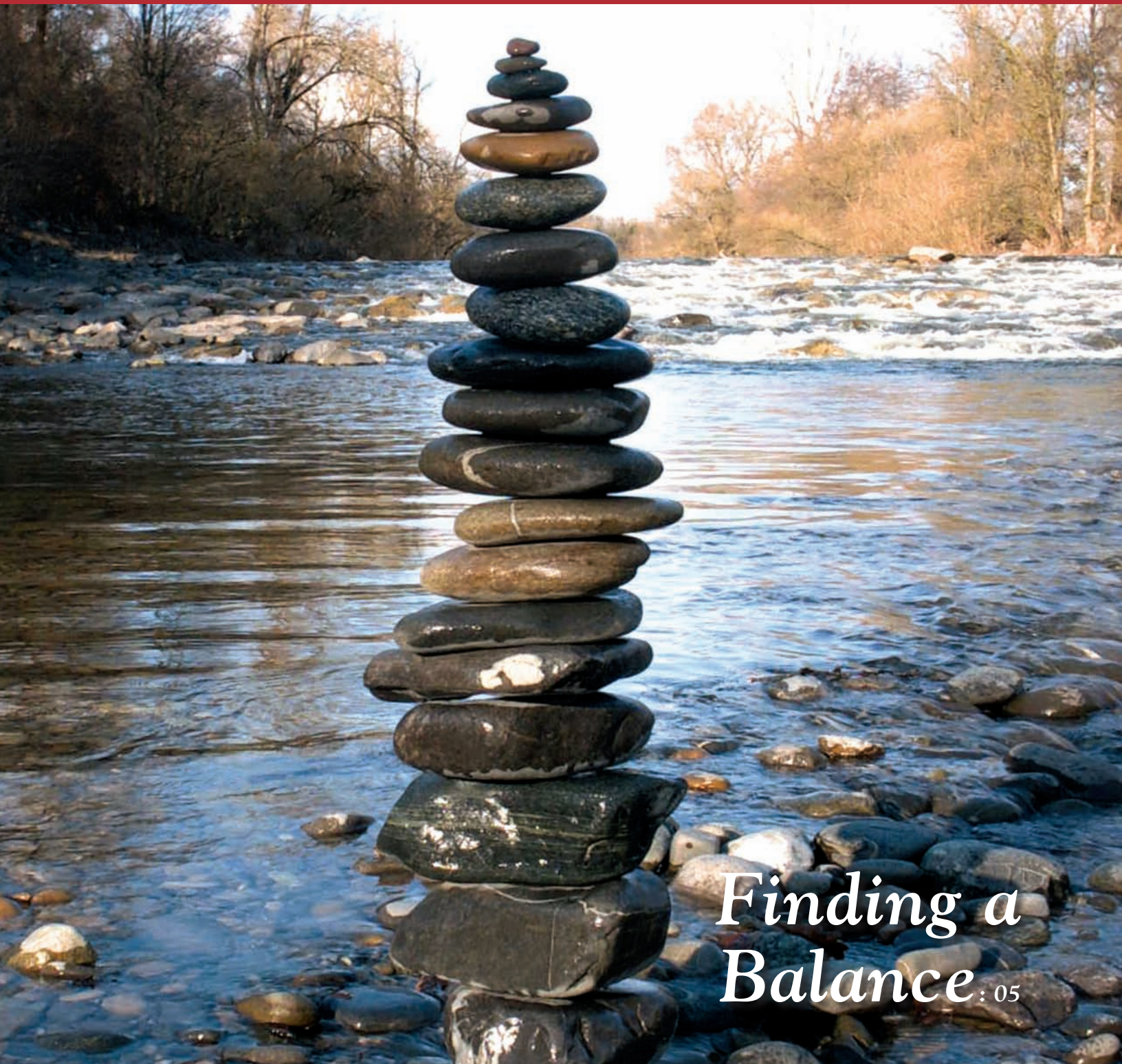


\$5.00

adventist today

november | december 2007
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Editorial | Andy Nash

Something to Believe In

You're not the only one who feels like you do. A lot of Adventists out there are looking for something in Adventism itself to get excited about — something to believe in.

It isn't that we don't see refreshing springs of grace shooting out from the Adventist landscape. But these tend to be the welcome exception. The ground seems mostly dry.

The local church experience is mixed. Churches near our larger schools and hospitals tend to be our most vibrant, benefiting enormously from the high numbers of young people. But drive 50 miles in any direction, and you begin to wonder, Where is the life? Where are the young people?

Church leadership is also mixed. Multiple times I've heard thoughtful Adventist members remark about the "dearth of leadership" in this world church. Our leaders are good people, but we need more of them to lead — not simply repeat the predictable party line, as though they're competing to live in the 1860s. Let me say something about Ellen White. As many mistakes as she made (and she did make mistakes), no woman in the Nineteenth Century was going to figure prominently in any church without an ability to stand up and speak boldly — even taking on the big shots in 1888, on behalf of the gospel, before she got shipped off to Australia. It would be great to see more church leaders following her example of boldness.

Church publications have also become predictable. Readers flip through church publications, knowing exactly what the articles are going to say ahead of time. (When a cover story says, "Adventist Education — Is It Worth It?", what do you think the answer's going to be? "No, it's not worth it"?) There seems to be a feeling among church communicators that "we're supposed to say this" — so that's what they say. It can easily become formulaic and lifeless.

Over the past 13 years *Adventist Today* magazine has provided a free-press alternative for members who wanted straight talk. At times, however, this magazine has also needed to refresh itself.

So here's our commitment to you:

We will have one agenda — excellent

journalism. We will look for the clearest voices, wherever they're found, and show respect for them all.

We will continue to work at voluntary or sacrificial pay levels. Many readers of *Adventist Today* may not realize that the leadership of this magazine have taken nothing for their work. Quite the opposite. They donate heavily because they believe in the importance of an Adventist free press.

We will involve young adults and college students heavily. We already are. My first hire was a 23-year-old woman. And in this issue you'll see the fine work of Chris Blake's Union College students.

What can you do? Keep reading closely, letting us know what we're doing right and wrong. Hold us accountable. But sign your letters, please.

Think of a few people who might like where we're headed — and subscribe for them. Seriously, do this, like, today so they can join us in January. My wife, Cindy, and I have done the same. Call (800) 236-3641, and a terrific woman named Hanan will help you. If we're going to rally together, it's got to start with the core supporters. Let's double our readership by January.

Include *Adventist Today* in your charitable giving (it's tax deductible). The address is *Adventist Today*, P.O. Box 8026, Riverside, CA 92515-8026. By working together, we can grow a premier publication.

Words can make a difference. We won't let you down. See you in January.

Andy Nash, 36, will be the editor of Adventist Today effective with our next issue. Nash has worked as publisher of a national newspaper syndicate and as a consultant for Reader's Digest Association. He's currently an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Southern Adventist University. You can reach him at andy.nash@atoday.com





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Adventist Today (ISSN 1079-5499) is published bimonthly by Adventist Today Foundation, P.O. Box 8026 Riverside, CA 92515-8026. Periodical postage paid at Riverside, California, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Adventist Today*, P.O. Box 8026, Riverside, CA 92515-8026. Copyright©2007 by Adventist Today Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering open dialogue in the Adventist community.

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685

1. Publication Title: *Adventist Today*. 2. Publication No. 1079-5499. 3. Filing Date: October, 18 2007. 4. Issue Frequency: bi-monthly. 5. No. of Issues Published Annually: 6. 6. Annual Subscription Price: \$29.50. 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: *Adventist Today*, 4500 Riverwalk Parkway, Biology, Annex 1. Campus Box 128, Riverside, CA 92515. Contact Person: Hanan Sadek. Telephone: 951-785-1295. 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: 4500 Riverwalk Parkway, Biology, Annex 1. Campus Box 128, Riverside, CA 92515. 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor; Publisher: Elwin Dunn, 4500 Riverwalk Parkway, Campus Box 128, Riverside, CA 92515. Editor: John McLarty, 4500 Riverwalk Parkway, Campus Box 128, Riverside, CA 92515. Managing Editor: Diana Fisher, 4500 Riverwalk Parkway, Campus Box 128, Riverside, CA 92515. 10. Owner: *Adventist Today* Foundation non-profit. 4500 Riverwalk Parkway, Campus Box 128, Riverside, CA 92515. 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: none. 12. Tax Status: Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months. 13. Publication Title: *Adventist Today*. 14. Issue Data for Circulation Data Below: November/December 2007. 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation: a. Total No. of Copies, Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months 1900. No. Copies of Single Issue Published nearest to Filing Date: 1900. b. Paid Circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail): 1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies), Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 1367; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 1367. 2) Mailed In-County Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies); Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: N/A; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: N/A. 3) Paid distribution outside the Mails including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS; Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 10; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 90. 4) Paid distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail) ; Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 90; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 90. c. Total Paid Distribution (Sum of 15b (1),(2),(3), and (4) Average NO. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 1467; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 1467. d) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (by Mail and Outside the Mail) 1) Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies included on PS Form 3541; Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: N/A; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: N/A. 2) Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies included on PS Form 3541; Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: N/A; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: N/A. 3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail) Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: N/A; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: N/A. 4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means) Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 100; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 100. e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 15d (1),(2),(3) and (4); Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 100; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 100. f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e); Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 1567; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 1567. g. Copies not Distributed (See Instructions to Publishers #4 (page #3)); Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 330; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 330. h. Total (Sum of 15f and g); Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 1900; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 1900. i. Percent Paid (15c divided by 15f times 100); Average no. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 93.62; No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 93.62. 16. Publication of Statement of Ownership, Publication required. Will be printed in the November/December 2007 issue of this publication.. 17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner, Hanan Sadek, Office Manager 10/18/07.

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Adventist Today welcomes letters to the editor.

Short, timely letters that relate to articles appearing in the journal have the best chance at being published.

We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity.

In publishing letters, *AT* does not necessarily endorse the views represented, but believes in giving voice to differing viewpoints. We prefer messages sent by e-mail, addressed to atoday@atoday.com. Please include your complete address and telephone number —

even with e-mail messages.

Send postal correspondence to Letters to the Editor, *Adventist Today*, P.O. Box 8026, Riverside, CA 92515-8026.

letters

Comment and Response

THOMPSON AND THE TEN COMMANDS

The September/October *Adventist Today* was an outstanding issue. It “outed” the elephant in the room, the decline of Adventism, and did it forcefully and directly.

