of godliness (Matt. 22:37; John 13:15), who practiced social justice as the way to be a true disciple (Luke 4:18-19; Matt. 25:31-46), who distanced himself from religious sectarianism and challenged the religion of his day to redefine itself.

Redefinition is not a negative thing. It is an attempt to make people consider something in a new way. Yet redefinition does open legitimate challenges to tradition and asks us to contextualize the gospel to the culture and times in which it is preached (Matt. 28:19-20; cf.1 Cor. 9:19-23). Religious systems do find that threatening.

Adventism shouldn't find it threatening, however, because from its beginnings our church has perceived itself not as a traditional denomination, but as a movement: dynamic, changing, advancing, and refusing to stagnate.

Ellen White made clear that truth is progressive. She used the word "conservative"[2] as a disparaging description, not fit for the people of God or the Adventist movement. The following statements from 1892 reveal her thinking: "Long-cherished opinions must not be regarded as infallible. It was the unwillingness of the Jews to give up their long established traditions that proved their ruin. … Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed. This was the spirit cherished among us forty years ago."[3]

Many of the concepts currently communicated by the church are hostile and excluding, such as those toward LGBTQ+ people. We approach today's society and tell them that Adventists are superior, while reminding them that they themselves are wholly inadequate because they're not as stuffy as we are—and then we are astonished when they don't listen to us.

A Realistic Fear

The church leaders' suspicion that people are losing interest in the type of religion they present, as conveyed in Blanco's editorial, is justified. The statistics, in a part of the world that bragged about its growth for decades, have turned dismal.

The General Conference's Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research documents the new members who entered and left the Seventh-day Adventist Church from 2010 to 2020. During that 10-year period, for every 10 people who joined the church in the South America Division, eight left. In Argentina it is even worse: nine left for every 10 who joined.

In 2018 the Bonaerense Conference split, forming the North Buenos Aires Mission with a membership of 12,902. Today that territory has a membership of 12,687, meaning that more people have left than have joined. This crisis is being repeated in other divisions.

Our Real Crisis

In Latin America, where I have spent my life, the church's stubborn conservatism has done irreparable harm. Just a few streets away from the offices of the South American Division's *Adventist Review* is the Florida Adventist Church, a major congregation in the region that serves the church leaders in several institutions. A group of young people in that congregation had convened an incredibly successful youth program they called Afterweek, where they studied the Bible, shared, and sang contemporary Christian music with percussion instruments. Not long ago, without allowing discussion between the youth and the church board, a small core of church leaders closed down the self-generated youth program, thereby alienating these young people, who relocated elsewhere. Why should they suppose the church has their interests at heart?

In his editorial, Marcos Blanco seems puzzled that "Many who stopped congregating because of the quarantine have not wanted to return to the church. They are content to survive on YouTube sermons." Again, he's right. I have friends who are feeling more nourished by the sermons and worship services at other Adventist churches, such as those in Loma Linda, California, or Pilgrims Spanish in Hialeah, Florida, or Forest City Spanish in Orlando. Hispanic Adventists are finding more spiritual comfort 9,000 kilometers away—through the preaching of pastors such as Arnaldo Cruz, Roger Hernandez, and Joel Barrios—than in their local congregations. Young people are realizing that activities and concepts that are condemned in Latin America are normal and natural among Adventists in other regions.

Writes Blanco in his *Adventist Review* editorial, "Yes, they call themselves Adventists, and they like to benefit from what

the Adventist Church as an institution offers (relevant printed and audiovisual materials, a community that supports us, a solid teaching regarding health and the family), but they do not consider that they have some responsibility to advance the mission in challenging contexts like the ones we live in. In other words, without any responsibility, they only want to receive the benefits of the community, but contribute little and nothing."

What an ungrateful assessment! Why should people want to advance a mission that is exclusive and excluding, that has more to do with institutional tradition than with Christ? People will not support or care about the conservative Adventist structure—and they shouldn't—if those leading the church don't show the members reciprocal care by respecting them, listening, and treating them with dignity.

and Jesus are the *direct objects* of the commandments and the testimony: they share the divine identity.

But biblically, what really is that identity?

The phrase "commandments of God" appears twice in Revelation (12:17; 14:12). In the New Testament, the meaning of *entolē* [commandment] isn't limited to *nomos* [the formal law], such as the Ten Commandments or the Sabbath.[5] In John's literature, it has the more informal meaning of a rule of life.[6] The phrase "testimony of Jesus" appears seven times in Revelation, where *martyrian* means "witness" or "testimony." If taken as a subjective genitive, the phrase means the testimony Jesus gave *of himself* in the Gospels and to the apostles.[7] (In Revelation 14:12, *tēn pistin Iēsou,* "the faith of Jesus,"[8] is a parallel phrase to "the testimony of Jesus.")

