

Ellen White  
and Aeroplanes

Growing Up  
Terrified of God

Adventism's  
Toxic Sex Guilt

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# Adventist *Today*



**BELATED  
ADVENTIST  
APOLOGIES**



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## Belated Apologies

By Loren Seibold

I'VE HEARD PEOPLE MAKE FUN OF THE NOTION OF apologizing for things an organization—tribe, country, government, denomination, company—did in its past. At one time I, too, questioned its usefulness.

Does it matter if, say, the Vatican apologizes for giving Galileo such a hard time about Earth moving around the Sun? Does it help for modern American leaders to apologize for the nation's legacy of slavery? Those who say, "Yes, but I haven't enslaved anyone" or "I never put Galileo on trial; the people who did are long dead" are technically telling the truth.

Here's my argument in favor of making apologies for historical sins: if we want to take credit for our group's historical successes (often achieved by people long dead), then it's logical to also take responsibility for its historical failures in such a way that it solidifies our decision to do better in the future.

The reason why we create organizations is that we value an entity that outlasts individuals. So, we proudly remember and honor Thomas Jefferson's concepts of governance and individual rights, Ellen White's spirituality and health teachings, the Wright brothers' technological innovations that led to flight, and the product-design sensibilities of Apple CEO Steve Jobs, even if these people are deceased and the organizations they helped to create have evolved in significant ways.

Looked at in this way, it seems a thin excuse to say: "We can't apologize for that, because the individuals who are currently running the organization didn't do those things. The people who did those bad things are long gone."

Yes, but the organization isn't long gone. It lives, and we who are part of it value an unbroken chain of provenance from William Miller, Uriah Smith, and J. N. Andrews—or even more recent figures, such as Neal Wilson and Jan Paulsen—to today. The reputation and momentum that serve to build up long-lasting organizations also provide the strongest argument in favor of their taking responsibility for any past abuses.

While it may seem mostly symbolic to make a corporate apology for what I will call (for want of a better phrase) historical sins, it is much more than that. It says that we desire to be morally accountable for what a multigenerational organization has done. It makes us step more carefully as we move forward.

After all, the first step in solving a problem is to admit that you have one. Acknowledging past failures will lead people to trust us more—to see Adventists as not just honest truth-tellers, but doers of truthful actions.

## Church Apologies

What will follow in this magazine are six apologies that our church could—and, we argue, should—make.

I understand that "church" is an indistinct term. It is variously a building, a congregation, a denominational judicatory, or its top leaders (in our case, the General Conference). As you read these six calls for apology, you will immediately see that some apply more to one definition of church than to another.

The Colin Cook scandal, for example, was exacerbated by leaders of the General Conference who were unable to accept LGBTQ+ Adventists for who they were. It would be meaningful to many if the current leaders would take the initiative to apologize for what their predecessors did.

What we're asking for requires humility, a lesson that much of organized religion has failed to learn from Jesus. Big church organizations do a lot of things well, but humility isn't one of them. Sadly, a spirit of triumphalism reigns at the top of our church.

Still, all of these apologies can be interpreted as calls to repentance and action by every level, from the General Conference down to the individual member in a small congregation. You may not have supported fraudulent gay conversion therapy, but many of us can be guilty of discrimination. You also probably can identify with Stephen Chavez's mourning the narrow indoctrination that demanded we be reflectors of others' thoughts, rather than thinkers, or Maury Jackson's recollection of the all-saturating eschatological fear employed by our evangelists and pastors.

To the extent that we reproduced any of that in our local churches, we need to apologize, too.

There's no biblical reason to feel trepidation about apologizing. The ethos of Protestantism, it seems to me, is the ability to rethink who we are and, if necessary, repent of our past and move in a new direction.

Let's start here.

## FEAR

## THE CHURCH THAT TAUGHT OUR HEARTS TO FEAR

BY MAURY JACKSON



I HOLD THE GREATEST REGARD FOR MY PARENTS; THEY SHOWED more courage and love than I could muster in several lifetimes. They met and married, then in the early 1960s converted from Baptist and Methodist Christianity to Adventist Christianity.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church awakened in my father a deep devotion to follow Christ. This devotion was strongly influenced by the writings of Ellen White. Following her counsel, my dad moved his family out of the city of Los Angeles. I was my parents' first child born in the Mojave Desert. My five siblings and I attended Adventist Christian academies, ate a vegetarian diet, abstained from chocolate (because it contains trace amounts of caffeine), avoided listening to secular music on the radio, limited our television viewing to a couple of programs (*It Is Written* and *The Waltons*)—and God forbid that we'd ever get caught at the movie theater. For us, scrupulous rule-following went with the territory of the Adventist faith.

Nevertheless, some of my childhood memories leave me with

unsettling and mixed emotions. I remember how one evening for family devotions, my father completed a long reading from Ellen White's writings. What should have been a great opportunity to offer his children the assurance of God's loving care proved everything but, because Dad's reading ended with discussion on this passage: "Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above, are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless, their characters must be purified from sin by the blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort, they must be conquerors in the battle with evil."<sup>1</sup>

And again, "In that fearful time, after the close of Jesus' mediation, the saints were living in the sight of a holy God without an intercessor."<sup>2</sup> Wow, to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator—without Jesus at your side pleading for you!

I knew my siblings were not all as disciplined or scrupulous as I was. Some of them were even rebelling against it all. *What if Jesus were to return before they got it together?* I wondered. I negotiated with God that evening: If I would live a righteous life, then would he save my siblings and let me burn in hell in their place?

This attempted negotiation says as much about my early messiah complex as it does about morbid-minded religion. The teaching that our probation period with God will one day close before Christ's return is heinous and inexcusable. If there is one thing God has to offer, it is time.

### A Fearful Religion

Adventist Christianity creates a complicated history of religion and fear intertwined in strained and inextricable ways. The three angels in the fourteenth chapter of John's Apocalypse sound warnings that have shaped a good part of its history: "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come" (Rev. 14:7, NRSV).

The skeptic David Hume notes that "both fear and hope enter into religion; because both these passions, at different times, agitate the human mind, and each of them forms a species of divinity, suitable to itself."<sup>3</sup> It is inevitable in religion that fear is present, either to be expiated—that is, to be purged—or, in



the case of morbid-minded religion, it takes up residence in the mind. In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James says, “The worst kind of melancholy is that which takes the form of panic fear.”<sup>4</sup>

Consider the various ways that Adventist Christianity has taken the natural, God-given gift of fear and perverted it to make it a tool of manipulation in the hands of ecclesiastical power:

## Apologies can be a step toward reconciliation, and I raise here the possibility that the church would do well to offer an apology for using fear to frighten people into cooperation.

- As described above, the repeated warnings of a time when we must stand before the presence of God without a mediator—a thoroughly frightening notion to those of us who can’t reach perfection

- Using Jesus’ imminent return, plus guilt about normal youthful urges, to drive sensitive-minded students to the altar during many academy weeks of prayer

- Artwork used by public evangelists, with ugly beasts and a menacing pope wearing a mitre, who was to shortly initiate a global persecution of Sabbath keepers

- The threat (originating with Ellen White) that even our parents and pastors would abandon us, leaving us to face persecuting authorities on our own.

- Repeated stories of Roman Catholics who would torture us, or about torture chambers in Catholic church basements

- Unending warnings about spiritualistic manifestations,

including Satan personally revealing himself to the unwary

- The denomination’s denial, against the testimony of the New Testament, that there can be any security of salvation—teaching instead that individuals could go all through life doing their best for Jesus and trusting in him and his word, yet in the end be lost on a technicality

- Teaching that probation could close at any moment, leaving one bereft of salvation—and not even knowing it

Many youth raised in Adventist homes were introduced to these frightening messages early—and we are none the better, as Christians, for these rhetorical tropes. Fear crowded out healthy emotions, leaving us paralyzed and shrinking from a threatening emotional universe. Baptism in such a setting was less a sincere cleansing of conscience and more of an assault to make us teenagers cower in fear and submit to the preacher’s will in an effort to be saved.

Howard Thurman, the theologian who mentored Martin Luther King Jr., says that “this fear, which served originally as a safety device, a kind of protective mechanism for the weak, finally becomes death for the self. The power that saves turns executioner.”<sup>5</sup> When it is sick, Christian religion turns the saving power of faith in the resurrected Christ into the slaying power of a death-producing paralysis. But healthy Christian faith returns the executioner named “fear” back to its rightful place among the motivating human emotions.

In other words, a healthy-minded religion knows that “faith is not propped up by hope of reward, nor by fear of punishment.”<sup>6</sup>

### Apologies Make Room for Reconciliation

Sometimes forgiveness comes without the ritual of an apology. My father and I have reconciled, now. I had forgiven my father, as he many times had forgiven me, before a word of apology was ever spoken. I have also grown to better understand his love through my own parental mistakes. Indeed, I never blamed him; he didn’t write those words, he only trusted those who wrote them.

Apologies, however, can be a step toward reconciliation, and I raise here the possibility that the church would do well to offer an apology for using fear to frighten people into cooperation.

Some of our mature members have, at least intellectually, overcome their fears and can now laugh at what used to frighten them. After all, “laughter makes the object of one’s fear small.”<sup>7</sup> But others of us, once wounded, still carry scars. My childhood fears no longer control me, but neither are their effects gone, as evidenced by how well I can remember and describe them. Even if I have forgiven my church for manipulating me with fear, something was altered in my young psyche.

I would welcome an apology from the church for using fear to manipulate us young people, because some of those pastors,

## To be effective, the apology must be accompanied by change.

evangelists, and writers knew perfectly well what they were doing and employed fear because it worked so well to force their will on us.

Such tactics left many young Adventists with so many wounds and scars that they had to leave our fellowship, and it is unlikely that an apology will reconcile them to us again. Still, if an apology reconciles nothing other than the church to its true and best self, it has begun a great work. At best, it acknowledges and confesses a vision of God in Christ worthy of inviting disciples to, not propped up by hope of reward or fear of punishment.

### Healing and Change

Reconciling Adventist Christianity to its best self means also drawing from our resources to heal the damage done to the sensitive. The Bible, like the revered Hindu Bhagavad Gita, “explores the psychology of the sensitive, caring human being at a loss as to what to do in a world whose ultimate origin and meaning remain the mystery of mysteries.”<sup>8</sup> In the reality of this mystery, the one biblical command given more than any other is the command to “fear not”!

Sadly, the church seems unable to wean itself from manipulative fear. Graphic stories of persecution and insecurity are still told in our schools and Sabbath Schools. The evangelistic brochures still display images from the realm of horror. The era of fearful soul-winning isn’t over.

So, to be effective, the apology must be accompanied by change. Is the love of God not a sufficient motivator for our religious devotion? Perfect love casts out fear, says John (1 John 4:18). The kindness of God leads us to repentance, says Paul (Rom. 2:4, NRSV).

Yes, it is true that the gospel always delivers bad news before the good news. A clear statement of the problem must always precede a solution, so fearing the sin can be a first step toward receiving a healthy gospel. But although the bad news leaves us in a melancholy state (Christianity calls it “guilt”), a healthy-minded believer needn’t stay there.