As an added bonus, Alden Thompson, unintentionally, clarified why it is that Adventism is in decline. We are stuck theologically. In his concluding four paragraphs, he alludes to his thesis, fully developed in his book, *Escape from the Flames*, where he effectively documents Ellen White’s journey from fear to joy — conservative and traditional to progressive and liberal. In that book, Thompson argues that the god of the Old Testament is a god who “was willing to do what needs to be done,” i.e. use mass killing if necessary, to provide us with “the anchor that the law [what he calls the “ten commands”] provides.”

It is remarkable to me that Thompson includes these ten commands “within the safe framework established by Jesus’ two great commands.” Which is it, Alden, the god of the Old Testament who expediently ruled by fear and the “ten commands,” or Jesus Christ who proclaimed neighborliness and a kingdom of peace and freedom? Attempts to serve both, as our church has attempted to do since 1888, can never enable us to “be a dynamic community working together to make a difference in God’s great world while we await his return.” If we don’t choose to abandon the god of the Old Testament and do it forcefully and quickly, Adventism is a dead man walking.

Andy Hanson — Chico, California

ALDEN THOMPSON’S RESPONSE TO ADVENTIST TODAY LETTER FROM ANDY HANSON

Ask Jesus to get rid of the only Bible he had, the Old Testament? Ask him to dump the tough side of his message? When God took human flesh, he never struck anyone, never killed anyone, but he was angered by evil. When he cleansed the temple, evil people fled, but the children came running (cf. Matthew 21:12-16). I would give anything if I could be angry like that.



Everywhere in the world, the churches and religions that are dying are the ones whose members are physically comfortable, wealthy, and have great trouble believing in the miraculous. That’s where one finds the dead men walking. Voices as diverse as John Wesley and Maya Angelou remind us of the potentially deadening effects of wealth. Interestingly enough, Bull and Lockhart, in their second edition of *Seeking a Sanctuary* (Indiana University Press, 2007), argue that Adventism is still sectarian because it still appeals to the poor. “Upwardly mobile sects only become denominations,” they write, “when, like the Episcopalians, they lose the capacity to attract the poor” (p. 360).

It’s worth noting that Adventism and Christianity are strongest where the Old Testament is taken very seriously. In Africa, for example, it walks virtually straight off the page into the lives of the people. The writings of Philip Jenkins are revealing in that respect. And one of the most vivid pictures of God’s peaceable, vegetarian kingdom comes straight from the Old Testament: “The wolf shall live with the lamb..., the lion shall eat straw like the ox.... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9).

I share Hanson’s horror at the biblical descriptions of God’s involvement with violence. But because I follow Jesus, I can live in hope. Adventism is a flawed and imperfect community but it is deeply committed to making a difference in this world while we live in eager hope of the next. And when those who have been part of us can still read an issue of *Adventist Today* cover-to-cover and be enthusiastic enough to write a letter to the editor, there’s hope.

Alden Thompson, September 28, 2007

Finding a Balance

When the Union College class in magazine article writing started this assignment, we scratched to find a common theme. What should power this *Adventist Today* issue? How can we communicate purple passions and distinctive perceptions through a shared vehicle? Is it possible to meet the reading needs of neophytes and ninetysomethings?

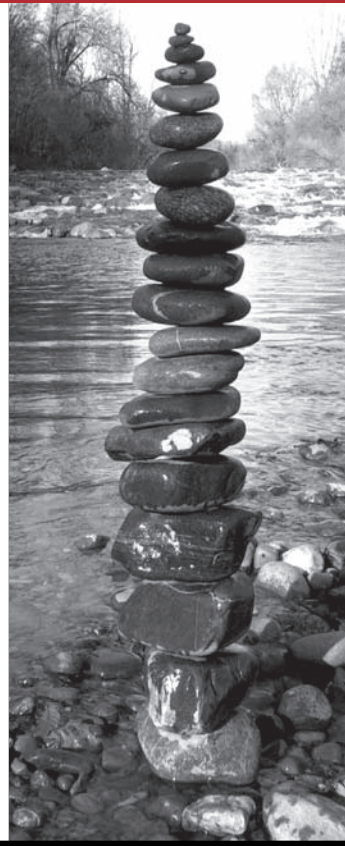
In a world of extremes, we decided that ultimately everyone strives for balance — a quest that will continue for eternity. On that basis, the writers launched themselves into the spectacular galactic spaces of their computer screens.

Tatiana explores the balance between being Adventist and being human. Liz ventures into the volatile terrain of “us” versus “them.” Emily examines saying and doing — the menu and the meal. Mandy

weighs moral and ethical justice. Trina wonders about missionary work at home as well as abroad. Amy exchanges a past spiritual reliance for a present one. Caleb considers how both younger and older members can maintain a vibrant church experience. Rebekah probes personal responsibility and “God’s will.” Andrea questions defending beauty and inviting change.

These nine youthful expressions give voice to our common need for balance. Enjoy the ride.

*Chris Blake is associate professor of English and communication at Union College. He has written many books, including **Swimming Against the Current** (Pacific Press, 2007).*



Feature | Tatiana Ryckman

Religion Purge: My Experience With Bringing on Questions

As greenish-brown bile burst from my mouth into the trash can by my bed, I thought, *Maybe my life isn’t balanced.*

My health had always been important to me; eating well, exercising, and regular bowel movements were top priorities. But on Valentine’s Day for “breakfast” I ate three cupcakes, a chocolate chip cookie, and a large cheesecake brownie. Later in the day, I snacked on a Take Five, and then went to dinner with my boyfriend at an ethnic restaurant.

That evening, as the chemistry of chocolate and noodles produced painful pockets of air inside me, I thought about “detoxing.” Some days earlier my sister had called me to say that she and her fiancé were going to cleanse themselves with a miracle mixture of water, cayenne pepper, maple syrup, and lemon juice. “You can’t eat or drink anything else for 10 to 40 days,” she told me.

“That’s not detoxing,” I laughed, “that’s anorexia.” But she was convincing. Two days and one diabetic coma later, I was trying it too.

Two days after that I woke up retching and

» Call it brainwashing, call it a lifestyle, call it devotion, but when you’re raised Adventist it’s a hard umbilical cord to cut. Like Judaism, Adventism is more than a religion. When a Jew stops going to synagogue it doesn’t mean he or she is not a Jew.

wondered why I had ever tried such a diet. That’s when I decided to eat normally.

Questions Asked, Lessons Learned

So often we get caught up in extremes, an “all-or-nothing” mentality. Diet was probably not the only area of my life where I lacked balance. No doubt my spiritual life was a mess, too. Proficient at repeating the beliefs of my religion teachers, I am almost completely drained of any personal beliefs.

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Religion Purge: My Experience With Bringing on Questions

» I remember, before this heap of doubt fell upon me, that a friend who has no religious affiliation once told me, “You’re really pretty normal for an Adventist.” I hope that doesn’t change.

Instead, the only things I am balancing are mounds of questions that seem to twist and turn like my insides that woeful night. I actually do try to start with a foundation, a base, but usually find myself lost in my own self-talk: *Do I believe in God? Yes. Well, I think so. Yes, yes I do, definitely. I think.* As soon as I’m adequately frustrated, I try to organize my micro-questions. *Am I Adventist? Yes. No, not really. Then again, sort of. Okay, let’s define terms: What is an Adventist? Well, someone who believes that Saturday is the Sabbath. Do I believe that? Yes, Saturday is it... if there is a Sabbath. Then I engage in some comparisons and contrasts: Do I act like an Adventist? Maybe? Well, what are people like who are “good Adventists?”* I immediately think of the kids who carry their Bibles everywhere, who seem to have no inner struggles, who question nothing, who make me feel inferior for my lack of faith.

As I writhe with these uncomfortable thoughts, questioning God, who I’ve been told is the only thing I can always count on, my conception of Adventists does not digest well. If this is what I interpret Adventists to be, why would I even *want* to be Adventist?

Two summers ago, seated by a pond with a friend from academy, I thought about a mutual friend who’d decided to leave the church. I asked my friend if he thought he would, too. It was dusk, and as he thought about his answer the still air sang with frogs and insects. “I don’t know if I believe everything Adventists believe,” he said, “but I don’t think we can ever stop being Adventist.”

Call it brainwashing, call it a lifestyle, call it devotion, but when you’re raised Adventist it’s a hard umbilical cord to cut. Like Judaism, Adventism is more than a religion. When a Jew stops going to synagogue it doesn’t mean he or she is not a Jew. Many of my atheist friends were taken to church for a few years of their life, but not past the age where church means merely being tucked into uncomfortable dress clothes and squirming in a pew with a bag of Cheerios. From what I understand of their experiences, church was like work — you don’t take it home with you.

I recall missing birthday parties, getting made fun of for not eating meat, and waiting through painfully boring Saturday afternoons, all with my parents’ intention of making me a good Adventist. Looking back, it seems the only time I was even close was when I wasn’t questioning.

While I keep cheering for God, I feel that I’m not on his team. I want desperately for God to swoop into my life, wearing his underwear outside his leggings as he bellows, “I exist. Stop being so ridiculous, chasing yourself in circles. Follow me.” I think if that happened I would have a good portion of the reality puzzle figured out. All the frills of religion could be sorted later. For the time being, though, the only tangible things I have are the religious frills.

Even as I fight these questions like thunder-colon, I’m going to do my *balanced* best to represent what I feel Adventists should be. As T.R. Knight (of “Grey’s Anatomy”) said of his homosexuality, “People keep talking about it, but I hope it’s not the most interesting thing about me,” and I apply that to my denominational ties. Whether I choose to be Adventist or not, I hope that I’m a human first, seeing others as human rather than Christian or Asian, rich or unusually pale. I remember, before this heap of doubt fell upon me, that a friend who has no religious affiliation once told me, “You’re really pretty normal for an Adventist.” I hope that doesn’t change.

So here’s my game plan. I’m going to keep praying, but I’m going to try not to start it with, “God, please exist.” I’ll try to pray, instead, “God, please show me that you exist.” Then, after this semester is over (when I will have accrued enough Bible credits to graduate), I will stop disgorging others’ opinions of Bible texts. I will accept responsibility for my faith, and I will begin to balance my detoxing questions with answers.