LOSS OF MEMBERS IN THE SOUTH AMERICAN DIVISION (2010 TO 2020)

TOTAL GAINS	-	TOTAL LOSSES	=	NET GROWTH
4.079.196 (100%)		3.526.923 (86.46%)		552.273 (13.54%)

LOSS OF MEMBERS IN THE ARGENTINE UNION CONFERENCE (2010 TO 2020)

TOTAL GAINS	-	TOTAL LOSSES	=	NET GROWTH
120,876 (100%)		107,933 (89.29%)		12,943 (10.71%)

LOSS OF MEMBERS IN THE NORTH BUENOS AIRES MISSION (2018 TO 2020)

TOTAL GAINS	-	TOTAL LOSSES	=	NET GROWTH
1,890 (100%)		2,105 (-1.11%)		-215 (-1.11%)

General Conference's Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research

I agree with a statement made by David Trim, director of Archives, Statistics, and Research, during a General Conference presentation on Adventist membership loss and retention. He declared: "It's not about doctrines. It's about relationships. … And about caring for people."[4]

The Remnant Identity

Marcos Blanco bases his argument for "a special message and mission for the time of the end" on a traditional reading of Revelation 12:17. But that reading doesn't stand up well to close exegesis. In Greek "the commandments of God" and "the testimony of Jesus" are in the genitive case, meaning that God

In other words, the remnant shares the same identity as Jesus; like him, they possess and live the essence of "the commandments" and "the testimony." That essence is best described in John 13:34: "So now I am giving you a new [*entolē*] commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other" (NLT).

The last phrase of Revelation 19:10, "the spirit of prophecy" (RSV), is subordinate to the testimony of Jesus. Hans K. LaRondelle warned of the danger in replacing or substituting the historical testimony of Jesus with that of "the spirit of prophecy," writing: "Such an interpretation will make the testimony of Jesus in Revelation 12:17 exclusively a gift of visions given to a few select believers at the time of the end."[9]

All believers—not just prophets—partake of the testimony and faith of Jesus. Not unique to the end-time church, it is a

characteristic of the entire Christian dispensation and affirmed through the martyrdom of Christians in all ages (cf. Rev. 1:9; 6:9; 13:15-17; 20:4). It is through faith that believers in Jesus become sons and daughters of God: "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26, NIV).

The remnant is identified not by the Sabbath and Ellen White, but by love (1 John 3:23) and the good news given by Jesus (Col. 2:6; John 14:15).

Our Uniqueness?

Adventism's distinction is not in holding particular eschatological interpretations, doctrinal statements, or standards of how things

People will not support or care about the conservative Adventist structure—and they shouldn't—if those leading the church don't show the members reciprocal care by respecting them, listening, and treating them with dignity.

should or should not be done, but in reproducing the liberating gospel of Jesus, bringing relief to the oppressed, serving as Jesus served us, and loving in such a way that the world says, "I desire to meet Jesus."

In our current iteration, we run the same danger as the Gnostic Christians of the first century, who thought that theory and knowledge were the means of salvation and could displace Christ. The same Jesus who speaks to John in Revelation prophesied that when the end of the world approaches, "the love of most will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12, NIV).

Why did we Adventists change our focus? The prophecies do not change the essence of the identity and mission that Jesus gave to all Christians in all ages (Matt. 28:19). "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony [*martyrion*] to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14, NIV).

The real identity crisis in Adventism is placing more emphasis on secondary concerns—often not very relevant ones—rather than on the gospel. The crisis is not just that we tend toward the legalistic and toxic, but that we have NOT made love and mercy the essence of Adventist identity.

When I hear criticisms of contemporary Adventists, such as that "they preach much love and ignore prophecy," it sounds as though we have learned absolutely nothing from the gospel. Paul, who was transformed by the love of Jesus, put it simply: "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. … And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:2, 13, NIV).