The good news for those traumatized by fear is found in the doctrine of incarnation, by which I mean not quibbling over the metaphysical nature of a God-man, but learning from the gospel story how God in Christ models the relationship of the powerful to the powerless, the strong to the weak, the controllers to the controlled. God in Christ models and disorients the distorted power relationships that dwell at the root of fear.

Adventist Christians have resources to heal the fear-inducing results of denominational evangelists. With the message of God in Christ, the fog of fear will lift, for “whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:18b-19, NRSV). **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888), p. 425.

<sup>2</sup> White, *The Story of Redemption* (1947), p. 403.

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion* (1998), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1958), p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1976), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Rayan, “Wrestling in the Night,” *The Future of Liberation Theology*, edited by M.H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (1989).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy L. Seals, *Daniel’s Mysticism of Resistance in Its Seleucid Context* (2022), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Mundschenk, “The Psychology of the Bhagavad-Gita,” *New Essays in the Bhagavadgītā: Philosophical, Methodological, and Cultural Approaches* (1987), pp. 22-23.

# FOR THE LIES WE'VE BELIEVED ABOUT SEX

BY LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER



FROM THE BEGINNING, ADVENTISTS HAVE HAD A TROUBLED relationship with sex. Perhaps people expecting Jesus to return at any moment instinctively felt that pleasure of any kind was suspect. Even today, some Adventists insist that the delay while waiting for Jesus to return should be regarded as a period of mourning and sadness. (What if Jesus appeared in the heavens while you were “doing it”? How unspiritual!)

Although Ellen White gave permission for couples to enjoy “every privilege of the marriage relation,”<sup>1</sup> her advice was always overshadowed by a fear that married sex would take on a licentious cast and escape the boundaries Christian society set for it. Under the heading of “Demoralizing Practices in Marriage,” she wrote, “Sensuality and base practices in a marriage relation are educating the mind and moral taste for demoralizing practices outside the marriage relation.”<sup>2</sup> She doesn’t name these base and demoralizing practices, but clearly great spiritual danger lurked, even in the marriage bed.

Nowhere is her fear of sex as clear as in her advice about masturbation. One of Ellen White’s early books was *An Appeal to Mothers*, which addressed what she called “solitary vice.” Her descriptions of the harm to those who practiced self-pleasure

included “imbecility, dwarfed forms, crippled limbs, misshapen heads, and deformity of every description.”<sup>3</sup> For females she saw “catarrh, dropsy, headache, loss of memory and sight, great weakness in the back and loins, affections of the spine, [and] the head often decays inwardly. Cancerous humor, which would lay dormant in the system in their life-time, is inflamed, and commences its eating, destructive work. The mind is often utterly ruined, and insanity takes place.”<sup>4</sup>

If Ellen White’s warnings were true, there would be almost no sane person anywhere, much less one without a misshapen head or body, or one not saturated with “cancerous humor.” The fact that no evidence backs any of these preposterous claims didn’t stop the sex-fearful physician John Harvey Kellogg, a close friend and protégé of the Whites, from employing torturous measures to curb “self-abuse.”

For boys, Kellogg promoted circumcision without anesthetic, advising that the ensuing pain would curb the habit. For the especially troubled, he recommended sewing the foreskin shut with silver wires, causing pain with any erection. For girls he recommended the application of carbolic acid to the clitoris as “an excellent means of allaying the abnormal excitement.”<sup>5</sup>

Added to his list of horrific treatments were electroshock therapy, bandaging of children’s hands, and locking a boy’s genitalia in a chastity-belt-style cage.

Former Loma Linda University School of Medicine dean Harold Shryock, MD, noted in his book *On Becoming a Woman*: “There are teenage girls who, impelled by an unwholesome curiosity or by the example of unscrupulous girl friends, have fallen into the habit of manipulating these sensitive tissues as a means of excitement. This habit is spoken of as masturbation. ... There is an anatomical factor that sometimes causes irritation about the clitoris and thus encourages a manipulation of the delicate reproductive organs. ... Oftentimes the remedy for this situation consists of a minor surgical operation spoken of as circumcision. This operation is not hazardous and is much to be preferred to allowing the condition of irritation to continue.”<sup>6</sup>

The exaggerated effects and sadistic methodologies described above, though we don’t hear much about them now, deserve an apology of their own. Sadly, the church’s teaching with regard to masturbation is only the start of untruths the church has told—and believed—about sex.

## Purity

“If you are a virgin when you get married, God will bless your marriage bed and you’ll have the most amazing sex ever!”

When I was young and unmarried, I heard this message during youth rallies, campus events, Bible classes. Everywhere the topic of sex was brought up, I was assured of it. I am a rule follower to my core, so I believed it.

But boy howdy, were they wrong!

I sometimes wonder: did those pastors and Bible teachers really believe that? Since only men said it, they probably did. I wonder what their wives would’ve said.

This isn’t just a church problem. Women throughout history have been taught that they must endure sex—“close your eyes

**Sadly, the church’s teaching with regard to masturbation is only the start of the untruths the church has told—and believed—about sex.**

and think of England”—which doesn’t sound very fun or satisfying. But the church has taken this sexist concept and solidified it into theology. Men are the head of the household. Women should submit to them. Women should be sexually available to them at all times, no matter the circumstances.

No matter how you slice it, this is an unhealthy dynamic. It sets young couples up for trauma, heartbreak, and divorce.

Call me a heretic, but I think it’s foolish to make young people feel guilty if they don’t wait until marriage to engage in sexual relations. So many young people get married because they don’t want to “burn with lust.” What a terrible reason to get married! Sexual compatibility matters; it’s the number two reason for divorce, right after money at number one. Wouldn’t we be setting up our young people for more success by allowing them to choose to bond for life with someone for better reasons than that? A lifetime is a long time.

## Headship

Headship is the notion that men exist to rule women. It is why women can’t become ordained pastors. It is why church officials, by policy, must be men. It is why women have a difficult time reporting the abuses they’ve suffered at the hands of clergy and teachers; thousands of young women have been abused by authority figures and could find no one to listen to them.<sup>8</sup>

Headship is why I was taught that godly women should never say no to their husbands—even to sex. But taking away someone’s ability to say no is a recipe for abuse and trauma. If a man believes that his wife owes him sex whenever he wants, and that she is violating the will of God by denying him, then he can coerce her, or guilt her, or in extreme cases, even rape her. There can never be a healthy sexual dynamic when one of the two people involved no longer gets to choose.

Marriage should be an equal partnership. Both parties should be more or less satisfied, on balance. This applies not only to sex, but also to lots of other decisions, including chores, children, and church. It takes time, and work, and many discussions over a lifetime. When done right, marriage can be beautiful, fun, even sacred.

## The LGBTQ+ Problem

I have personally seen the heartbreak that results when a gay, lesbian, or trans person realizes, after years of marriage and raising children, that it’s impossible to feel intimacy within the heterosexual relationship. I’m not sure the church realizes how hard some of these individuals have tried to be something they are not before finally quitting their marriage and breaking their spouse’s heart. Doesn’t it make more sense to accept queer people openly and honestly from the beginning to prevent this sad ending?

In this issue of *Adventist Today*, we tell the story of one of the most hurtful things that the denomination has ever done: sending LGBTQ+ Adventists to an unproven, unsupervised counseling program run by Colin Cook, a gay former pastor who had no professional training or credentials in counseling. While he claimed that he could remake the men he counseled into heterosexuals, Cook instead used his in-depth sessions with them to satisfy his own sexual cravings. The church has never apologized for this, nor for recommending his “ministry” even after he admitted to having abused his counselees.

Yet some church leaders still advocate for gay change therapies,<sup>9</sup> with the “liberal” option limited to acceptance of LGBTQ+ members only if they are completely celibate.<sup>10</sup> If our



church follows a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding the sex lives of its unmarried straight members, then why does it demand complete celibacy from its gay members?

I believe that thousands of LGBTQ+ people would be in our church today, active members in committed long-term relationships, if our church had taught compassion and acceptance rather than exclusion.

### Telling the Truth About Sex

The church should tell the truth about sex: that it is complicated and cannot be controlled merely with stern rules, headship authority, guilt, or ridiculous descriptions of what might happen to you if you touch yourself “down there.”

## We have substituted a set of harsh judgments and rampant hypocrisy for speaking truthfully and acting with integrity in this matter.

It appears that Christian young people learn about sex from two primary non-peer sources: (1) sex-fearful preachers and teachers who try to suppress sexual activity using guilt, or

(2) pornography. What if we instead taught young people to be safe with sex? Not just physically safe from sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy or unwanted advances by authority figures, but also emotionally safe. Sex complicates things, but it also illuminates things. Partners who don’t respect another person’s boundaries or “no” in a sexual setting are showing a red flag that they won’t respect boundaries or “no” in other settings, too.

Teaching the emotional and physical components of sex is the healthier option. It allows young people to marry when they find the person they want to truly spend their lives with—however long that takes—instead of rushing into marriage to satisfy their lust.

### Rampant Hypocrisy Regarding Sex

The notion of purity is such a sacred cow in modern Christian culture. Some might think that in advocating for more generous and compassionate attitudes about sexuality, I am, in fact, advocating for “adultery.” (It should be noted that biblically, adultery is specifically sexually breaking one’s marriage vows. The current Christian definition of adultery would indict the Old Testament patriarchs and kings, because of their polygamy.)

No, I’m asking for simple honesty about sex. We have substituted a set of harsh judgments and rampant hypocrisy for speaking truthfully and acting with integrity in this matter.

We must apologize for Ellen White’s tragic wrongness about masturbation. We must apologize for the corporate silence that has let so many male abusers operate among us unchecked—and, in some cases, allowed them to continue their ministries and abuses elsewhere. We must explain why LGBTQ+ people who accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior have been made unwelcome in churches. Above all, we must apologize for diminishing women in so many ways under the banner of Christianity.

I’m not saying this merely to stir the pot. I am saying it because the church’s attitudes and teachings about sex have ruined so many lives. We have chased away from church the very people Christ died to save, rather than redeeming them for happy—or at least happier—relationships.

It is time to rethink our approach to sex and sexuality, on matters ranging from masturbation to single people to homosexuality to headship. I and millions of my brothers and sisters, single and married, gay and straight, are owed an apology for the church’s historical and current unkindness about sex. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), p. 380.

<sup>2</sup> White, *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce* (1989), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> White, *An Appeal to Mothers* (1864), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> John Harvey Kellogg, *Treatment for Self-Abuse and Its Effects* (1888), p. 296.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Shryock, *On Becoming a Woman* (1951, 1968), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Richard A. Schaefer, “Shryock, E. Harold (1906–2004),” *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (January 29, 2020). Online at <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=6A50>.

<sup>8</sup> The Hope of Survivors is an organization that advocates on behalf of individuals abused by authority figures. Online at <https://www.thehopeofsurvivors.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> Beginning around 2015, Wayne Blakely and others from Coming Out Ministries made several presentations at General Conference Executive Committee meetings.