Tatiana Ryckman is a senior communication and Italian major from Millersburg, Ohio.

Eliminating the “Versus”

The line had been drawn. On one side of the street the Christians congregated, holding a white cross and signs that said, “Repent now, or you’ll be in hell.” On

the other side were the atheists, holding their own signs and shouting, “We’d rather be in hell than with you.” One represented the “spiritual” while the other represented the “secular.”

With several friends I walked out of the Grand Theatre in downtown Lincoln, Nebraska, past these two groups. We were curious, though a little frightened, as we approached the hostile territory.

My fingers wrapped tightly around my boyfriend’s hand as we walked by. I looked straight in front of me, purposefully not wanting to get involved or to personally contact either group. We made our way through the shouting, the fist shaking, and the hatred. Their faces were scarlet contortions, their words soaked in hostility. Their fists raised as if to throw grenades. I found it difficult to discern which people were “virtuous” and which were “demonic.”

As we drove back to the dorm, my thoughts swirled and seemed to scream at me. I thought about the hatred I had seen — hatred so intense that some would rather be in hell than with the people on the other side of the street. Then I thought, *If I were compelled to choose, which side would I stand on?* As a Seventh-day Adventist, I wouldn’t be considered an atheist, but would I stand with the group of professed Christians? Remembering their contorted faces, their harsh, angry words, and their so-called “Christian witnessing,” I knew I wouldn’t be standing with that group either.

In this scene I witnessed an extreme example of something that takes place every day — at work, at school, at home, and even in church.

“They are the ones who are wrong. They are the ones who are different. We must try to change them.”

How many times have we used the words “us” and “them”? Who are *they*? Are they people we should fear? Are these individuals so different from us?

In Christ’s eyes, there is no “us” and “them.” He sees no people as superior. As children of God, we are all part of one body, which is his. As members of one body, no member is more important than another. The eye is not more important than the hand; as one body, the “versus” is eliminated. The barriers that

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separate vanish. What is left are people, children in need of a Father.

Christian v. Atheist

On the campus of Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, I was attending an honors convention with hundreds of other students from different colleges and universities. While walking around Drake’s student union, I passed a huge bulletin board with a welter of tacked and stapled announcements. One flier in particular caught my attention. It looked like most of the fliers on the board, white with black lettering, friendly, simple. The word “atheist” held my focus. Having grown up in a small community, I had never really been exposed to atheism before, but there it beckoned: “Atheists unite.” People swirled around me as I stood and stared. The flier advertised a meeting, a chance for people to come together, have fun, and support one another.

I never would have imagined I had anything in common with atheists. I believe in God and they don’t. It seemed an immense, impassable difference. But as I stood looking at the bulletin board, I thought about how very much alike Christians and atheists are. Both are people who need support and community. Both believe strongly. Both are in need of something and someone to hope in. Both seek answers.

Christian v. Muslim

After September 11, 2001, I was among the many who were filled with confusion. I wasn’t sure what to think about the events taking place or the people involved. I wasn’t sure whether I, as a Christian and an American, was supposed to be afraid of and against people who were Muslim. In the eyes of many, Muslim people were to be feared, hated, and considered dangerously different.

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Adventures of the Starving Food Connoisseurs

“TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD” (PSALM 34:8).

» We may imagine we believe the food to be amazing, and we may think we believe God is good. But until we see our great need reflected back to us by the Holy Spirit and choose to eat what he's prepared, we're just fooling ourselves.

Warm air, rich with garlic and oregano, rushed past Sharon's face as she stepped inside the restaurant. Her mouth watered.

“Party of two?” a waiter asked.

“Yes, please.” Dean, Sharon's husband, followed her as she tried to keep up with the waiter, winding her way through tables and booths.

“Is this all right?” The waiter motioned to a small booth tucked in the corner.

Sharon smiled. “Perfect.”

The menu was choice: bruschetta, tossed in olive oil and fresh basil; tortellini with grape tomatoes and garlic; spring greens with sun-dried cranberries and raspberry vinaigrette. Sharon's stomach somersaulted as she gazed across the table at Dean.

“This looks amazing! Do you know what you'd like?”

“For the appetizer? The spinach and artichoke fondue. Mmmm...” Dean closed his eyes in ecstasy. “Baby spinach and artichoke hearts toasted with crostini! Can you imagine?”

“I know!” Sharon said. “I can't believe how good this menu looks.”

Dean nodded. “This place has the best food in town.”

The couple sat in their corner booth for an hour or two, talking and laughing, staring into each other's eyes and discussing the menu. Every so often their waiter would reappear.

“Are you ready to decide?” he would ask.

“Not quite yet,” Sharon answered each time.

“Well...,” Dean finally glanced at his watch,

“it's getting pretty late. We should probably go.”

Sharon looked longingly at the menu before setting it beside her immaculate plate.

“Okay.”

On the way out, they passed a host. “Thank you so much for a wonderful evening,” said Dean.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” she answered. “How was your meal?”

“Incredible.” Sharon looked at the tables around her. “The service, the presentation, the prices... superb. And the décor is so tasteful!”

The cold air snapped at Sharon's nose as she and her husband stepped outside.

“Sweetheart,” said Dean, “let's do this again. Say, next week, same time?”

Sharon's stomach growled loudly and her knees shook a little. “I'd love to!”

The corner booth in “their” restaurant became a favorite spot over the next few months. They'd sit and unwind in the candlelight, reverently opening their menus, closing their eyes to breathe in the aroma of boiling pasta and herbs. They'd listen intently to the clink of silverware and low hum of conversation around them. Gradually, they got to know some of the staff and heard tales of the best dishes and the chef's secret recipes.

Meanwhile, they wasted away.

One morning, Sharon looked in the bathroom mirror and didn't recognize the face staring back at her. There stood a foreigner, a skinny, bony person. The image scared her. She heard a low cry and saw Dean gaping at his own reflection.

“What's happened to us?” he said. Eyes wide, he turned to her. “I'm so hungry.”

Filling the Need

Sharon and Dean had spent hours sitting in a sumptuous place filled with food, but had never eaten a bite. Almost too late, they realized the menu was not enough. They were literally starving.

While menus entice, attract, and invite us to eat, only meals fulfill a restaurant's purpose. Restaurants exist to meet a basic need; our bodies crave nourishment. We visit McDonald's because we're hungry. We patronize The Olive Garden because we realize there's taste behind the text.

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Abusing Morality: Are We Still Majoring in Minors?

“You nailed the board in crooked again!” Katie flinched and looked up at her father towering over her. Her red bandana was caked with sweat and dirt from working on her hands and knees all day. She stood and followed his eyes across the room where she had been working.

“Can’t you do anything right?” he yelled.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I....”

“Just fix it.” He slapped her face hard and walked away.

My friend, Katie, experienced physical abuse like this daily. Whenever her father lost his temper, he hit her. As the only girl in the family, Katie suffered physical abuse at home and at work. Her older brother also beat her and when she was only eight years old began to sexually molest her.

Katie was raised a Seventh-day Adventist, but when she was 13 and we became friends, she attended church sporadically. One day she called me, crying. “I went to church last week and the deaconess pulled me aside and asked if I had a sweater in the car.”

“Why did she ask you that?” I asked, dreading the answer.

She thought my shirt was too low. She said it was showing off my chest and that isn’t the purpose of church.” Katie’s words were filled with rage and embarrassment. “She said she thought my jewelry was flashy and inappropriate too.”

I didn’t know what to say. I could muster only, “I’m sorry, Katie. They shouldn’t have told you what to wear to church. It’s not really their business.”

Katie still wears her flashy jewelry and low-cut shirts, but she hasn’t been to church since. When her church members could have helped her in a time of desperate need, they chose instead to judge appearances and drive her away. Little did they know that Katie wore jewelry to build up the self-esteem that her father and brother had crushed.

More Aware

When we are trying to uphold and balance God’s standard of justice, which side is more important — moral or ethical? If God has imparted truth to us, how important is it that we give that truth to others and make them follow it? While we take seriously our vow to spread God’s word, we could agree that many “good” Adventists get too caught up in trying to force moral codes on others. We can also recognize that tolerating differences

does not mean embracing immorality. God desires us to accept his children, no matter how they act or what they wear, and to point all to him.

Once a man named Henry visited my church, sporting a beard and wearing casual jeans and a plain, green T-shirt. My pastor, Bob Posh, greeted Henry with warmth and ushered him to the front of the church for song service. As they shook hands after the sermon, Henry told him, “On my way to visit my mother this weekend, someone stole my suitcase. All of my clothes were in the suitcase except for the ones I have on my back. I almost didn’t come to church. Thank you for accepting me, even though I’m not dressed up.”

If as God’s people we became more aware of heinous evils happening all around us, we would not be so quick to judge the minor things. Is swearing worse than refusing to help starving children? Is missing church worse than allowing rape to ruin young girls’ lives? Is wearing jewelry worse than not taking a stand against abuse? Sometimes it would seem so.

A just balance is called for. R. C. Sproul noted, “Social ethics must never be substituted for personal ethics. Crusading can easily become a dodge for facing up to one’s lack of personal morality. By the same token, even if I am a model of personal righteousness, that does not excuse my participation in social evil.”

We need to educate ourselves on what is happening all around the world — the horrors of child abuse, bigotry, war profiteering, depression, sickness and rape — so that we can refocus our priorities on doing God’s will. And what does God desire us to do? “Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Rules are important. They help govern our land and keep us within social boundaries. We all feel compelled to pass judgment on others from time to time, but none of us likes the way it feels to be judged. Only God can judge ultimately; it is a terrible mistake to believe we can fill his shoes. He has not asked us to be scorekeepers in the game of other people’s lives. If we try to fill a position that we were not given, we will throw off our own game and end up in a mess. By abusing morality, we are abusing God’s greatest desire and gift — loving one another.

Amanda Klump is a senior English major from Alamogordo, New Mexico.

“Good” Adventists get too caught up in trying to force moral codes on others. By abusing morality, we are abusing God’s greatest desire and gift — loving one another.





As a sixth-generation Adventist myself, I have lived with the assumption of being a part of the worldwide church. This faith is engraved in my family's genes — something inherited, not cultivated.