If it transformed a fundamentalist Pharisee, it can transform us, too. AT

[1] Marcos Blanco, "The Crisis of the Remnant," *Revista Adventista* (30 July 2021).
[2] Ellen G. White, "Attitude to New Light," *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (1946), p. 38.
[3] White, "Search the Scriptures," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald,* Vol. 69, No. 30 (July 26, 1892).
[4] David Trim, "Preventing the Losses; Reclaiming the Lost," presentation at Trans-European Division Nurture and Retention Summit (2017), pp. 22-23. Available online at www.adventistresearch.info/wp-content/uploads/NR2017TED_3.pdf
[5] Mark Allen Turner, *An Evaluation of the Traditional SDA Understanding of the Identity of "The Rest of Her Seed" in Revelation 12:17* (2015), pp. 56-58.
[6] In BibleWorks v. 9, see "entolē" by these authors: F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament, ed. Frederick W. Danker*, 2nd ed. (1983); Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1889); Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament Library (2000).
[7] Turner, pp. 60-66.
[8] ibid.
[9] Hans K. LaRondelle, *Las Profecías del Fin: Enfoque Contextual-Bíblico* [*How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible*] (1997 English ed., 1999 Spanish ed.), pp. 293-294.

NEWS BRIEFS

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

Seminarian Boldly Practices Plagiarism

BERRIEN SPRINGS, Mich. – John the seminarian found himself on unusually thin ice this week after his professor discovered that his term paper had been lifted word-for-word from other sources. Scrambling to defend himself, John told a disciplinary committee today that he was only trying to uphold a great Adventist publishing tradition. Ellen White herself, he claimed, was a prolific plagiarizer.

Pleading his case while standing outside the entrance of the seminary in pouring rain, John conveniently ignored the fact that White was well within the legal boundaries of fair use in her time, while he had literally done a copy-and-paste job. Unlike White, John had never openly acknowledged his use of external sources, preferring to take the academic credit for himself while ploughing through Cheetos and watching SportsCenter.

New App Announces Incoming Ingatherers

PALO ALTO, Calif. – As COVID lockdowns begin to lift, innocent civilians around the world have gone back to dreading that knock on the door from overeager Adventist neighbors clutching donation cans to promote ADRA.

Duck, a new app available in iOS and Android, promises to track and trace the movements of suspected Ingatherers and will alert residents to their presence. While the basic version of the app automatically flags potential contribution solicitors, a premium subscription also disconnects your doorbell as soon as an Ingatherer steps foot in your driveway.

Not wanting to completely thwart the humanitarian efforts of ADRA, Duck also includes in-app purchases of pre-named ADRA goats for worthy recipients.

GC Forces Historian to Face Committee

SILVER SPRING, Md. – A helicopter carrying the current administration's least favorite church historian was diverted to the General Conference parking lot today. George R. Knight had been en route to a speaking engagement in Washington, D.C., when church leaders were able to bribe his Adventist pilot with enough GC cafeteria free-lunch coupons to instead land just outside the denomination's main entrance.

Knight was immediately escorted off the aircraft and into the denominational headquarters, where he was whisked into a holding cell (also known as a board room) on the third floor. Early reports say that Knight will not be let out of a committee meeting that had already started until he recants some recent articles or admits to writing them under the influence of gossip juice.

"WELL, THERE'S THAT..."

By Nate Hellman

Contributors

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Find Out What's Actually Going On

"We read *Adventist Today* to find out what's actually going on in the Adventist Church!"

I was shocked. I was talking to a top-ranking denominational leader, and his unusually frank admission was completely unprompted.

I had called this particular union conference office to track down information I needed for a story, and here was a senior leader admitting that instead of going to official denominational news sources, he and his colleagues made a beeline for *Adventist Today* in order to stay informed of what was happening in the global Adventist Church.

The crazy thing is that these kinds of comments aren't rare. We hear all the time from readers (many of them in senior church leadership jobs) thanking us for having the guts to report on stories official church news outlets simply aren't allowed to touch. And it doesn't stop with news; *Adventist Today* provides a safe place where insightful views and commentary can be shared by world class writers who are unafraid to challenge our faith community to be and do better.

For all of the agony the pandemic era has forced on us, our *Adventist Today* community blossomed as we found new ways to meet and fellowship online. Every week a friendly crowd the size of a robust congregation gathers for the live *Adventist Today* Seminar, which allows us to both learn and encourage each other in our faith journeys.

Financial support coming directly from you is the reason *Adventist Today* is able to bring you the news, commentary, and community that you love and appreciate. We can grow and thrive in an age of denominational censorship, power struggles, and spin because you give faithfully to support independent, accessible Adventist journalism. You give financially to *Adventist Today*, instead of thinking it's someone else's responsibility to help. *Adventist Today* can continue telling the whole truth, instead of simply regurgitating tired "approved" talking points from denominational top brass, because you make it your personal responsibility to financially back us.

Thank you so much for giving. Your financial help makes a huge difference.

Your highly grateful *Adventist Today* fundraising director,
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