<sup>10</sup> “North American Division Statement on Human Sexuality” (Nov. 2, 2015). Online at <http://www.nadadventist.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/NAD%20Statement%20on%20Human%20Sexuality-Nov%202%202015.pdf>.



## ADMINISTRATION

## REDUNDANCY, RELEVANCE, AND RESOURCES: OUR OVERGROWN CHURCH

BY RAJ ATTIKEN

I SPENT MORE THAN HALF OF MY YEARS IN MINISTRY AS AN administrator in the Ohio Conference. My 26 years of service were fulfilling and enjoyable. I liked being part of a team working to sustain the system that had been bequeathed to us. That, after all, is what the church members who sent us to these offices expected us to do.

In time, however, another awareness deepened in me: that what we were about as conference and union conference staffs was increasingly irrelevant to the flourishing of local Adventist congregations.

During my lifetime, many of us have become sensitized to the wasted resources, both financial and human, of our multilayered denominational organization. At the end of 2021, the Seventh-day Adventist world church operated 1,092 conference and mission organizations, which maintain similar staffing levels in most areas of the globe.<sup>1</sup> The number of administrators, departmental leaders, and staff working in these offices could approximate or exceed the number of full-time and part-time ordained pastors worldwide, a number that was reported to be 20,924 at the end of 2021.<sup>2</sup> The resources represented by these offices and employees—both in terms of their personal contribution in ministry and in the finances of the church—are enormous.

### Perpetuating an Ecosystem

So, why do we continue to perpetuate a system that consumes so much of the church's resources?

Christianity began as a marginal mission movement. In time, the movement became an institution and moved from the margins to the center. Institutionalization brought with it some benefits, but also drawbacks. When early Sabbatarian Adventists organized, they followed the reigning pattern of churches at that time. Mission was chief among the driving factors in the initial organization of the denomination in 1863 and its reorganization in 1901.

With time, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has become an ecosystem of sorts: a subculture with its own language, norms,

rituals, and values. The mission statements it produces, the goals it sets, the campaigns it launches, and the reports it issues all reveal signposts of how the system sees itself. Those immersed in this ecosystem become enculturated to seeing it as an essential element of the church—in fact, seeing it as *the church*.

## Restructuring

The hierarchy's norms seem normal—until they're scrutinized.

The denomination still sees advancement of the gospel to be an essential function, a priority that appears in many mission, vision, and strategy statements. However, policy and strategy documents that use missional language but leave institutional life unaltered are misleading, even counterproductive.

Discussions about structural reform have persisted for decades. Now and then, someone steps out of the embedded paradigm to question the relevance, or at least the size, of one organizational level or another. Occasionally someone even proposes elimination of one level in the hierarchy.

The typical response to such proposals is to appoint a study commission. These commissions come and go, their reports largely ignored. A study commissioned by the North American Division (NAD) in 2015 showed a potential annual savings of \$145 million if the functions of the conferences in the NAD were consolidated at union conference offices. I wasn't there, but I was told that the response from the floor was enthusiastic that it should be done—by every conference “except ours”!

Another time a conference executive committee even took the “we'll go first” step of voting to propose to its constituency that it disband the conference and restructure with the union conference as the base-level judicatory. This decision didn't persuade any other conferences to act similarly.

One conference president defended his committee's decision to reject the idea by saying, “It wasn't God's time!”—though a cynical person might conclude that it had more to do with the prospect of losing his leadership job!

## Why We Should Make Changes

The current denominational system includes many features that are relics of a bygone era. The multiple layers of hierarchy have produced redundancies of function. If the General Conference elects a director for a specific ministry, the practice has been to establish a similar office at the division, union conference, and conference levels.

All of them, in some way, see themselves as helping local congregations or their pastors perform some aspect of ministry. They often operate on the premise that all clergy and all

congregations share a similar call, possess similar gifts for ministry, and have similar needs or potential. This one-size-fits-all paradigm has seldom been true.

The relevance of our current denominational system to the flourishing of local congregations has become a growing question in recent years. The reality in the 21st century is that congregations do not need much from the various levels of the organizational hierarchy. A wide range of ministries are pursued with energy by most healthy congregations. Most pastors receive quality education and training in the various aspects of ministry.

**The reality in the 21st century is that congregations do not need much from the various levels of the organizational hierarchy.**

We are now in a culture of mass communication and diminished control. Unlike in the past, no center of organizational authority and power can direct the functioning of congregations or the flow of knowledge and information. It has become obvious that wisdom does not reside solely in denominational offices, and God has not reserved the biggest visions for church executives. Offices and titles are overrated; church members aren't waiting for denominational leaders' approval.

Most importantly, the biggest challenges facing congregations today cannot be resolved through the application of authority from some distant administrative office.

Ministry resources that denominational staff once produced and published are no longer needed; a plethora of resources are now available online, often at no cost. Therefore, a church executive can't offer much to enhance the effectiveness of a congregation or its pastor.

Conversely, the imposition of programs, goals, and expectations by denominational entities can often burden, demoralize, and render ineffective the ministry of local congregations. The institutional paraphernalia, administrative complexity, and prescribed activities are burdensome and dispiriting. Denominational campaigns that are promoted with slogans announcing, “Every member...” or “Every church...” or “Every pastor...” are seldom relevant to their target audiences.

Undergirding all of these concerns is the matter of resources—both in personnel and finances. Many competent, skilled, and Jesus-loving people who are involved in ministry at the various levels of church administration offer service that has little or no impact on mission expansion. Believing that institutional hierarchy confers status, some pastors feel that serving in a denominational office is more valuable or a higher calling than serving as a parish pastor. This is a regrettable misuse of the giftedness and skills of people.

Admittedly, pastoral ministry can be demanding, exhausting, and demoralizing. Some congregations have unrealistic expectations of their pastor, and the burden of their demands

## The biggest challenges facing congregations today cannot be resolved through the application of authority from some distant administrative office.

extends to the pastor's family. The appeal of a more structured, predictable, and reasonable schedule that comes with an office job can be irresistible. Many skilled and effective pastors are lost to parish ministry as a result.

The world church uses an enormous amount of financial resources to sustain this organizational system, which is only marginally effective. We cannot escape the question: How will we faithfully and responsibly steward the resources we receive for the mission that Christ has given us?

### Radical Institutional Repentance

We Adventists want our first loyalty to be to Jesus, not to an organization. But we also want the entire world church to be healthy, relevant, and robust. In order to achieve that, we need radical institutional repentance for the resources that we have squandered. We have taken pastors from the front line, making them administrators with higher status but diminished influence. We have led congregations to believe that they can't function locally without direction from administrators, who are often out of touch with boots-on-the-ground needs.

If the Adventist Church is to embody the gospel, it must be open to critique and change. Its aim must not be to merely preserve denominational structures, but to promote the flourishing of congregations and of those who serve on the front lines.

A good starting point for structural reform would be for the denomination to apologize to its members for the self-protective stance it has repeatedly taken when offered credible research showing that the current structure is too top-heavy for the needs of the church. Radical institutional repentance for squandered resources must include intentional action to eliminate redundancies and waste. That means we should quit employing familiar tactics of defending the current paradigm by delaying commitment to change.

Acknowledging that we have for too long resisted needed structural transformation would be a matter of honesty, not defeatism. Apologizing for it will demonstrate integrity, not disloyalty. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> "Membership Statistics by Division for 2021," *2022 Annual Statistical Report, New Series, Volume 4* (2022), pp. 17-36. I obtained this figure by adding up the number of missions and conferences in each union conference within each division of the world church. Because the division and General Conference offices maintain much larger staffing levels than the local conference and mission entities, I did not include them in the total of 1,092.

<sup>2</sup> "Denominational Employees" Chart, *Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics*, prepared by the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (updated Feb. 14, 2022).

## THE FAILED GAY CHANGE EXPERIMENT

BY LOREN SEIBOLD



IN THE 1970S, AN ADVENTIST EX-PASTOR PROPOSED TO “CURE” homosexuals of their same-sex attraction. Colin Cook was an Adventist clergyman from England, defrocked for having multiple sexual encounters with young men while he was a minister.

Cook told church leaders that he had developed a program that would turn homosexual people straight—in effect, a “cure” for same-sex attraction. The leaders of the Columbia Union and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists strongly endorsed Cook’s untested program.<sup>1</sup> Neal Wilson’s office authorized financial investment in—and church publicity for—Cook’s gay-change ministry, called Quest Learning Center, located in Reading, Pennsylvania.

Quest was embraced by Christians inside and outside of our denomination, since Cook offered an answer to a difficult theological and behavioral question. Sociologist Ron Lawson, who has done the most complete study of the phenomenon, called him “the dominating intellectual force within the ‘ex-gay’ movement.”<sup>2</sup>

Cook gained attention for his views in a series of articles in *Insight* magazine, an appearance on the television show *It is Written*, and in other Adventist contexts. After a major article in *Ministry* magazine in September 1981, Adventist homosexuals who were desperate to be “cured” moved to Reading. The *Ministry* article was a key reason, because it was a long, promising piece that offered hope to homosexual people who felt that what they were doing was a sin and that they needed to become heterosexual.

Quest had two problems. First, it proved a false hope. Ron Lawson’s interviews with those who went through the program showed no change. To date there is no evidence that homosexuality can be either prayed or counseled away. It is safe to say that gay change is a failure, and only naive Christians still hold to it.

Second, and central to my purpose here, is that the center’s director and male “counselor” took sexual advantage of his counselees. Under the guise of desensitizing his clients to gay sex, Cook set up situations where they would massage one another and engage in other edgy encounters, masturbatory confessions, and fantasies. Of the 14 clients whom Lawson was able to interview, 13 reported having sexual encounters with Cook, their denominationally approved “therapist.”

Again, this was a program given both publicity and financial support from the General Conference. When *Ministry* magazine published its piece, it was effectively telling pastors, “If you have someone who is homosexual in your congregation, send them to Quest.” And Quest drew clients. Lawson writes: “By 1986 the total number who had been counseled at Quest had reached about 250. ... By 1986 it was estimated that between 700 and 800 people seeking ‘freedom from homosexuality’ were attending weekly meetings [of Cook’s affiliated organization, Homosexuals Anonymous] in 60 chapters.”<sup>3</sup>



After considerable research into Quest, Lawson sent the disturbing news of Cook's abusive behavior to church leaders in a letter dated Oct. 23, 1986. Cook was dismissed and the financial support removed.

The end of the story? No. *Ministry* magazine published a follow-up interview with Cook in September 1987 titled "Homosexual Recovery—Six Years Later." It only vaguely alluded to a "crisis" in Cook's ministry and at the same time allowed Cook to claim to the church that he was now completely free from homosexuality.