Feature | Trina Peterson Cress

Cheaper by the Million

Five eager Mongolian faces lined the river's edge in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Each face expressed anticipation of the commitment soon to be confirmed. I stood farther back on shore with the

family and friends of the five to be baptized. We stood together — the Mongolian church members, people that spoke their native tongue, and the missionaries, including me, who had just arrived in Mongolia. We stood together as family of God.

Local Mongolians scattered down the narrow river, enjoying its refreshing contrast from the hot, August sun. Some waded at the water's edge while others swam around the shallow middle. I noticed many watching our peculiar group out of the corner of their eyes; others blatantly stared. In the two weeks I had been in Mongolia, I had learned enough to know that our Christian practices were a foreign concept in a predominantly Buddhist culture.

The first in line to be baptized was an 80-year-old grandmother. Her wrinkly, worried face loosened only slightly when her toes tipped into the cold water. Pastor provided the grandmother the stability of his hand and helped her into the river's depth.

The locals had given the American missionary the nickname "Pastor." His wife and two daughters had moved to Mongolia from the state of Georgia. Pastor's daughter (my friend and high school roommate) was the reason I was in Mongolia. Her family had opened up their home for me to spend a year with them, after she and I had finished high school. In that year I learned a lot about mission work, particularly as I witnessed that first baptism.

Pastor continued through the baptismal routine, complete with "in the name of the Father, and of the Son . . .", pausing between each phrase while an interpreter interjected the Mongolian equivalents. Our group of riverside supporters sang out the Mongolian translation of "Into My Heart" as the woman was raised from the water. Though I did not comprehend the words, I did not need translation to understand the Mongolians' expression of joy. The woman was then helped out of the water as the next person in line, a 70-year-old grandfather with a sun-leathered face, soundly stepped from shore to river.

Commotion from the Mongolians in and around the river continued, with only momentary pauses to show interest at each exchange from shore to river and back to shore. This pattern continued from one person to the next, from woman to man to woman, from old to young, until all five stood proudly by the water.

Thirteen million was the number of our worldwide church family when those baptisms took place in August 2002. The number grew to at least 13,000,005 that day at the river. Pastor then proceeded to tell about the growing worldwide family that is the Adventist Church.

The sun was bright, the Mongolian church members were excited for their friends' decisions, and the family of God was growing. That day was happy. Yet, somehow, I couldn't fight the growing unease within me. Pastor's words, *thirteen million*, echoed in my head as I considered members of my own family who remained "on the books" of the church yet remained personally removed from the actual church.

MIA Grandpa

I stood as a seven-year-old girl by my mom in front of our kitchen sink, splashing water on each dish in attempts to rinse them after she washed them. We were cleaning the house in preparation for Grandma and Grandpa's visit. My mom continued cleaning as I interrogated her.

"Is Grandpa coming with us to church this time?"

Mom gave her honest response. "I don't know, Trina."

Grandma came with us sometimes — when my sister and I would beg. I was hopeful that this time Grandpa would come too.

It was a sore spot in family conversation, and it always had been. It wasn't even talked about. When Grandma and Grandpa visited, we knew not to make a big deal about their presence or absence at church. We learned it was better to plan an activity in place of church. Sabbaths with Grandpa and Grandma came to include parks, museums, or staying home — my family's Sabbath fill-in to avoid the unpleasant results of talking about church with Grandpa.

Nothing has changed in the years between then and now. Even today, Grandpa avoids church and topics about it. I found this out last semester when I wanted to get information from him for a class assignment. I had already talked to both my parents and from my grandpa on the other side of the family. My church-avoiding Grandpa was the only puzzle piece missing.

He sounded slightly groggy when he answered the phone. He had been sick that day, but was still friendly and willing to talk — until I mentioned that I was calling to ask questions about religion. All of a sudden a willing demeanor changed into sickness too severe to permit further talk on the phone.

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“Some other time might be better,” he assured me. I completed the assignment without getting Grandpa’s perspective.

First-generation Adventists often have a lot of non-Adventist — even non-Christian — family members, because multiple generations from a single family rarely convert together. But Grandma and Grandpa are different, because they are counted in the *thirteen million* Pastor talked about at the Mongolian baptism. My grandparents are baptized members of the Adventist Church. They followed their parents’ lead, as their grandparents followed *their* parents’ lead. Yet missionary efforts toward them ceased, or perhaps never took place.

Missionary-worthy

As a sixth-generation Adventist myself, I have lived with the assumption of being a part of the worldwide church. This faith is engraved in my family’s genes — something inherited, not cultivated.

How wrong is that assumption! Just ask Grandpa, who uses every possible excuse not to attend church — as if avoiding some great evil. None of us in the family knows exactly what that evil is. All we can guess is that Grandpa was deeply hurt. Perhaps structure and rules strangled him in his earlier experiences in academy. Perhaps his own perception of hypocrisy in the church as a whole offended him. Whatever the case, likely his bitterness toward people has caused him to take his discontentment out on God.

I know that Grandma and Grandpa, and even other members of my family, are not the only people leaving the Adventist Church. My hometown church still records non-attending members on its roster. These are members who have been hurt or ignored — members born into Adventist homes and thought not to need spiritual nurturing, like the people in Mongolia.

You know them too. They’re your friends. They’re your family. They could even be you. They are all Adventists overlooked in favor of the numbers coming in, Adventists wondering if anyone would even notice their absence. They are Adventists looking to be shown a real God and his real love.

A shout and a splash from the other side of the river interrupted my thoughts. The last of the five had been baptized and properly welcomed into the Mongolian Adventist Church. Joyfully they greeted one another and joined arms to help each other up the loose incline to the top of the bridge. I prayed a prayer of peace for Grandpa, followed by a prayer for each of the newcomers into the Adventist Church. *Lord, may the efforts toward these new believers begin now and never cease.*

Trina Peterson Cress is a senior English and psychology major from Wawona, California.

Looking for ways to experience God?

Here are some ideas to get you thinking, praying, and acting.

- Support human rights worldwide. Write letters or campaign for Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org).
- Take a class that will bring you closer to God and others (try health or communications, for example).
- Get radical. Invite the Holy Spirit to be your daily Tour Guide. Ask often each day, “What would *You* have me do?”
- Bake a loaf of bread (whole wheat, banana, zucchini, chocolate chip) and share it with a could-be friend.
- Fix God’s words in your mind. Write them where you’ll see them often.
- Try prayer walking. You might spend this time interceding for others, praising God for his grace, or simply sharing your needs with him and listening as he speaks to you.
- Lead. Inspire. Change the world. Search for ways to help your community (www.getinvolved.gov) or world (www.maranatha.org).
- Get active. Hike, bike, play soccer, or go roller blading.
- Plan for friendship. Set aside time each day to communicate with God. (Start with two minutes and work up.)
- Find your volunteer niche (www.volunteermatch.org/volunteers/gettingstarted).
- Get creative. Paint, draw, knit, scrapbook, write or make music for someone else.

Remember, you may choose anything on the menu. What are you passionate about? What starts your mind turning? What do you believe in and know to be true? One of my professors likes to remind his classes that their greatest spiritual gift is the brain. Let’s use it to think, to listen to our God.

Then, taste and see.

Why Uncle Dan and Aunt Sue Lost Their Attraction



For many years, I have relied on things like these tapes and CDs to tell me about God, instead of letting him speak to me directly. As I've gotten older, the things I used to rely on have grown stale and aren't as powerful anymore. If I'm going to learn about God, I realize I need to take a different approach.

I can see it in my mind. Daniel and his three friends — Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah — are standing in line in King Jehoiakim's palace, waiting to enter the throne room.

Prince Nebuchadnezzar arrives to take some of King Jehoiakim's household as captives back to Babylon. As Daniel and his friends pass the time, he and Hananiah talk.

Daniel: His highness is certainly a young man.

Hananiah: And a very successful one.

Daniel: He knows what he wants and exactly how to get it.

Hananiah: Is that your formula for success?

Daniel: Mixed with love and mercy, yes.

That is an excerpt from an episode of *Your Story Hour*, titled “The Four Friends.” I know the entire episode by heart. I have been listening to the Uncle Dan and Aunt Sue tapes for as far back as I can remember. Growing up, my brother and I would listen to the tapes all the time, until they were completely worn out.

Three years ago, I went looking to replace the tapes. My family decided that I should get them in CD form, so they would last longer. At the time, the three sets cost a total of about \$500. It had taken me more than a year to save up the money.

But the CDs don't mean nearly as much to me now as the tapes did. It's sad. Though I used to have all the tapes memorized, I've forgotten most of the stories now.

For many years, I have relied on things like these tapes and CDs to tell me about God, instead of letting Him speak to me directly. As I've gotten older, the things I used to rely on have grown stale and aren't as powerful anymore. If I'm going to learn about God, I realize I need to take a different approach.

On a Sabbath in February I celebrated my birthday. The sky was overcast. It had rained a lot and would rain some more. When I walked outside to go to Sabbath School, the moist air was spitting a little bit. As the wind would send the mist and bigger drops my way, I said to myself, “These are angel kisses. The Holy Spirit is the wind. As the wind hits me, the misty rain strips away my sins so that I don't have them anymore.”

Later on, after church, the sky was still cloudy and it was misting a little. Because my sins had been stripped away, I could see the vibrant colors contrasted against the gray sky. I saw green. Lots of green. Possibly because the rainbow surrounding God's throne is green — emerald green. Never had the world looked so vibrant and alive. I could hardly contain the joy I felt.

The Difference?

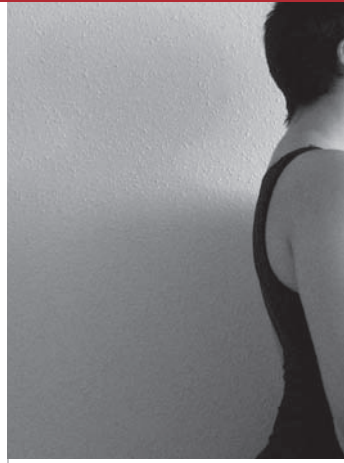
So, what's the difference between these two approaches to God — between relying more on God to tell me about Himself and less on the things I know to tell me about Him? How can you get from knowing *about* God to actually *knowing* Him? I don't know.

For me, feeding Union College's squirrels has helped. I gain new insights into God's character as I do so. For example, when I'm feeding them I understand how much God wants to lavish blessings on us and how hurt he is when we skittishly run or ignore him.

Someday the King will invade Satan's throne room as Nebuchadnezzar did Jehoiakim's. Someday we will be able to communicate with God face-to-face. No aunt or uncle will need to tell us about him. As we wait now to enter the throne room into the King's presence, it seems essential to rely more on God and less on things.

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One Step at a Time: How to Keep Youth Interested Each Sabbath



“I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the...” The words were drowned as my head joined the rest of my body, submerged beneath Rice Lake. For a fleeting moment I was held and then pulled back to the surface. Once there, a chorus of amens greeted me, and as Pastor Springer and I made our way toward shore, my new church family began singing “My Peace.”

“Why did you want to be baptized, Caleb?” That’s the only question I remember from that sunny July afternoon.

“I want to have more jobs in the church,” I replied, “so I can feel more involved.” At the time, I was content with my response. Later, however, I realized I was seeking something else.

My duties in the church started small. I helped my grandma in the Primary division, and I was also the assistant special music director and children’s story coordinator. These jobs succeeded in getting me involved, and working along with my grandma allowed me to see how an experienced teacher managed a class. I was involved, interested and enjoying my Sabbath experience.

When I was 16 and had been a member of my church for nearly four years, I accepted roles as Primary director and bulletin editor. I could hardly wait for that warm, fuzzy feeling to fill my soul. Instead, I was left discouraged and empty. My interest in the church dwindled. My youthful exuberance was now covered by a black cloud of disinterest. Some weeks I would show up, drop off the bulletins, teach my Sabbath School class and leave, feeling guilty but not guilty enough to stay. Once I graduated from high school, I quit going to church altogether. Why? Did I suddenly lose my faith? What about my baptismal comment about wanting to become “more involved”? What had changed? Interested?

I quit going to church because I was no longer interested, and I was no longer interested because I was no longer learning. Involvement

» Once I graduated from high school, I quit going to church altogether. Why? Did I suddenly lose my faith? What about my baptismal comment about wanting to become “more involved”? What had changed?

doesn’t inevitably cause interest. Interest causes involvement. I put the cart before the horse and then proceeded to smash the cart repeatedly into the dust. Holding a job in the church doesn’t make one vitally involved. When I was younger I loved Sabbath School. I loved the singing, the lesson, even memorizing memory verses. The older I got, the less I learned. I was taught the same old Bible stories I’d heard since I was five. As a result, I began to lose interest.

By the same token, the summer my brother Jake and I held a Bible study with a non-Adventist during Sabbath mornings was by far the most spiritual time I have ever experienced. Instead of feeling bored and turned off by a sermon I sensed I didn’t need, I was digging into the Bible and learning for myself because I wanted to. Every Sabbath I was excited to get up and go to church. I could hardly wait for Sabbath School to end so we could start the Bible Study. I was interested. I was involved.

According to *Steps to Christ*, my experience was natural and predictable: “If we will go to work as Christ designs that His disciples shall, and win souls for Him, you will feel the need of a deeper experience and greater knowledge of divine things, and will hunger and thirst after righteousness. You will plead with God, and your faith will be strengthened, and your soul will drink deeper drafts at the well of salvation” (p. 80).

Involvement by itself will never be enough. Our involvement must be meaningful — risky. By participating in that Bible study I was putting myself and my beliefs out where everyone could see.

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Eliminating the “Versus”

» When people choose to eliminate barriers of race and color, they see a reflection of commonalities rather than differences.

I became a part of Amnesty International in the spring of my junior year. Every Tuesday night, I join a small group of Union College students in writing letters. The first letter I wrote was on behalf of a woman in Iraq who was being held as a prisoner of conscience. After reading her story in the urgent action appeal, my confusion began to vanish. I realized that she was like me. She was a person with rights, dreams, and hopes. She was someone who just wanted to live her life. She was a Muslim. I was a Christian. We were both people who deserved a chance.

Black v. White

From a distance, it looked like a box, a random box that someone had misplaced and left on a stand. From visiting this modern art gallery in downtown Lincoln before, I had come to expect the unexpected and completely random. My eyes stopped on this box, and as I looked closer I saw something that was anything but random. Inside the box were three tiny plastic men, each standing in front of a miniature mirror. One was white and his reflection was white, as well. Another was black and his reflection was black, as well. It was the third one that drew my attention. It was white but the reflection that stared back at him was black.

As I stood there, I started to think. So often, people see only reflections of themselves. They limit their vision to one color, when really they are surrounded by rich diversity. A diverse palette of human pigment from the hand of God. When people choose to eliminate barriers of race and color, they see a reflection of commonalities rather than differences.

Adventist v. Non-Adventist

I heard the phrase “dark county” for the first time in a class at Union College. My professor, Mr. Blake, was telling the class of an experience from his early years as an Adventist. He recalled being in church and hearing some of the members talk of a “dark county.” When asked what they were referring to, they explained that a dark county was one where there wasn’t an Adventist church. This did not sit well with my professor.

Growing up as an Adventist, I have often

heard some members speak of non-Adventists in a negative manner. When referring to friends or acquaintances, I frequently heard the question, “Is she an Adventist?” Sometimes, when the answer was negative, I would catch a look of disappointment and disdain accompanying the uttered word, “Oh.” I wondered why this was so. I wondered if “God’s remnant church” believed that only Adventists possessed truth and light.

After thinking about Mr. Blake’s class, I came to this conclusion: There are no “dark counties.” The darkness of a place is not determined by whether it has an Adventist presence or not. The word “Adventist” does not make someone superior to someone else. Several Adventist churches may reside in a single town, but that may not mean there is light there. Light exists where God’s love, truth, and mercy reside. Light lives in the hearts of those who genuinely search for God’s will.

Us

There is no Christian vs. Atheist. There is no Christian vs. Muslim. There is no black vs. white. There is no Adventist vs. non-Adventist. There is no us vs. the world. Everywhere there are groups of people who all share similar needs. There is a group of people who need a Savior, who all need to be loved and nurtured and saved. Black, white, Adventist, Catholic, Muslim, and atheist are all the same in this regard. The only barriers are false ones we erect ourselves.

I think about that night in Lincoln, about those two snarling groups who appeared so different, yet were so similar. I think about what would happen if that line dividing them were erased. I think about what would happen if the barriers separating them were broken down. I think about what would happen if the shouting stopped, the prejudice ceased, and the anger fled.

Where would we stand? Not on one side or the other, but in the middle, a healing bridge, where there is no “us” vs. “them.” There is simply “us.”

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Blueprint, God? Can We Know His Plan for Our Lives?

His voice was filled with calm assurance. “This congregation has been reading a book, so they are finding out what God’s will is for their lives.”

The preacher’s words echoed in my thoughts.

Finding out God’s will. God’s will. Is that really something we can know?

My roommate, Julie, looked over at me and asked the same question I had been thinking. We both smiled, and I knew this would invite a conversation later.

As a child, the story of Adam and Eve had intrigued me. I wondered why God would place such a temptation in the middle of the garden. He must have known they would sin, so why would he want his children to go through such pain? People around me provided answers such as, “God gave them the gift of choice” and “It was God’s will that they sin so that the rest of the universe could see how terrible sin is.”

That last answer still troubles me. I find it hard to believe that a loving God could will for so many people to experience such pain. Everywhere I look the world seems saturated with suffering. Yet many still try to answer the “why” question with, “Well, it’s God’s will.”

Is it really God’s will that thousands of people get killed in a terrorist attack or die from hurricanes, earthquakes, or tornadoes? Is it God’s will that children get sold into slavery because their parents need a little money? Is it God’s will that a man beats his wife and children or a drunk driver kills and maims? Is it God’s will that a family won’t be able to pay all of their bills this month? Is it God’s will when the doctor says “cancer”? Is it God’s will when gas prices go up or construction slows people down? Is it even God’s will when the toast is burnt and a sock goes AWOL in the dryer? Second Peter 3:9 says the Lord is “not willing that any should perish,” yet people perish.

So what is God’s will? How do we know when to follow God’s will? As Christians, we seem to think

of God’s will as a sort of blueprint for our lives. We hope that God has everything planned out and he will simply reveal this plan. However, if we think that God will speak directly into our ears and tell us exactly what we’re supposed to do, we will be disappointed. Perhaps a balance exists between waiting for God to speak and chalking everything up to God’s will.

Clear Channel

God communicates if we are tuned into him. Through our diligent prayer and Bible study he will speak to us, although he does not communicate every detail for our lives. He still leaves choices up to us. God is, after all, a God of choice. He guides us, but we must take the initiative to make the choices.

An example of God’s communication happened recently to me. My life had become routine and I began to feel that my spiritual life was stagnant. It seemed that I had fallen into a deep rut, with no escape. I decided to ask God to shake my life up and give me passion again. In response, I felt God communicating clearly and guiding me in a most unexpected way, when I made a casual visit to the Campus Ministries department at Union College. I don’t remember why I had walked in that morning; it may have been to say hello to Julie, who worked there. I do remember asking a casual question about the student missions program.

“Are you going to be a student missionary next year?” my bubbly roommate asked excitedly.

“No.” My word sounded unsure. “I wasn’t planning to go anywhere next year. I just want to concentrate on finishing school so I can get a job.”

“Do you want a pre-application?” she persisted.

“If I’m not going to go next year, then why do I need a pre-application?”

“Take it anyway. Just because you fill this out doesn’t mean that you are going to be a missionary next year.”

I looked at her and could tell she was determined to give me the application. “Okay,” I said with a smile. “I guess it couldn’t hurt just to fill it out.”

Was it a coincidence that the next day after

This responsibility goes beyond trying to hear what God is telling us. Part of listening is doing.

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Blueprint, God? Can We Know His Plan for Our Lives?

God is a God
of recovery.
If we trust him,
he can turn
around even
the worst
situations.
God doesn't
have a blueprint
for our lives,
but he does
have a plan
for us...

I had asked God to shake my life up, I found myself filling out this application to be a student missionary? I don't pretend to know what God's will is for my life. But I feel that God was leading me. God is always communicating. We are responsible for listening.

This responsibility goes beyond trying to hear what God is telling us. Part of listening is doing. It doesn't do any good to listen to God if we don't act upon what we hear. Eventually we need to get out of our overstuffed easy chairs and move. God gave us the gift of discernment so we would act upon his direction.