## How many young Christian men were abused because our denomination wouldn't publicly admit it was wrong?

Lawson writes that the article's "main thrust was to reaffirm that the Cook approach to the healing of homosexuality was valid and retained the blessing of the Adventist church. It announced that Cook would 'soon resume leading seminars for recovering homosexuals,' and it promised that Cook was going to continue counseling young gay men."<sup>4</sup>

Adventists weren't told the whole story, because church leaders didn't want to admit they had been wrong. Yet Lawson had collected not just the fact that there was abuse, but the details of how it was done. One counselee made tape recordings of phone counseling sessions, during which Cook breathlessly asked his counselee, "How much have you masturbated?" "What images did you use?" and "How did you hold your hand?" After a heavy breathing pause, Cook released a deep gasp/sigh.

### Denver

One of the tragedies of the Quest Learning Center fiasco was how many young men were stuck in Reading, Pennsylvania, when Cook moved to Denver in 1993. Their families and churches had counted on their becoming straight, and they were ashamed to go home.

Although Adventist church leaders knew about the program's failure and Cook's abuse of its clients, their silence allowed Cook to find support in Colorado from evangelical ministries, such as Focus on the Family, which were as eager as Adventists had been to embrace a "cure" for homosexuality. In Colorado, Cook continued to "counsel" young men under a program called FaithQuest Colorado. According to Lawson, "Cook also re-appeared on national television and received renewed publicity from Seventh-day Adventist sources."<sup>5</sup>

Sadly, he continued to abuse counselees. In the mid-'90s, Lawson spoke with a religion reporter at *The Denver Post* who revealed the ongoing debacle to the world in a front-page story published Oct. 27, 1995, which included the Seventh-day Adventist Church's complicit silence.

*The Denver Post* article ended much of Cook's evangelical support. Yet, according to Lawson, there is evidence that he continued to counsel gay men even into relatively recent years. Given his history, it is difficult to imagine that his "counseling" tactics changed.

### Why the Victims Deserve an Apology

The church leaders who originally funded Quest withdrew financial support after the first revelations of Cook's behavior. But they didn't let church members know, nor did they warn their homosexual members. The follow-up article, published in *Ministry* magazine even after Cook was no longer being supported by the denomination, implied his continuing success.

The only formal renouncement ever made was a cryptic paragraph in *Adventist Review* saying that the church was no longer affiliated with Cook. In its issue dated Dec. 14, 1995, the official church paper noted that "a major Colorado newspaper" had carried an article alleging that Colin Cook, "whom it identifies as a Seventh-day Adventist," had engaged in inappropriate conduct toward counselees participating in his organization, FaithQuest Colorado. It added that Cook "denies the allegations" and then proclaimed that "Mr. Cook's seminars and counseling activities are neither connected to nor endorsed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church."<sup>6</sup>

As Lawson points out, "this statement did nothing to direct counselees away from the predator—it did not even indicate that the counseling was related to homosexuality, nor did it advise pastors to refrain from directing church youth to Cook or warn the youth against trusting themselves to him."<sup>7</sup> It certainly wasn't an apology, nor was the renunciation as attention-getting as the 10-page recommendation in *Ministry* magazine had been.

Cook had begun this behavior with counselees in Pennsylvania, and he continued it for years afterward as he received references from evangelical ministries. Interviews and recordings show that he continued the same behavior in Colorado that he'd begun in Pennsylvania. How many young Christian men were abused because our denomination wouldn't publicly admit it was wrong?

In short, the denominational leaders who put this crisis in motion eventually learned what was happening, and yet they let their first recommendation stand because it was too embarrassing to admit they were wrong. They would rather support a sexually

**It is safe to say that gay change is a failure, and only naive Christians still hold to it.**

abusive charlatan than admit that there was no such cure—and there still isn't.

I think that deserves an honest public apology. Actually, more than an apology. Given the circumstances, wouldn't the compassionate thing be to provide reparations for the years of counseling and the disruption of leaving home and moving to Reading or Colorado, because these young men believed with all their hearts that their denomination had approved Colin Cook's program to "cure" them?

Gay change therapy is a failure, even though those at the top of the denomination are still supporting the concept, now with an orientation to celibacy. Not only has there been no repentance, but our church leaders are continuing to pursue the same approach.

I think that even those who can't let go of their disapproval of homosexual relationships should still want the church to make an official apology for not only failing to prevent church members from being sexually abused, but also giving homosexual members tacit encouragement—even after Cook's behavior was known—to continue to trust him as a counselor.

Will we find some courage in the denomination to make such an apology? **AI**

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Lawson, "The Adventist Church and Its LGBT Members, Part 1," *Spectrum Magazine*, vol. 48, no. 4 (March 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Lawson, "The Troubled Career of an 'Ex-Gay' Healer: Colin Cook, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Christian Right," a paper presented Aug. 22, 1998, in San Francisco at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "NAD Leaders Comment on Colorado News Stories," *Adventist Review*, vol. 172, no. 55 (Dec. 14, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Lawson, "The Troubled Career of an 'Ex-Gay' Healer."

## INDOCTRINATION

## WHAT INDOCTRINATION DID TO US:

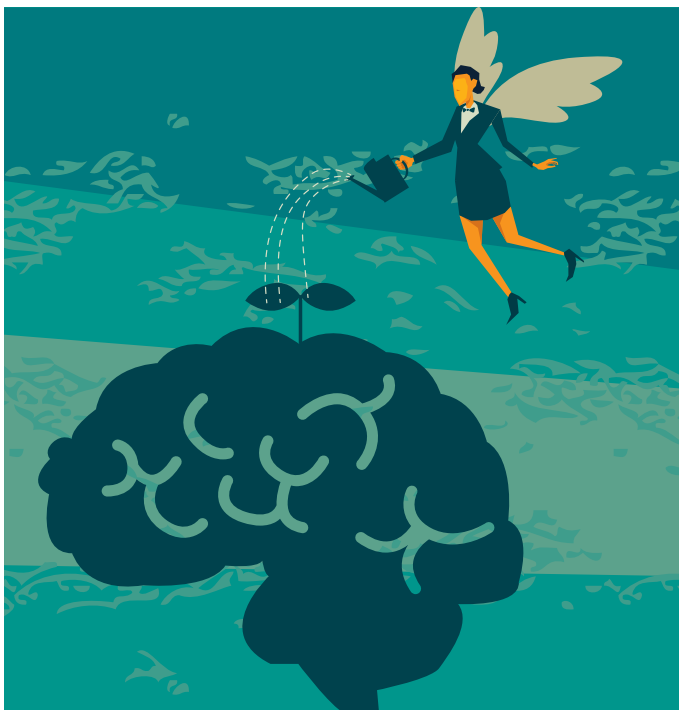
### The Difference Between Thinking and Reflecting

BY STEPHEN CHAVEZ

*“Standing by a purpose true,  
Heeding God’s command.  
Honor them, the faithful few,  
All hail to Daniel’s band.”*

All together now:

*“Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone!  
Dare to have a purpose firm, dare to make it known!”*



SINGING “DARE TO BE A DANIEL” IN PRIMARY SABBATH SCHOOL is such a vivid memory for me that even today, these words bring back the small church in Southern California where I was baptized and went to church school. It was easy to be an Adventist back then. All of my friends were Adventists, except for the kids across the street—Butch and Cindy—and sometimes we could persuade them to come to church with us.

We attended evangelistic meetings that featured images of grotesque beasts. We heard stories about faithful Protestant reformers, such as Jan Hus (sometimes anglicized as John Huss), John Wycliffe, and Martin Luther. We heard warnings about

a time in which our Bibles would be confiscated, making it absolutely necessary to know that week’s memory verse. Stories about the Waldenses helped us imagine a time we’d have to live in remote mountain hideouts and carry Scripture sown into the lining of our clothes. When the national Sunday law would go into effect, we had to be prepared to face imprisonment, or perhaps even death, if we remained faithful to God and worshiped on the seventh-day Sabbath. In short, we had to dare to be like the biblical Daniel.

Daniel was our hero, because he “resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine” placed before him (Dan. 1:8, NIV). Daniel’s three friends—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—faced an even more daunting test: to remain standing when everyone else bowed before a massive image that had been set up on a plain in ancient Babylon (see Daniel 3). The penalty for disobedience was death in a fiery furnace—not unlike being put to death for demonstrating loyalty to the Ten Commandments and worshiping on Sabbath. Later in life, Daniel was willing to risk prison and capital punishment rather than alter his habit of praying to God three times a day in front of an open window that faced Jerusalem (see Daniel 6).

In addition to the threat of physical death or imprisonment, my Adventist friends and I faced the spiritual and emotional angst imposed upon us by something known as the “close of probation.” It sounded sinister enough when we were pre-teens, but it assumed horrific dimensions when, as academy students, we learned that we were expected to stand before a righteous God in our own self-generated righteousness.

Forget about the assurance of salvation. All we could think about was the futility of going to church on the right day and eating the right foods, only to be disqualified by one bad habit not overcome or one sin accidentally left unconfessed. Could even Daniel and his three friends have survived such pressure?

### The Perils of Self-centeredness

Explicit in the indoctrination (yes, it was indoctrination) we received in Adventist elementary schools and academies in the 1950s and 1960s was the notion that only Seventh-day Adventists were faithful enough to triumphantly survive the great controversy that would envelop the planet prior to Christ’s return. Not only

would we know the right answers, but also we would be willing to practice our “peculiar” (read: unique) beliefs, such as worshiping on the seventh-day Sabbath, practicing health and dress reform, returning to God a faithful tithe, and supporting worldwide missions. We had our own schools, hospitals, clinics, health food markets and religious bookstores, Boy Scout and Girl Scout programs, etc. Like Daniel, we were ready to stand alone.

Looking back, it's easy to see that Adventist self-centeredness prevented us from understanding that we are not God's only people. We are, in fact, only one of many movements that have existed to advance God's cause throughout the centuries. Hundreds of years before William Miller, Ellen White, and the movement that came to be known as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, God's character was revealed in ways both small and great.

The great conceit of Seventh-day Adventists is that at a certain point, we staked our claim on the mistaken notion that we, of all people, had the truth. We convinced ourselves that we had cornered the market on orthodoxy and that in the future, all we had to do was hold onto the doctrines that our pioneers had hammered out 50, 75, or 100 years ago. And woe to those who dare suggest a different interpretation of biblical “facts.” Is there room in this Adventist Church for those who, like Daniel, “dare to stand alone”?

Ellen White made this interesting comment: “Let not one of the people who have had advanced light take the position that they have all the light that is to be revealed for all time, and that there are no further rays to shine upon their pathway from the word of God. The more our people search the Scriptures, the more will be revealed.”<sup>1</sup>

It's not unlike the commendation applied to the Bereans in the book of Acts: They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11).

To those who want to anchor the church's fundamental beliefs in concrete, the inspired counsel is, “Not so fast!” We still have much to learn and unlearn.

Probably the greatest example is the “shut door” controversy in the early second-advent movement (before the Seventh-day Adventist Church was officially inaugurated). Some Millerites used the words of Jesus' parable about the 10 wedding attendants—“The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut” (Matt. 25:10, NIV)—to say that it was too late for those who didn't embrace the Millerite message; the door was shut. Not only did that interpretation of the Bible preclude any future evangelistic efforts, but also it revealed the primary weakness of Bible study as early Adventists practiced it: the proof-text method of Bible interpretation, which is still popular today.