Wrong Choice?

After church, my conversation with Julie picked up again. "Julie, can we ever really know the will of God?" I asked.

"I don't really think so. He guides us, but we can never know the complete mind of God." I nodded as Julie began talking again. "Do you ever think that maybe it is God's will that you make a wrong choice?"

I thought about this for a moment. "Maybe wrong choices can turn into God's will. They might

not have been what God wanted for us originally, but God can turn them around to his glory."

Perhaps it wasn't God's will for Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. I may never understand why God put that tree in the garden, but I believe God didn't want them to eat from it. But once the mistake was made, God took a bad situation and worked it out for good. He sent his Son to die so that we might live. Through the sinful act of disobedience he bruised the serpent's head and defeated sin forever.

God is a God of recovery. If we trust him, he can turn around even the worst situations. God doesn't have a blueprint for our lives, but he does have a plan for us: "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11, RSV). When we act on this plan, our lives — and our mistakes — can demonstrate what is the will of God.

Oh, by the way, I'm in Palau this year.

Rebekah Story is a junior communication major from Valley Center, Kansas.



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One Step at a Time: How to Keep Youth Interested each Sabbath

I allowed myself to be vulnerable because I knew in the end the juice would be worth the squeeze. Unfortunately, the Bible study fizzled out, and I was back into the ho-hum of Sabbath School and church. My interest faltered and, as stated earlier, I left the church. I never told anyone I was leaving, and they never asked.

Was it anyone's fault? No. Is it a problem? Yes.

Listen

Communication between generations is a problem that can be fixed. Young people can speak up and be willing to voice their opinions in a straightforward and mature manner. Adults can be ready to listen to these concerns and suggestions with open minds, remembering that longevity shouldn't be the only impetus. Not every complaint warrants action, but each should warrant an attentive, listening ear.

Looking back, I could have said something to my parents, an elder, or even the pastor. I could have shared the struggles I was having. I could have asked for help or offered suggestions as to what would make the Sabbath experience more appealing. Why didn't I? *I am too young*, I thought. *They won't listen to me*. To youth I say, if we *don't* talk, others *can't* listen.

However, once we start talking, I'll bet most will be grateful for our input. What if we get ignored or pushed to the side? Talk to someone else and keep talking until someone finally listens. It won't be easy, but it definitely will be worth the effort.

To the more experienced churchgoers, I say, "Don't sit back and wait: talk to the youth and find out what's on their minds. Show them genuine interest in their opinions." This is at least a step in the right direction.

Writing in *Religious Education*, an Andrews University Theological Seminary publication, Roger Dudley concluded, "It seems reasonable to believe that at least 40 percent to 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s."

We have the power to stop this mass exodus. We need to listen. We need to ask questions. Our worship of God shouldn't just be a weekly ritual but a daily lifestyle, one that fosters growth, encourages learning, and discourages drowning.

Caleb Herwick is a junior communication and pre-law major from Milltown, Wisconsin.

Shattering Cement Flowers: Cultivating a Place for the World to Grow

Danielle and Ben Fullerton desperately needed a newer car. The rusty, worn-out pile of metal and tires slowly dying in the driveway wasn't as reliable

as it once had been, and they had a baby on the way. One bright, fall Sunday morning they decided to start their search. Confident and hopeful, they set out scouring the city, scouting every dealership and flipping through every *Auto Trader* they could get their hands on. Too soon dusk pushed its way into the sky, and Danielle and Ben still hadn't found anything that met their needs.

They wanted something bigger, something more comfortable, something with four-wheel-drive and anti-lock brakes, something reliable that would last a long time. Tired and disappointed, they puttered to the last dealership on the edge of town. Then they saw it. Heaven's light seemed to beam down on this shiny, black, affordable, *perfect* vehicle. They couldn't believe their luck! With angel choruses ringing in their ears, they hurried over to further examine their newly discovered treasure, not noticing the salesman with slicked-back hair who eyed them for a moment before sauntering in their direction.

"Hey there, folks, I see you found something you like."

"Oh, yes, this is just what we've been looking for!" Danielle gushed.

The salesman looked them over. "Are you sure about that?" he asked skeptically. "I mean, how much do you know about this vehicle? There's a lot to know, and you really should be more informed."

"We know enough to see that it's what we'd like to buy," said Ben.

"Looks like the car you have now is in pretty bad shape," the salesman observed. "I doubt you'd be able to take care of this fine vehicle."

"Well, um, can't you just let us try?" pleaded Danielle. "We really like it a lot."

The salesman's brow furrowed. "I don't want our dealership misrepresented if people see you driving

» If God is the only one capable of judging hearts, then we have no right to be exclusive with the hope He has given us to share.

this car and it's not taken care of properly. I mean, we can't let just *anybody* buy a car from us."

Isn't that the purpose of a dealership?" asked Danielle, glancing at Ben in confusion.

"Maybe other, lesser dealerships, but not this one. Until you can prove to me that you will maintain this vehicle to our standards, I simply cannot sell it to you."

The salesman turned abruptly, pulled out a rag, and started dutifully shining the Fullertons' dream car. Danielle and Ben walked dejectedly back to their scrap pile, casting a longing glance back at their lost hope.

Sometimes the Adventist Church is like this dealership. The world we are here to help and uplift is the very world we often shun when it does not measure up to our brick-wall beliefs. The fundamentals we guard and defend so vehemently are those that should draw people to Christ, not keep them away from him.

What is it that makes someone ineligible to be included within the group of believers? Is it smoking or swearing or taste in music? Are these outside things so much worse than the pride and selfishness that all of us hide inside? Is the young woman who strips on the weekends to make ends meet for her fatherless baby somehow more unworthy than the vegan man who rests on the seventh day and verbally abuses his wife the other six? If God is the only one capable of judging hearts, then we have no right to be exclusive with the hope He has given us to share.

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Shattering Cement Flowers: Cultivating a Place for the World to Grow

» The church will not crumble, religion will not break up, God will not fall apart if we decide to be less defensive and more inviting.

Room to Grow

Bright, smiling peonies. Lush, full roses. Color-drenched tulips and graceful lilies. Soft petals exhaling the sweetest of aromas adorned by dewdrops that catch the warm sun. Majestic trees giving off shade and a subtle green glow, and sturdy cedar benches inviting anyone to sit and enjoy the sights and sounds of birds' happy chatter.

A person with a garden like this would be justifiably proud, right? What if that person carried in buckets of cement and poured it all over this garden, smothering its fullness and vitality?

"It's crazy!" you might say. "Why would someone destroy something so beautiful?"

What if this was their reply? "It was so perfect and beautiful that I didn't want it to change at all. I wanted to preserve it just as it was."

Still think that's crazy? I do. Often we do this with our own faith and beliefs. We pour cement over what seems to be right, refusing to budge from that, forgetting that we have to be flexible to allow our faith to grow. When everything is set in stone, there can be no more cultivation, no more tilling or fertilizing. While cement may allow a flower or two sprout up through the cracks, it can never produce the full, thriving garden that soft, pliable, and fertile soil produces.

In the same way, the mysteries and intricacies of God can never fit into one set standard. Of course there are things in our faith that we need to cling to tightly, such as salvation through the grace of Christ.

We can hold on to those *and* open our minds and hearts to other concepts as well. Coupled with the promises and revelations of Jesus in His Word, new ideas can strengthen our faith instead of weakening it.

With God as huge and constant as he is, we need not fear newness and change. When we realize this, we can start to truly accept and trust other people. Instead of defending our choice to pour cement over our garden, we can invite them to enjoy its sights and smells while they join us in caring for it.

The church will not crumble, religion will not break up, God will not fall apart if we decide to be less defensive and more inviting. We are not the ones keeping everything together. God has parts for us to play, purposes for us to fulfill, but he is in control. He has been working things out since the beginning and will continue doing so, even after we are gone. We can be no use to this shifting world if we refuse to acknowledge and accept that.

We can let others own and drive the car. We can put up with some weeds in our pot for the sake of a growing, verdant garden.

Our purpose in this world is the world.

Andrea Cox graduated with a communication degree in May, 2007 and is now in Prague, Czech Republic.

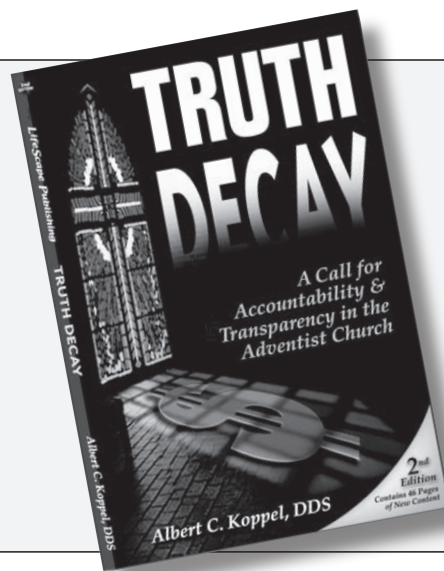
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Visions and the Word:

The Authority of Ellen White in Relation to the Authority of Scripture in the Seventh-day Adventist Movement-Part II

ADVENTISTS AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In 1894, A. T. Jones had argued that the Bible should be studied through the writings of Ellen White. His approach took firm hold of large sectors of Adventism early in the Twentieth Century, even

though there were influential voices arguing against it. The first major struggle on this issue in the new century was stimulated by a controversy over the identity of the “daily” of Daniel 8. In that struggle, those who advocated the older interpretation held that the new one would subvert the denomination’s theology, because a statement in Ellen White’s *Early Writings* supported the traditional Adventist interpretation; to make any change would undermine Mrs. White’s authority.

One spokesman for this group was quite explicit on his view of the relation of her writings to the Bible: “We ought to understand such expressions by the aid of the Spirit of Prophecy [i.e., Ellen White’s writings]. . . . For this purpose the Spirit of Prophecy comes to us. . . . All points are to be solved” in that manner.¹

Ellen White disagreed with the argument. She requested that her writings “not be used” to settle the issue. “I entreat of Elders Haskell, Loughborough, Smith, and others of our leading brethren, that they make no reference to my writings to sustain their views of ‘the daily.’ . . . I cannot consent that any of my writings shall be taken as settling this matter.”²

W. C. White also provides us with an interesting insight into the issue of his mother’s relationship to the Bible. “Some of our brethren,” he wrote, “are much surprised and disappointed because Mother does not write something decisive that will settle the question as to what is the ‘daily’ and thus bring an end to the present disagreement. At times I have hoped for this, but as I have seen that God has not seen fit to settle the matter by a revelation thru His messenger, I have come more and more to believe

» Daniells and his colleagues in 1919 may have had a correct position on the relation of Ellen White’s writings to the Bible, but their timing couldn’t have been more disastrous.

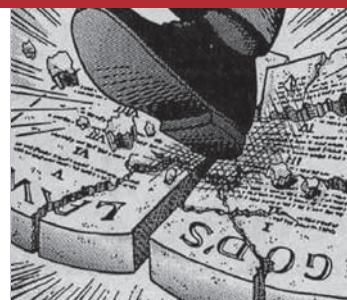
that it was the will of God that a thorough study should be made of the Bible and history, till a clear understanding of the truth was gained.”³

Her refusal to function as an infallible Bible commentator should not have surprised anyone. She had not assumed that role in the past, but had always pointed people to their need to study the Bible for themselves. Never did she take the position that “you must let *me* tell you what the Bible really means.”

In spite of Ellen White’s clarity on the topic, the battle over the identity of the daily rumbled along for more than two decades. The topic of the daily itself wasn’t all that crucial. The real issue was Ellen White’s authority as a divine commentator on Scripture. Such titles as *Have We an Infallible “Spirit of Prophecy”?* reflect the sentiments of those who were so concerned with the topic that in 1922 they utilized the issue of Ellen White’s authority to overthrow Arthur G. Daniells, who had been president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists since 1901.⁴

The authoritative role of Ellen White was not just a preoccupation with denominational dissidents. Leaders at the center of the church also espoused it. Thus F. M. Wilcox, influential editor of the denomination’s *Review and Herald*, could claim in 1921 that her writings “constitute a spiritual commentary on the Scriptures.” And in 1946

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Visions and the Word

» The middle decades of the Twentieth Century found Adventists more and more using Ellen White's writings both to settle biblical issues and to do theology.

Wilcox asserted before the General Conference session that Ellen White's writings were "far above all other commentaries" because they were "inspired commentaries, motivated by the promptings of the Holy Spirit. . . . The one who fails to make this distinction reveals that he has little if any faith in the doctrine of spiritual gifts in their application to the church today."⁵

By mid-century the Wilcox position had become by far the dominant one in the church, so much so that the extensive *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (1953-1957) had a section for unpublished and out-of-print Ellen White remarks at the end of each volume and a list of references to her published usages of various texts after the discussion of each biblical chapter. That very arrangement led people to see her writings more than ever as an inspired commentary on the Bible. The denomination by and large hadn't learned much from its history.

Up to her death in 1915 she sounded the same message on the relation of her writings to the Bible. In 1903, for example, she wrote that "little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light."⁶ In 1911 she noted, "In His word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation.

The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. . . . The Spirit was not given — nor can it ever be bestowed — to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested."⁷

Others may have drifted from the position of early Adventism on the authority of Ellen White in relation to the Bible, but she appears to have kept on course. And she was not the only one. The denomination's 1919 Bible conference of church administrators and religion teachers is remarkable for its openness on the topic. C. L. Benson, for example, pointed out disapprovingly that many Adventists put

more emphasis on Ellen White's writings than on the Bible.⁸ And A. G. Daniells, the denomination's president, remarked that "we are to get our interpretation from this Book [the Bible], primarily. I think that the Book explains itself, and I think we can understand the Book, fundamentally, through the Book, without resorting to the Testimonies to prove up on it." W. E. Howell, education director of the General Conference, noted that "the spirit of prophecy says the Bible is its own expositor." To that comment Daniells responded: "Yes, but I have heard ministers say that the spirit of prophecy is the interpreter of the Bible. I heard it preached at the General Conference some years ago [by A. T. Jones], when it was said that the only way we could understand the Bible was through the writings of the spirit of prophecy." J. M. Anderson added that "he also said 'infallible interpreter.'" Daniells responded by observing that that "is not our position, and it is not right that the spirit of prophecy is the only safe interpreter of the Bible. That is a false doctrine, a false view. It will not stand."

Daniells went on to note correctly that the Adventist pioneers "got their knowledge of the Scriptures as they went along through the Scriptures themselves. It pains me to hear the way some people talk, that the spirit of prophecy led out and gave all the instruction, all the doctrines, to the pioneers. . . . That is not according to the writings themselves. . . . We are told how . . . they searched these scriptures together and studied and prayed over them until they got together on them." He then expressed his dismay at those Adventists "who will hunt around to find a statement in the Testimonies and spend no time in deep study of the Book."⁹

Daniells and his colleagues in 1919 may have had a correct position on the relation of Ellen White's writings to the Bible, but their timing couldn't have been more disastrous. The 1920s would see the fundamentalist crisis over biblical authority reach an explosive climax, and Adventism would be drawn into the vortex of a struggle that for them entailed not only biblical issues but also issues related to Ellen White's authority. Those who spoke openly at the 1919 Bible conference, including the denomination's leader, would lose their jobs. Meanwhile, the minutes of this very open meeting were purposefully locked up "in a vault," where they were lost for six decades. The conference was forgotten, along with the position on authority held by Ellen White and the founders of the church.¹⁰

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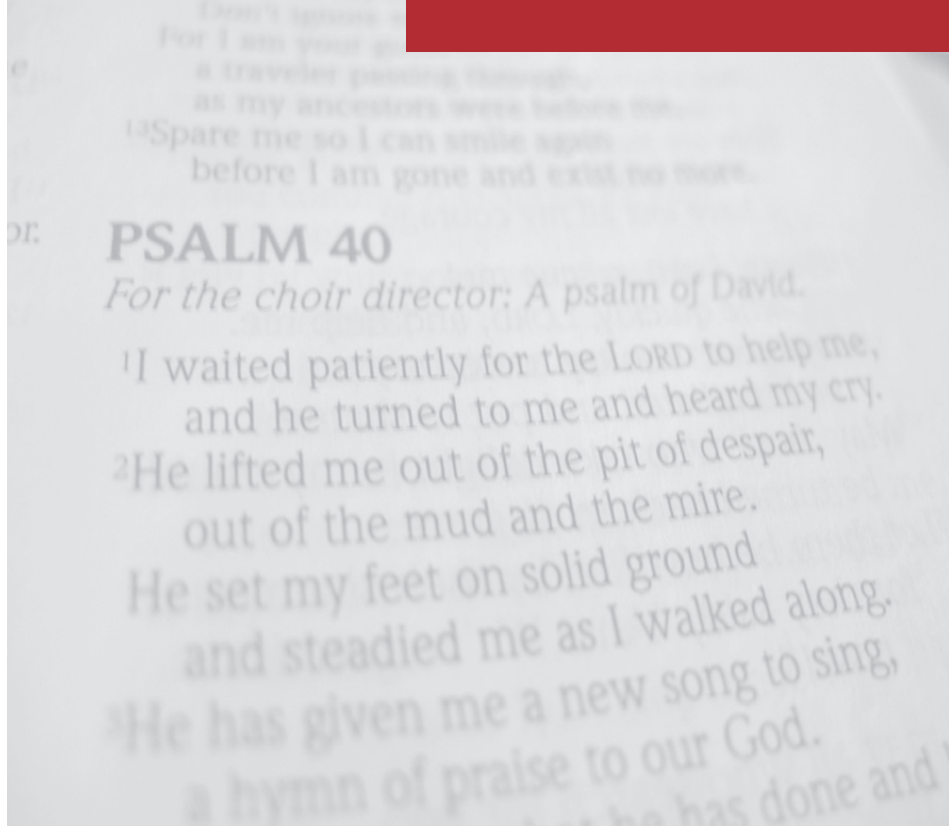
The middle decades of the Twentieth Century found Adventists more and more using Ellen White's writings both to settle biblical issues and to do theology. Few would have openly admitted that they were putting Ellen White's authority above that of the Bible, but their writings and discussions indicated that all too many Adventists were spending more time with Ellen White than with the Bible. For them she had become the final word on any biblical passage that she had utilized, and a doctrinal authority. A word from Ellen White tended to end discussion. The official position of the denomination may not have changed, but practice certainly had. By the 1960s the new practices had become firmly entrenched, and it appeared to most Adventists that that is how their church had always utilized Ellen White's authority.

Toward a Healthier Perspective

Those days of historical innocence began to crumble in 1970 when *Spectrum* (an Adventist publication independent of the church) and a new generation of academically trained historical and biblical scholars began publishing articles on Ellen White, calling for a critical reexamination of her writings. In the next decade and a half nearly every aspect of her work was rigorously examined, including her role in doctrinal formation in early Adventism and the relationship of the authority of her writings to the Bible.¹¹ Between the early 1980s and the late 1990s, the historic pattern of that relationship as outlined earlier in this paper was becoming more well known among significant sectors of the leadership, clergy, and reading laity of the denomination.

Significantly, in 1981 Robert Olson, director of the Ellen G. White Estate,¹² faced the problems inherent in the infallible-commentary approach when he wrote that "to give an individual complete interpretive control over the Bible would, in effect, elevate that person above the Bible. It would be a mistake to allow even the apostle Paul to exercise interpretive control over all other Bible writers. In such a case, Paul, and not the whole Bible, would be one's final authority."¹³

Olson went on to note that "Ellen White's writings are generally homiletical or evangelistic in nature and not strictly exegetical." In fact, she often accommodated the words of a text to her own homiletical needs. Thus she could derive quite different meanings from the same passage, depending on her purpose. Olson does note correctly that she sometimes interprets texts exegetically, even though she "generally" spoke homiletically.¹⁴ But that fact does not imply that she ever claimed to be a divine commentary on Scripture.



In the early Twenty-first Century, mainline Adventism has a healthier understanding of the relationship between Ellen White's authority and that of the Bible. Its theologians and biblical interpreters have a better grasp of the biblical position and the position of the founders of the church, including Ellen White herself. In practice that means that she is neither a determiner of doctrine nor the final word on the meaning of Scripture. But old habits and ways of thinking die hard for some, even when they know the facts. And there are many mainline Adventists who haven't even caught up with the facts yet. But when all is said and done, mainline Adventism is light years ahead of where it was in 1980 in its understanding of Ellen White's authority.