Another example is the early Adventist interpretation of the “cleansing of the sanctuary.” William Miller, of course, interpreted Daniel 8:14 in the setting of Christ's second coming. Eventually, he and other Millerites designated October 22, 1844, as the date when Jesus would return and cleanse this earthly sanctuary. October 22 came and went, and with it the hopes of many Adventists that they would see the Lord's return.

Enter Millerites Hiram Edson and Owen Crosier, who concluded that the prophecy about the cleansing of the sanctuary referred to the heavenly sanctuary, not planet Earth. The ensuing discussions and conversations are what eventually led early Adventists to develop the doctrine of the investigative judgment—the idea that before Jesus could return, God's people must be cleansed from all moral impurities.

While the intent of early Adventists was to make sense of an epic and embarrassing misinterpretation of Scripture, our pioneers concocted a cardinal doctrine that has scant, if any, biblical support.

In fact, the idea that Jesus waited more than 1,800 years after his ascension to sit with his Father is explicitly refuted in Scripture. Jesus told his disciples: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17, NIV). The author of the book of Hebrews uses the present tense to describe Christ's ministry: “We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being” (Heb. 8:1-2, NIV).

The idea that something happened in the heavenly sanctuary on October 22, 1844, isn't acknowledged by serious Bible scholars. Yet, it remains Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief No. 24: Christ's Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary.

## **An Unhealthy Preoccupation**

Perhaps there is no harm in believing that a “pre-advent” judgment must take place before Jesus can return—unless, as some teach, it requires God's people to demonstrate a level of perfection to prove their fitness for salvation. Known as Last Generation Theology, this philosophy posits that the only thing preventing the Lord's return is Adventists who haven't yet achieved the required level of character development.

In other words, the fate of the entire cosmos depends on the ability of a fraction of a fraction of Earth's population to live good enough lives to persuade Jesus to return.

Inevitably, that requires a certain isolationism. One prominent Adventist leader proudly boasts: “I only read the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy!”—as if being unaware of all that's happening in the world makes it easier to remain uncontaminated by negative influences. By contrast, Adventist evangelist H.M.S.

Richards, Sr., used to say, “I read with one eye on the Bible and with the other eye on the newspaper,” meaning that only as we know what’s happening in the world can we communicate a gospel that appeals to people who live in the real world.

Ours is a time in which people profit by spreading conspiracy theories. “Our Bibles will be taken from us.” “The words ‘In God We Trust’ will be removed from our money.” “The pope is secretly meeting with legislators and members of Parliament to enact a national Sunday law.” These and other rumors would make for good fiction, except for one thing: today’s plot lines include rogue meteors, natural disasters, environmental chaos, and ruthless dictators who try to impose their repressive regimes on everyone—but no scenarios in which religious bigots try to impose their beliefs on the rest of the population. Freedom of religion is too entrenched in every modern society to be taken seriously as a sign of the end.

## If we can’t admit our faults and apologize for them, can we ever claim a “purpose true”?

### Still Standing Alone?

What, then, are we to make of the story of Daniel? Is it still necessary to dare to be like Daniel and to stand alone? Yes, but not in the way some of our leaders would have us believe.

Daniel and his three friends were chosen to live in the royal palace because they were “skillful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science” (Dan. 1:4, KJV). They weren’t selected because they were dogmatic and lacked sophistication or curiosity; they were chosen to learn from the greatest minds in Babylon. Their early training in Jerusalem prepared them to be able to sift wheat from chaff, truth from falsehood. In the words of Ellen White: “It is the work of true education to develop this power [to think and to do], to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men’s thought. ... Instead of educated weaklings, institutions of learning may send forth men [and women] strong to think and to act, men [and women] who are masters and not slaves of

circumstances, men [and women] to possess breadth of mind, clearness of thought, and the courage of their convictions.”<sup>2</sup>

One of Daniel’s finest moments was when he was asked to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Daniel 2). Whereas the king’s counselors had said to Nebuchadnezzar, “Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it” (verse 4, NIV), Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that “there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries” (verse 28, NIV). Daniel’s reward was to be named ruler over an entire province of Babylon and placed in charge of its wise men—hardly a role for a dogmatic religious extremist. For the rest of his life, Daniel served as a trusted counselor to Nebuchadnezzar, then to Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson, Belshazzar, and even to Darius, king of Persia.

### Why This Deserves an Apology

For most of our denomination’s history, Adventist leaders, evangelists, professors, and apologists have lived as if loyalty to the institution is the same as loyalty to God. That heresy must be abandoned, and responsible Adventists at every level must apologize to their neighbors, friends, family members, and (most importantly) to themselves for living and perpetuating a myth. Daniel stood alone so that God could be honored and glorified. If we can’t admit our faults and apologize for them, can we ever claim a “purpose true”?

While some Adventist leaders demand blind, unquestioning adherence to questions as varied and debatable as the age of Earth, the morality of sexual orientation, and the exact disposition of the events of the “time of the end,” perhaps our greatest opportunity to stand like Daniel is to engage with the world around us. Our reading of the Bible must produce a theology that is logical, consistent, and inclusive—one that stands up to scrutiny and investigation but allows for difference of opinion.

While much of the world sees religion (particularly Christianity) as bigoted, narrow, and hypocritical, we owe our neighbors a religion that reflects the life and ministry of Jesus: gracious, just, and expansive. We have to remember and practice the reality that the gospel is not about us; it’s about a God who became human to rescue us when we couldn’t rescue ourselves. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, “Our Work and the Manner of Doing It,” *The Home Missionary* (Sept. 1, 1894).

<sup>2</sup> White, *Education* (1903), p. 17.



# SOMETHING WE SHOULD NEVER NEED TO APOLOGIZE FOR

BY BJÖRN KARLMAN

AS YOU'VE READ IN THIS ISSUE OF THE MAGAZINE, WE ADVENTISTS have some apologies to make. Any organization that has been around since 1863 will have made both forgivable missteps and gargantuan failures. Throw in the odd J. H. Kellogg, some blinkered bureaucrats, and a very peculiar conspiracy-peddling brigade, and you've got yourself a mess born of "remnant" hubris and officially sanctioned overreach.

That's why I'm pleased *Adventist Today* is calling for church leaders to take the time to apologize for several manifestations of it.

However, that doesn't mean we've given up hope in this faith community. When certain specific aspects of the Adventist experience that we love are done properly, we need never apologize.

For me, it's all about how God moves in local Adventist congregations.

## The Heart of the Church

Let me make it clear right here that I regard the healthy local congregation as not only the heart of our church, but also the best chance the Seventh-day Adventist denomination has of surviving with the message of the gospel intact.

When we, as local church members, feel that we are both safe and valued as part of the body of Christ, we are best able to fulfill our positive potential together as a church. An experience of real Christian fellowship, in which we stand as equals, bond over our vulnerabilities, and look to Jesus as the Author and Finisher of our faith, puts us in a context to flourish as a corporate whole.

A healthy local congregation provides the fellowship—the community experience—that makes faith real. It allows for broad growth and spiritual discovery. A healthy local congregation makes possible open discussion, a vigorous exchange of ideas. A healthy local congregation leads to growth in understanding that is far more in line with our pioneers' concept of progressive revelation than with the top-down directives and Vaticanish feel we get when the General Conference directs the thinking of the church.

A focus on the local church unleashes a freedom that allows the Spirit to work. It allows growth of understanding that long-winded fundamental beliefs handed down by bureaucrats can never achieve.

## Strengthening Congregations

Adventists don't need to apologize for the local church, but if we want to save it, we need to be intentional.

First, we need to be aware that "denominationalizing" the church has made us successful institutionally, but not necessarily locally. You will read elsewhere in this magazine that we have as many church administrators as we have frontline workers. That's counterintuitive, and it works against us.

An overly centralized model of denominational governance requires resources—money and talent—from the local church. This model can cripple local mission, and it has. Too much tithe goes to multiple levels of church administration, with limited effect on our mission.

Church administration has taken the best pastors out of local churches, because our structure has convinced them that the only way to be successful is to occupy an office. Whisking pastors away to ivory towers, right as they are hitting their stride, kills momentum.


Second, we have long lived with an evangelistic regime that emphasizes numbers rather than congregational health. That's not good news for anyone other than the drive-by evangelists and the church officials who take credit for "hastening the second coming" but don't realize that those rushed into baptism aren't attending church a year later.

We don't need to apologize for the local church, but if we've structured our denomination to make the local church ineffective, we need to apologize and change that—quickly.

## Accentuate the Positive

Here is our secret weapon: sincere Adventist fellowship. Something about heartfelt "Happy Sabbaths," a meaningful church service, and a tasty potluck shared with friends picks up my spirits even after they've been crushed by Annual Council the week before. It's a joy that I still feel strongly, no matter where I am in the world, when I get to worship with other believers—even if we don't agree on every point of doctrine.

Recognizing mistakes in our past and confessing them without hesitation is essential for a thriving local congregation. Let us never fear doing so as a global church as we move forward.

Honesty and transparency must be modeled on a local level in order for us to ever have a prayer of them working for our global family of faith. 







# SATAN'S FLYING MACHINES: ELLEN WHITE AND AIRPLANES

BY MATTHEW J. KORPMAN

As a prophetic theologian and one of the three historic founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ellen G. White is known for many things. But her opinion about the invention of the airplane is both unknown and fascinating. In fact, until this article, the topic has never been publicly discussed.

The issue is of interest to many for the opposite reason that it interested White; airplanes are no longer surprising or new, but instead, a staple of modern life. We live in a world that has undergone extensive technological innovation at an increasingly rapid pace. How would the Adventist prophetess have reacted to the developments of the Modern Era? Many sincere Adventists, with perhaps an unrealistically high view of her authority, assume that based on her visions, she would not be surprised. It's much more likely, though, that she would have been.

## **An Apocryphal Quotation?**

In the later years of Ellen White's ministry, some Adventists claimed that during a camp meeting held in Lodi, California, May 1-10, 1908, she had declared: "Any one killed from an aeroplane would be lost." After the White Estate became aware of the report, one of White's previous secretaries noted in his reply that he had been at the aforementioned camp meeting as an official stenographer, and none of his notes included such a quote. He concluded, "I am sure that it was not during this camp-meeting" that it had been said.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the secretary expressed inherent doubt that such a statement had been made. He wrote: "Inasmuch as there is nothing left in writing regarding the subject you mention, and as verbal reports cannot be remembered accurately, I should say that it is unwise to quote Sister White on this subject. I am sure that she would not want to be quoted as saying that any one killed

from an aeroplane would be lost. That would be placing herself on the judgment seat, and I am certain that she never made such a statement as that. In view of the use that some of our workers have made of the aeroplane in reaching difficult places quickly, I am certain that we should be careful not to make statements that would cast reflection upon their course."<sup>2</sup>

Although the reported statement is deemed by the Estate to be apocryphal, it likely is not fictional or a distortion, but rather represents an accurate reflection of Ellen White's views on human flight (albeit, perhaps a paraphrase rather than an exact quote). The digitization and release of her unpublished writings have made her work increasingly accessible, so that it is now clear that this declaration accurately reflects her position on the subject.

## **Flying Machines in 1910**

Nearly two years after the 1908 camp meeting, Ellen White began to write and speak about the evils of aeroplanes. In an unpublished manuscript of a public speech she gave in Oakland, California, on March 20, 1910, we read: "Satan has made every effort to impress minds to consume means in creating [flying] inventions that are odd and singular but which will benefit no soul. The result has been that much money has been worse than wasted to do a work that they consider to be a work of ingenuity. No benefit is to be derived from them, and the money spent upon them, which might have been spent in good works, is lost. Lives are endangered, and many are not only imperiled but lost. Self-destruction is placed

against the names of those who lose their lives in such pursuits. The Lord did not call upon them to run the risk of losing their lives in this manner. The world has gone crazy over the most strange exhibitions of doing the things the Lord has not asked them to do. Reports of these exhibitions are published in the papers as being wonderful performances; then others will see what exhibitions they can, in their turn, make.”<sup>3</sup>

The next day White gave another speech in Oakland, during which she again denounced the folly of pursuing flight. In this

Although Ellen White initially saw airplanes as the product of Satan, she probably would have changed her tune if she could have lived to eventually fly in one.

unpublished manuscript, she states: “There is a world to be saved. We need not make a flying machine or some wonderful invention. What glory will that bring to Christ? Not a particle. ... We are not to occupy our time and our brain to institute something that will bring glory from the people to us. It makes them foolish, so foolish, that they never will accept and find a place with Christ upon His throne. They will be spending their time instituting things to imperil their lives.”<sup>4</sup>

Later that same year, in a letter to A. G. Daniells, White continued to build upon her idea that such people are lost: “What strange occurrences are being brought to our notice in the daily papers. Men are hazarding their lives in an attempt to do strange things. The Lord has not laid upon any one the doing of

these things; for souls are not saved through such exhibitions of foolhardiness. On certain occasions large companies of people are drawn together to witness the feats of men in flying through the air. The lives of many of those attempting these feats are sacrificed. It is not the God of heaven who leads men to attempt these hazardous feats. It is the god of this world whom they are serving. It is Satan who inspires men to enter into these foolhardy projects, just to see what men can do. ... Satan is trying to bring about a condition of things that will make the world uncivilized. He desires to see strange things acted out, which God, who is too wise to err, has not ordained. But the Lord, yes, Our God, will be Ruler of the heavens and earth.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, she wrote a letter to church leaders A. G. Daniells and W. W. Prescott, in which she made her final remarks on the topic before her death: “Satan is putting every invention in the minds of people to keep their attention, so that the messages of warning shall not reach them. ... Satan looks with pleased recognition at the great stirring folly of men in setting in operation agencies to create wonderful things. ... While the world is seeking to demonstrate their flying machines at the cost of life, more or less, the Lord would enjoin His people to engage in a sacred activity to carry out His holy law.... Satan is working to keep up his inventions to occupy the minds of converted and unconverted. There are many who, through the influence of the unconverted to become one with them, act as if unconverted and dishonor their profession of believing the truth. I would call upon men and women to come into line. Separate yourselves from the ungodly who dishonor God in their schemes.”<sup>6</sup>

In reflecting on these various statements, it appears that the Adventists who recalled Ellen White’s admonition that “Any one killed from an aeroplane would be lost” perhaps incorrectly remembered some of the details. Instead of May 1908, the most likely time such a statement would have been made was around March of 1910, when White spoke on the issue publicly in Oakland, California. Likewise, although we have no record that she said the exact words “Any one killed from an aeroplane would be lost,” such a statement does in fact summarize her opinion in March of 1910, when she stated that those who lost their lives imperiled their salvation and that it was Satan who inspired men to invent airplanes. Although the exact statement may be apocryphal, it does sum up a true but forgotten fact about Ellen White’s worldview in 1910: she believed that only someone controlled by Satan would have anything to do with such machines.

## Historical Background

The influence for Ellen White's statements in 1910 can be traced, at least in part, to some Adventist periodicals that repeatedly reported the various successes and crashes of early aircraft. Here is one example: "There is no longer any room to doubt that men are able to fly. The governments are interested in aerial navigation as applied to the art of war. England, France, Germany, and the United States stand about the same in question of aerial progress. Both airships and flying machines are being developed. Germany seems to be in the lead in dirigibles, having established a passenger service and mail route. French and English aviators cross the channel at will; and in both continents these daring aircleavers out-speed the express trains, mounting skyward for more than a mile with the grace of a winged animal. ... With reference to the possibilities of usefulness in service to the public of this wonderful invention, it seems a pity that men's minds should turn so instinctively to war; nevertheless it is true. After Mr. Curtiss' recent remarkable flight he is quoted as saying: 'I could have blown up the bridge at Poughkeepsie, set fire to the homes of the wealthy along the highlands, destroyed the railroad tracks on both shores, and cleared the river of ships.' Commenting on this the *New York American* says: 'The great game of war is all up. What nation in the future will care to buttress 1,800 men in a battle-ship when a single man in an aeroplane, with a bomb in his hand, can destroy them in a moment?'"<sup>7</sup>

In the *Review and Herald*, an editor commenting on such military possibilities lamented, "Truly all the world is preparing for war, and everything points to the fact that the hour of the last great struggle is fast approaching."<sup>8</sup> This emphasis on warfare and flying machines may even have inspired some of White's visions in 1904 and 1906 of fireballs dropping from the sky onto buildings.<sup>9</sup> Similar discussions about military applications for airplanes were shared during that decade in periodicals known to her.

Returning to 1910, one can note a judgmental tone from the editors of *The Present Truth*: "The list of fatalities among aviators mounts steadily higher, but notwithstanding the numerous deaths there seems to be no abatement of zeal or valour among the survivors. Some are beginning, however, to ask whether the results will ever justify so much risk of life. The least accident to an aeroplane or a sudden change in the wind may mean swift and irrevocable sentence of death to the aviator. But men willingly face death to obtain a corruptible crown, and their courage and daring at least set an example to those who seek an incorruptible."<sup>10</sup>

## Automobiles and Balloons

In light of Ellen White's exposure to such dismal views of the new invention and its possibilities, her rejection of flying machines makes a bit more sense. However, White also expressed similar apprehensions about other technological innovations. For example, while in San Francisco in 1873, she wrote, "We observed some excitement and saw over our heads a balloon going up with a lady and gentleman in the basket."<sup>11</sup> She did not share in the crowd's awe, however. Instead, she added

**We can learn many things by seeing  
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emerging technology.**

disapprovingly, "This scene, persons venturing their lives for amusement, does not interest us as much as to hear that our Saviour is soon to come in the clouds of heaven."

She had also extended her criticism to automobiles, which made their debut several years earlier than the infamous "aeroplanes." In 1909, the year before her speeches against "flying machines," White described with fluster how "One day I rode out in an automobile for several hours, and the many automobiles spinning past so affected my eyes that I have been suffering with them ever since."<sup>12</sup>

On a different occasion, she advised J. A. Burden, who was running the Wahroonga Sanitarium in Australia, to put away his idea of purchasing "an automobile in which to carry patients to and from the station,"<sup>13</sup> which she considered an inappropriate



extravagance for a church institution. She urged, “My brother, do not make such a purchase” because “if you should get an automobile, it would be a temptation to others to do the same thing.”

Earlier, in 1908, Ellen White had written: “The great outlay of the Lord’s goods in daring balloon ascensions, automobiles, and in various other ways consumes the Lord’s intrusted goods. In the great day of reckoning, all this extravagance will appear as it is. The want and suffering, the work of God to be carried forward in the cities in establishing sanitariums for the sick, and to hire halls to give the last message of mercy to sinners forbid anything like extravagance in any line.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to her attitudes toward *these* inventions, White supported the use of trains and wrote, “By means of railroads and steamboat lines, we are connected with every part of the world and given access to every nation with our message of truth.”<sup>15</sup>

**We should note that Adventist church leaders ignored Ellen White’s early warnings from 1910 and even forgot that she ever held such mistaken views, choosing instead to follow the guidance of the Spirit in pursuing mission work through aircraft.**

Although many people died as a result of trains (at that time an average of 10,000 deaths and 80,000 injuries per year), historian George R. Knight writes that Mrs. White was “convinced that the railroad was an overall blessing.” He adds that “As she saw it, the transportation advances of the nineteenth century had allowed Seventh-day Adventism to become a truly worldwide movement by the year 1900.”<sup>16</sup> The irony of this, as Knight wrote, is that “Compared with standards in the 1890s, travel by modern railroads and airplanes is infinitely safer.”

In many ways, Ellen White was a product of her age. As she approached the end of her life, she feared technological development. Speeding cars flustered her eyes, aerial balloons posed frightening risks, and early airplanes seemed to be the tools of an entirely Satanic beast.

## A Very Human Portrait

We can learn many things by seeing Ellen White for what she was: a human being who had no greater insight than anyone else into God’s intentions for emerging technology. The state of air travel in our time would likely shock her. Like many seniors today in churches across the world, who are demanding that electronic devices not be allowed to substitute for physical Bibles, she felt deeply suspicious of technology and initially viewed it as an enemy rather than a tool of the gospel.

Ellen White’s forgotten legacy regarding airplanes must serve as a reminder to the world church that our founder and prophetic voice was flawed, like any other human. Her theological outlook at times fell short of what the believers needed. She made proclamations about some issues that we can no longer understand or agree with her about. She was willing to condemn the earliest pilots to the hands of Satan, while many today remember those same men as the trailblazers for a new era of mission (with Mrs. White’s own church using those flying inventions in nearly every frontier mission trip they undertake).

In fact, editors of the British Union Conference’s *Missionary Worker* magazine appeared to show greater prophetic insight than White when they wrote: “The aeroplane in which M. Paulhan won the prize for the London-to-Manchester flight, passed over our grounds at Stanborough Park, some four hundred feet above our heads. It was a thrilling sight in itself, but the more so as being a striking sign of the times. Just a day before we had received a letter from one of our workers in Austria, which indicates how these aerial vessels will, under God’s overruling providence, play their part in the proclamation of that truth which John saw flying in the midst of heaven.”<sup>17</sup>

Editors of *The Oriental Watchman* in 1910 asked: “Is the aeroplane safer than the motor car? With twenty-five aeroplanes in a contest no one was hurt, while in a recent motor car contest five persons were killed.”<sup>18</sup> While mentioning aeroplanes later that year, the same publication noted that Jesus’ prediction of the Great Commission (Matt. 24:14) “is now going forward, and modern science with its marvelous methods of shortening time and space, is the divinely ordained auxiliary of the message.”<sup>19</sup> Editors of *Signs of the Times* described a flight of 137 miles from Albany to New York as “wonderful aeroplane flying.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps


C. E. Holmes put it most devotedly when he noted: “In order to meet the necessities of such a movement, God has poured out upon the world a great light. Inventions which facilitate the preparation of the printed Word have increased wonderfully, and methods of transportation are making it possible to carry the Scripture to every clime. With the development of aeroplane conveyance, we may yet see the gospel go literally as an angel flying in the midst of heaven. The carrying of mail by air-ships has already begun.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1909, a year before Ellen White railed against the evils of flying machines, Uriah Smith had published his commentary *Daniel and the Revelation*, in which he sang the praises of airplanes, calling their invention “one of the most noteworthy triumphs of any age” and remarking that “to the honor of Christianity let it be noted in what lands, and by whom, all these discoveries have been made. . . . Indeed, it is the very spirit of equality and individual liberty inculcated in the gospel of Christ when preached in its purity . . . which makes possible such an age of free thought and action, in which these wonders can be achieved.”<sup>22</sup>

## Critical Thinking

Had Ellen White lived longer, she likely would have changed her mind about airplanes. Although she condemned automobiles as late as 1908, a few years later in 1913, she described how her son’s family had bought one and how much nicer they were becoming. Like most humans, she had trouble accepting what seemed new and foreign until she could get used to it. Although White initially saw airplanes as the product of Satan, she probably would have changed her tune if she had lived to eventually fly in one.

The point, though, is that being a prophet didn’t give her any more insight into the future of airplanes than any other person, and far from accurately understanding the roles of Christ and Satan in the developing technologies of her day, she utterly failed in her attempt to parse between the two. Moreover, we should note that Adventist church leaders ignored Ellen White’s early warnings from 1910 and even forgot that she ever held such mistaken views, choosing instead to follow the guidance of the Spirit in pursuing mission work through aircraft.

This should serve as a cautionary tale for any Adventists who try to apply White’s warnings to our modern times without critical thinking. What she noted about biblical inspiration appears to be just as true about herself: “The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect.” Even prophets make mistakes. Just ask Nathan about the time he told David that he could build God’s temple (2 Sam. 7:3). 

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, Apocryphal statement, “Any One Killed from an Aeroplane Would Be Lost (31-C-1)” (Oct. 26, 1930).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> White *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 25 (1910-1915)*, Manuscript 74 (Mar. 20, 1910).

<sup>4</sup> White, *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 25 (1910-1915)*, Manuscript 75 (Mar. 21, 1910).

<sup>5</sup> White to A. G. Daniells, *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 25 (1910-1915)*, Letter 114 (Oct. 27, 1910).

<sup>6</sup> White to A. G. Daniells and W. W. Prescott, *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 25 (1910-1915)*, Letter 163 (October 1910).

<sup>7</sup> “Flying Machines vs. Dreadnaughts,” *The Caribbean Watchman*, vol. 8, no. 7 (September 1910), p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> “The Summary,” *Review and Herald*, vol. 87, no. 45 (Nov. 10, 1910), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> See White, Manuscript 102 (1904) and Ellen White to W. C. White, Letter 278 (1906).

<sup>10</sup> “Notes & Comments,” *The Present Truth*, vol. 26, no. 41 (October 1910), p. 653.

<sup>11</sup> White, “Diary, January 1873,” *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 2 (1869-1875)*, Manuscript 3 (Jan. 12, 1873).

<sup>12</sup> White to J. E. White and Emma White, *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 24 (1909)*, Letter 98 (June 16, 1909).

<sup>13</sup> White to Brother and Sister [J. A.] Burden, *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 17 (1902)*, Letter 158 (Oct. 8, 1902).

<sup>14</sup> White, *Letters and Manuscripts – Volume 23 (1908)*, Manuscript 136 (1908).

<sup>15</sup> White, “The Support of City Missions,” *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5 (1882), p. 381.

<sup>16</sup> George R. Knight, *Ellen White’s World: A Fascinating Look at the Times in Which She Lived* (1998), p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Missionary Worker*, vol. 14, no. 10 (May 11, 1910), p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> “News and Notes,” *The Oriental Watchman*, vol. 13, no. 4 (April 1910), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> “The Outlook,” *The Oriental Watchman*, vol. 13, no. 10 (October 1910), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> “Broke the Sabbath,” *Signs of the Times*, vol. 37, no. 25 (June 28, 1910), p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> C. E. Holmes, “Power in God’s Word,” *The Youth’s Instructor*, vol. 58, no. 49 (Dec. 6, 1910), p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation* (1909), pp. 336-337.

# SORRY, I DON'T SPEAK CHRISTIAN

BY STEPHEN FERGUSON



My wife is a fluent French-speaker, and we are raising our two children to be bilingual. To do this, she speaks only French to the kids—no exceptions. Consequently, most of the conversations in my house are in a language I cannot understand.

However, after living some years in this linguistic cocoon, I have picked up a random assortment of French words and phrases, sometimes with odd results. For example, the French word for ticket is *billet*, which when pronounced sounds a lot like “beer” to me. French seems to have a lot of silent “l’s” and “t’s”. And the French word for beer is *bière*, which incidentally also sounds exactly like “beer.” So, when I tell the Parisian cashier, “Sorry, I don’t drink,” it elicits some awkward looks. If you speak a language other than English, you probably know what I am talking about.

I have also heard stories from immigrants who move to an English-speaking country and spend years learning the new language. Then, when they return to their birth countries, they are perplexed to find that several years later, they no longer speak the same language as everyone else there. New words have been invented, old words forgotten, and some words now carry a different meaning.

Even for us English mono-speakers, this becomes apparent when trying to understand archaic words from William Shakespeare’s 16th-century-English plays, which we are forced to read in school. Does anyone remember what *boggler*, *carlot*, *kickie-wickie*, *swoltery*, *quatch*, or *wappened* means?

As an Australian, my version of English is probably a little different from most people reading this article. I do say *G’day* (good day), *brekky* (breakfast), *copper* (police officer), *deadset* (true), *lollies* (sweets), *servo* (gas station), *sickie* (sick

day), *snag* (sausage), *stuffed* (tired), and sometimes *yous* (plural of you). The word *tomato* is pronounced with a long “r” so that it sounds like tom-ar-to. A mate is a friend (not a marital partner), a thong is something you wear on your feet (not a type of underwear). Your fanny is not your buttocks, but something too rude to spell out here (so perhaps don’t use that word if visiting Australia).

Language is a weird and wonderful thing; even within the family of English-speaking nations, you’ll find national and regional differences.

### Do You Speak Christian?

It might seem obvious, but you’d be surprised how many people overlook the fact the Bible wasn’t written in English. As you may know, the scriptures were mostly

A bunch of other commonly used words have perhaps evolved beyond their original meaning, even when used by pastors and theologians. Consider the following examples:

**Salvation** – The biblical term is *sōtēria*, from the Greek idea of deliverance or welfare, which can mean: (1) eternal salvation (common), as in “getting to heaven,” or the afterlife (Mark 16:20; Rom. 13:11); or (2) temporal salvation (less common), as in saving us bodily, here on Earth (Heb. 11:7, 31).<sup>3</sup>

**Sanctification** – The term in Scripture is *hagiasmós*, from the Greek idea of being set apart, dedicated, or being made holy, and can mean: (1) progressive sanctification (common), the process of becoming increasingly holy over time (1 Pet. 1:15-16); (2)

what is that person really talking about? What variant of faith, sanctification, and salvation are they using? You may well end up agreeing with them when you should disagree, or disagreeing when you agree, if you and the other person are assigning a different set of meanings to these words.

### Same Words, Very Different Results

Can you really get the Bible to say what you want it to say? To answer that question, consider this oft-debated passage: “God chose you as firstfruits to be saved (*sōtērian*) through the sanctifying (*hagiasmō*) work of the Spirit and through belief (*pistei*) in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13, NIV).

One person might read the preceding verse as suggesting that we obtain an afterlife in heaven (eternal salvation)

## YOU REALLY CAN GET THE BIBLE TO SAY WHATEVER YOU WANT IT TO SAY, IF YOU TRY HARD ENOUGH.

written in ancient Hebrew and Greek.<sup>1</sup> It certainly makes the bitter fighting over the sanctity of the King James Version versus other English translations seem a little odd.

Even where we do adopt a certain biblical word or phrase, it is surprising how often it can end up taking on a life of its own. Think of something as simple as the word “Amen.” You might say this word several times a day, but do you actually know what it means? If you get out your concordance, you will see it means “verily,” “truly,” or “so be it.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, when most of us use the word, we mean something approximating “finished” or “the end”—or we don’t think about the meaning at all; we just say it out of habit.

positional sanctification (less common), the event of being set apart, as in a dedication (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11; Heb. 10:10); or (3) ultimate sanctification (middling), the event of reaching the goal of perfection, free from sin (1 John 3:1-3).<sup>4</sup>

**Faith** – The term most often used in the Bible is *pistis*, from the Greek idea of persuasion, which can mean: (1) belief (common), a mental affirmation (Jas. 2:24); or (2) trust, fidelity, or allegiance (less common), a whole-hearted commitment (Jas. 2:24).<sup>5</sup>

So, if someone says we are saved by faith alone and that sanctification is only the fruit but not the cause of this salvation,

only by becoming sinless (ultimate sanctification) through showing allegiance to God (faith as trust). Another might view the scripture as saying that we can obtain assurance today of an afterlife in heaven (eternal salvation) by being spiritually set apart (positional sanctification), not by works (faith as belief).

And in relation to both views, one might also acknowledge a third parallel view: that God can free us here on Earth from the practical effects of sin in our daily lives (temporal salvation), through a process over time (progressive sanctification), in which we develop an ever-growing mutual relationship (faith as trust).

All of these approaches apply translations of the Greek words *sōtērian*, *hagiasmō* and *pistei*, yet with very different results. My primary point is simply to illustrate how easy it is for people to adopt the same words and come to very different interpretations. You really can get the Bible to say whatever you want it to say, if you try hard enough.

## MAYBE WE SHOULDN'T LIVE SO FOCUSED ON WHAT WE THINK THE BIBLE SAYS.

### What Does the Bible Actually Mean?

What is the answer, then? The trick is trying to focus on what words mean, not merely what they say.

In my day job as a solicitor (you might say “attorney”), I deal with this daily. I spend probably 50%-75% of my time as a government lawyer assuring public servants that they can do the morally right, common-sense thing, which they think they can’t do because of the way a particular regulation or policy is

worded. I can’t tell you how many times I have rescued some poor citizen from bureaucratic purgatory after a public official has become doggedly fixated on a box accidentally ticked the wrong way on a certain form.

Contrary to what people might think, lawyers are trained to adopt a purposive approach, to focus on what legislation might mean and not merely what it says. The United States Supreme Court, in the case of *Markham v. Cabell*, famously decided: “It is one of the surest indexes of a mature and developed jurisprudence not to make a fortress out of the dictionary; but to remember that statutes always have some purpose or object to accomplish, whose sympathetic and imaginative discovery is the surest guide to their meaning.”

On a similar point, Ellen White once said: “The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. ... The Bible must be given in the language of men. ... The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. ... It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired.”<sup>6</sup>

Through legalistic misinterpretation, focusing on what the Bible says rather than what it means, Christians have justified some truly horrendous things throughout the ages: slavery, rape, genocide, theft, racism, misogyny, and much more. Through legalistic misinterpretation, Christians spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on things the Bible doesn’t really care about as “weightier matters of the law” (Matt. 23:23, KJV). We have all met the Adventist Christian who wouldn’t dream of having a ham sandwich yet wouldn’t blink twice about engaging in underhanded business practices, or mistreating a family member, or behaving like an unkind and bitter jerk.

I agree with theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg, who observed: “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.”

Maybe we shouldn’t live so focused on what we think the Bible says. Rather, maybe we should focus on what we think the Bible *means*.

Maybe we shouldn’t even limit our focus to what Jesus said. Rather, we could focus on what Jesus *would* say, when dealing with the particular issue or concern we might be facing today.

Moreover, maybe we could reconsider our use of Christian jargon. Do we even know what these words mean anymore? With whom are we trying to communicate when we use such terms?

Can I hear a “Verily, so be it”? 

<sup>1</sup> Some parts of the Bible may also be translations from other oral languages, such as Aramaic, as the Bible itself attests (Mark 5:41; 15:34-36).

<sup>2</sup> *Strong’s Concordance* Lexicon search results for Greek [281] and Hebrew [543].

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* for Greek [4991].

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* for Greek [3640].

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* for Greek [4102].

<sup>6</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages, Book 1*, pp. 20-21. I have quoted an extract, but the entire passage is so good that it really deserves a proper read.



# Choosing Surprise

BY REBECCA BROTHERS

IF THERE'S ONE THING I'VE LEARNED FROM SCRIPTURE, IT'S THAT God loves a good surprise.

Are the Israelites facing a 3-meter-tall giant wearing 125 pounds of armor? Surprise! Here's a shepherd boy with a sling. Are the Philistines celebrating the downfall of an Israelite hero? Surprise! Let's use that same hero—bound in bronze shackles, his eyes gouged out—to defeat the whole Philistine leadership in one fell swoop. Is a prophet running from God's commission? Surprise! Here's a giant fish to intercept him. Is the only son of the universe's Creator coming to Earth as a helpless infant? Surprise! The first ones to hear about it will be some shepherds on the night shift.

I like this image of God. I like picturing God with D20 dice in one hand and a party hat in the other, always ready to turn human expectations on their heads. It nudges me to believe that Mary was on to something when she sang in the Magnificat: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53, NIV).

A great many hungry and humble people are part of today's church, and today I am thinking of two overlapping groups of particularly hungry people: women and the LGBTQ+ community. For over a decade now, I've been watching and listening to conversations about these two communities of mine—particularly our place in leadership. I've heard all of the arguments about Galatians 3:28, Genesis 1:27, the destruction of Sodom, Ezekiel 16:49-50, and the apostle Junia. I'm not particularly interested in rehashing those arguments here.

Instead, I would like to share my anger that those in power either do not know or do not care how humiliating and dehumanizing it is to hear Bible story after Bible story about how God can use anyone or even anything—a talking donkey, a raven, a burning bush, a desert rock, a giant fish and a weed and a worm!—to provide pastoral care to his people, but allegedly he is unwilling to use a woman. It is humiliating and dehumanizing to

hear sermon after sermon about God's immense power and lavish imagination and unfailing love, but always with a caveat: a loving relationship between two men or two women is, apparently, the only situation in the universe that God cannot work with, the only vacuum in space untouched by his love.

To my way of thinking, it all comes down to trust: trust in us, and trust in God.

It comes down to whether you trust us to know what a real relationship with Jesus looks like.

It comes down to whether you trust us to accurately discern the nudge of the Holy Spirit.

If you trust the woman who feels called to stay home with her children and be a homemaker, but you do not trust the woman who feels called to be an ordained minister of the gospel, then your trust is lopsided and partisan.

If you trust the gay man who feels called to celibacy, but not the gay man who feels called to marry his boyfriend and raise a family together, then your trust is paternalistic and condescending.

If you do not trust us to discern God's will for our own lives, then you have no business claiming to respect us as siblings in Christ. I want nothing to do with conditional respect. Either I am a human being and a fellow follower of Christ, with all of the same rights and responsibilities and dignity as you, or I am not. There is no middle ground here.

Finally, do you trust God? Do you trust the God who used a woman to strike down Sisera? Do you trust the God who called the Ethiopian eunuch to cross paths with Philip? Do you trust the God who brought Moses' basket to Pharaoh's daughter, the same one who lavishly poured out the Holy Spirit on Jews and Gentiles alike on the day of Pentecost?

The God I follow is a God of surprises. The God I follow is a gushing fountain of love that will never, ever run dry. I cannot speak for you; I cannot choose for you. But as for me and my household, we will serve the God whose imagination is bigger than any box we could ever try to use to confine him. **AT**



## NEWS BRIEFS

BarelyAdventist ([barelyadventist.com](http://barelyadventist.com)) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.

### Learn Where You'll Find a Vegetarian Spouse

COLLEGEDALE, Tenn. — For the first time ever, *US News and World Report* has ranked schools by their ability to provide students with “a high chance of finding a vegetarian to marry.”

*US News* put Southern Adventist University in first place in the nation for this new category, with other Adventist schools filling out the Top 10 colleges in the listing.

The publication said Southern's “picturesque campus, courtship culture, and abundance of theology majors virtually guaranteed that vegetarians will find love, often in the prayer garden.”

Coincidentally, Southern was also ranked as the school most likely to graduate Little Debbie addicts.

### Snopes to Fact-Check GC Baptismal Numbers

SILVER SPRING, Md. — The fact-checking website Snopes is investigating baptismal numbers released by the General Conference after flagging them for what the site calls “suspiciously evangelistic math.”

Snopes admits the numbers will take some time to verify, as the organization can afford to send fact-checkers to only a handful of exotic locations at a time.

When discovered, the data will be hard to analyze. As the site says, “records are messier than a midterm election recount, and there's no point in checking the numbers based on retention stats.”

### Report Sends Legalists Into a Global Panic

ADVENTIST WORLD — In breaking news, legalists across the globe were rushed to the hospital after sustaining panic attacks as a result of hearing the unwelcome report from leading denominational theologians that non-Adventists will be in heaven.

The theologians had posted the report in the middle of the night to minimize the chance that the news would spread too far, but unluckily for them, a lone conspiracy theorist who was burning the midnight oil spotted the upload and immediately attacked it on Twitter.

Aghast at the biblical evidence for non-discriminatory grace, exclusivists are meeting in prayer huddles all day today, imploring heaven for an immigration-busting fence that could at least ensure some peace and quiet in a heavenly Adventist suburb.

### Age of GC Employees Averages 75-Plus

SILVER SPRING, Md. — The General Conference (GC) building is undergoing major refurbishment after its human resources department finally stated the obvious: employees are so old that the place should just become a nursing home.

As part of the reimagining of its headquarters building, the church headquarters has stationed courtesy walkers at every entrance and elevator, and the GC is updating its “I Will Go” slogan to “I Will Roll.”

A video announcement of the updated slogan features animated seniors whizzing down the GC floors in brightly colored mobility scooters.

Senior leadership has announced a list of suitable after-hours recreational activities including Bibleopoly and nature-scene puzzles. Three rebels have already been wheeled out of the building for suggesting a daily bingo game in the auditorium.

# Contributors



**RAJ ATTIKEN** is an adjunct professor of religion at Kettering College in Dayton, Ohio, where he has taught for the past eight years. During his

16-year tenure as president of the Ohio Conference, he advocated for innovation and change, including the consolidation of conferences. *Refreshed: A Fresh Paradigm for Church Leadership*, an adaptation of his doctoral thesis, was published as a monograph by AdventSource in 2012.



**REBECCA BROTHERS** is a Tennessee-based librarian who writes at the intersections of faith, gender, sexuality, politics, and weight. She

has published pieces in *Our Bible App*, *Earth & Altar*, *Cirque*, *How to Pack for Church Camp*, *Spectrum*, and *The Gadfly*, and she is a regular contributor at the Sundial Writers' Corner.



**STEPHEN CHAVEZ**, an ordained Adventist minister, is director of church relations for Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International

(sdakinship.org).



**STEPHEN FERGUSON** is a lawyer from Perth, Western Australia, with expertise in planning, environment, immigration, and

administrative-government law. He is married to Amy and has two children, William and Eloise. Stephen is a member of the Livingston Adventist Church.



**MAURY JACKSON**, D.Min., chairs the Pastoral Studies Department of the HMS Richards Divinity School at La Sierra University in

Riverside, California, where he also serves as the advisor for diversity and inclusion.



**BJÖRN KARLMAN** lives with his wife and daughter in Bracknell, England. He serves as executive director of *Adventist Today*.



**MATTHEW J. KORPMAN** is an adjunct associate professor of Biblical Studies at La Sierra University. His Master of Arts in Religion from

Yale Divinity School focused on Second Temple Judaism, and he is completing his PhD in New Testament at the University of Birmingham. He is the author of the bestselling book *Saying No to God* and approximately 30 academic publications.



**LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER** is a mental health trainer living in Northern California. She is passionate about feminism, social justice,

and sci-fi. She is a proud parent and has way too many cats and one goofy dog.



**LOREN SEIBOLD** is the executive editor of *Adventist Today* and leader of the weekly online *Adventist Today* Sabbath Seminar (ATSS).

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## EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

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

# Good News for Everyone



We love our church.

That's why we at *Adventist Today* do what we do.

Yes, we tell the truth about our church—historical and current. But our purpose isn't just to show off how much we know. What we really want to do is to hold the Seventh-day Adventist Church accountable to giving what the Bible calls “good news” of salvation—for everyone, not just a few who believe certain approved things.

Denominations, when they get self-important, operate in ways that aren't necessarily about good news. They want to

stay in control. And if that means repeating the same old partial truths over and over again, that's what they'll do. If it means using guilt and fear to manipulate people, they'll do that, too. If they must spend the money we give them on self-promotion and hiding things we should know, well, that's all part of the game.

They may not do it with bad intentions, but they do it just the same. It's a side effect of institutionalism.

We at *Adventist Today* are aspirational for Seventh-day Adventism. We want our church to be the most generous spreader of the good news of salvation that it can possibly be.

That's why, first, we try to find new ways of telling the Adventist truths as good news. What is it that made this denomination grow to more than 20 million people, and how do we make the most of our historical legacy as a truth-telling church? And second, we challenge those with influence in the church to meet that same standard.

Read through this magazine, and you'll see in every piece our passion that even in an era when interest in religion is fading, Seventh-day Adventist Christianity won't just survive, but will thrive as good news to a struggling and broken world.

We do all of this because we love our church. And we hope you do, too. Thank you for your support, your responses, and your gifts.

Loren Seibold  
Executive Editor

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