The same cannot be said for sectarian Adventism. The perfectionistic, fundamentalistic sub-denominations within the denomination still largely rely on Ellen White for their theology and have no problem viewing her as an infallible commentary on the Bible. This sector of Adventism has even developed an Ellen White Study Bible that has Ellen White notes and marginal references. Such a Bible would have been totally rejected in early Adventism. Even though the Study Bible is published by an independent group, it is unfortunately marketed by the main denominational publisher.

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Visions and the Word

» The question of religious authority has been a lively concern of Adventism in the past and apparently will continue to be so in the future.

Sectarian Adventist groups are critical of mainline Adventism for its “betrayal” of the prophet and often consider themselves in one form or another to be the true historic Adventists. Unfortunately, their understanding of history focuses on the period from the 1920s through the 1950s and the approach to Ellen White’s writings set forth by A. T. Jones in the 1890s. They have failed to capture the biblical understanding of the founders of the denomination, including that of Ellen White herself.

The question of religious authority has been a lively concern of Adventism in the past and apparently will continue to be so in the future. Overall, Adventism since the 1880s has done better in theory than in practice in relating the two levels of authority. But the founders, including Ellen White, managed to be consistent in both theory and practice. Those Adventists who understand their history on the topic are in an advantaged position to harmonize the two today. But those who remain innocent of that history will most likely continue the problematic approach of the mid-Twentieth Century, all the while proclaiming that they have it right.

George Knight, Ed.D., is an SDA historian and educator. He is emeritus professor of church history at Andrews University. He is the author of many books on Ellen White and Adventist history.

This article is an abbreviated version (see www.atoday.com for the full text) of a paper read at a conference on religious authority at Brigham Young University in April 2006. The presentations are being published by Mercer University Press.



¹ S. N. Haskell to W. W. Prescott, Nov. 15, 1907.

² E. G. White, “Our Attitude Toward Doctrinal Controversy,” MS 11, July 31, 1910.

³ W. C. White to P. T. Magan, July 31, 1910.

⁴ Claude E. Holmes, *Have We an Infallible “Spirit of Prophecy”?* (n.p.: by the author, 1920); Knight, *Search*, p. 139. For a helpful treatment of issues surrounding the battle over the daily, see Gilbert Murray Valentine, “William Warren Prescott: Seventh-day Adventist Educator.” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1982), pp. 389-426.

⁵ F. M. Wilcox, “The Study of the Bible, Aided by the Writings of the Spirit of Prophecy,” *Review and Herald*, Feb. 3, 1921, p. 2; F. M. Wilcox, “The Testimony of Jesus,” *Review and Herald*, June 9, 1946, p. 75.

⁶ Ellen G. White, “An Open Letter,” *Review and Herald*, Jan. 20, 1903, p. 15.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*, 1911 ed. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), pp. vii-ix.

⁸ “The Use of the Spirit of Prophecy in Our Teaching of Bible and History,” 1919 Bible Conference Minutes, July 30, p. 39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

¹⁰ Donald E. Mansell, “How the 1919 Bible Conference Transcript Was Found,” unpub. MS, July 6, 1975; [Donald E. Mansell], “Sequence of Materials in the 1919 Bible Conference Transcript and Papers,” unpub. MS, cir. 1975, p. xiii; Molleus Couperus, “The Bible Conference of 1919,” *Spectrum*, May 1979, pp. 23-26.

¹¹ For a brief summary of the debates over Ellen White in the late twentieth century, see Knight, *Search*, pp. 184-188.

¹² In her will Ellen White established the Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., to be in charge of her literary estate. Its offices are located in the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists world headquarters building in Silver Spring, Maryland.

¹³ Robert W. Olson, *One Hundred and One Questions on the Sanctuary and on Ellen White* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981), p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42; George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1997).

Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives

Brian Bull, Fritz Guy, and Ervin Taylor, eds.

RIVERSIDE: ADVENTIST TODAY FOUNDATION, 2006

For those Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) who have not already read this book, consider doing so. It is an eye-opening experience. Not so much because of the arguments made (briefly discussed below), but because of those who make the arguments.

Over the past several years, the SDA Church has organized several Faith and Science Conferences to internally discuss the topic of origins and review the SDA Church's official position on the literal interpretation of the first few chapters of the Genesis account (Glacier View, Colorado, and Ogden, Utah). The General Conference has since restated the official SDA Church position in a more emphatic matter, to include the following:

1. We affirm the historic Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Genesis 1 that life on earth was created in six literal days and is of recent origin.
2. We affirm the biblical account of a catastrophic Flood, an act of God's judgment that affected the whole planet, as an important key to understanding earth history.
3. Church leaders at all levels be encouraged to assess and monitor the effectiveness with which denominational systems and programs succeed in preparing young people, including those attending non-Adventist schools, with a biblical understanding of origins and an awareness of the challenges they may face in respect to this understanding.

Given these specific affirmations of a fundamental position and key recommendations concerning this particular issue, it is very interesting to read what self-styled "contemporary Adventists" have to say in *Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives*. These prominent men argue strongly against the notions of a literal seven-day creation week in recent history as well as a literal worldwide Noachian flood; that the significant majority of SDA scientists and even many SDA theologians simply do not believe and cannot honestly support or teach the Church's stated

position on this issue. Yet they somehow continue to carry the title of SDA?

Other forms of religion, such as Hinduism, are much more compatible with evolution than is Christianity. The SDA view of God, in particular, presents God as a being who is actually concerned and grieved when a little sparrow falls wounded to the ground. Yet, early in this book Richard Rice attempts to counter by arguing that animals really don't suffer when they experience pain; that animals may experience pain, but only humans can experience true suffering.

Why then should God be concerned at all for the pain suffered by animals, be it a single sparrow or billions of sentient beings over millions of years? Why then should we be concerned? The Bible points out that, "The whole of creation groans and travails in pain together until now" (Romans 8:22). We are told that this condition is abnormal in God's universe. Evolution requires survival of the fittest — disease, suffering, pain and death of sentient beings. Would anyone call this situation "good"?

Why make a New Heaven and a New Earth if such pain, predation, and death really "make important contributions to our lives [for which we should be] grateful"?! (pp. 11). We aren't talking about bacteria or orange peels here or some little prick on the finger. Sure, predation, as Rice explains it, may be a necessary evil in a sinful place, but is it really ideal? Just because we may ultimately gain something from this current experience of sin does not mean that this experience was ever in God's original ideal plan.

Several authors try to separate science from religion. Brian Bull, a very intelligent man and scientist himself, argues that "pure science" only deals with empirical observations without making any value judgments whatsoever — unlike religion. As much as I respect Dr. Bull, I cannot for the life of me think of any useful purely empirical observations that are entirely independent of interpretation or value judgments. The very basis of science includes the ability to interpret evidence and establish predictive value; the making of *value* judgments.

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a better position in the crowd, people surrounding Jesus touched him constantly. Only this woman, hungering for relief, experienced his soul-healing power. This woman left satisfied. Encountering God's goodness, she sampled one of the amazing dishes on the Chef's menu (see John 13:17).

In reference to this story, Ellen White comments, "Genuine faith [accepting Jesus as our personal Redeemer] is life. A living faith means an increase of vigor, a confiding trust, by which the soul becomes a conquering power" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 347). We need not be satisfied with a lukewarm experience. Jesus gave us himself and all heaven has to offer so that we may have life abundantly.

Taste of Heaven

The next night, as Dean parked outside "their" restaurant, Sharon reached for his hand. It was trembling.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Actually," Dean said, "I've been waiting for this evening all my life."

Inside, Sharon held onto Dean's arm as a waitress escorted them to the corner booth.

"Welcome! My name is Esther. I'll be at your service tonight, so if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask. Why don't I give you a couple minutes to decide, then I'll be back to take your order."

"Thanks. We'd like that," said Dean.

His gaze leapt to Sharon; she was smiling.

"Wow!" Dean said, half an hour later and halfway through his eggplant parmesan. "We were missing out!"

"Tell me about it!" Sharon scooped up more spinach and artichoke fondue onto her crostini. "I can't wait to get this recipe from the chef. I bet I could make this at home."

"Really? That would be amazing!"

When Sharon and Dean left the restaurant that evening, they were full to overflowing and already planning next week's dinner. Sharon clutched the chef's fondue recipe in her hand; Dean had plans to invite some of his buddies over for some eggplant parmesan. They had tasted the chef's goodness at last.

Emily Eskildsen graduated with a communication degree in May, 2007. She served as a summer editorial intern at Guide magazine and is now teaching at Cross Street Christian School in Anderson, Indiana.

After sharing a bit of heaven with his friends, Jesus would often say, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." This blessing comes only after knowledge grows into action. Sharon and Dean knew many things about their favorite restaurant, but they were never fully satisfied. The chef prepared to fill them; he spent hours sautéing, chopping, and spicing. But until they saw their emaciated frames reflected in the mirror, neither Sharon nor Dean ever tasted the chef's work on their behalf. No matter how much they raved about the food, no matter how much they enjoyed sitting together in the candlelight, they left empty.

God invites us to eat. He tantalizes our senses with mouth-watering sights and smells and sets the menu in front of us. Then he waits, demanding freedom, longing for us to taste his goodness.

If we sit in the same pew week after week, enjoying the "clink and hum" of church music, imagining that hearing a stimulating sermon or reading an exceptional book are enough, we miss out. Our reaction must be more than intellectual agreement. As one of my favorite Christian authors puts it, "We believe what we do more than we do what we believe."

We may imagine we believe the food to be amazing, and we may think we believe God is good. But until we see our great need reflected back to us by the Holy Spirit and choose to eat what he's prepared, we're just fooling ourselves. Leaving the restaurant without a meal implies that the food is bad or that we aren't hungry, and if we continue to go home empty, our actions may turn to unbelief. The restaurant we once loved sours while our bodies and beliefs atrophy.

Conversely, tasting the sweetness of a chocolate-covered strawberry or the spiciness of Indian cuisine will only increase our belief in the chef's excellence. Savoring her food strengthens and satisfies.

The biblical account of the bleeding woman who reached with trembling hand to grasp the hem of Jesus' robe illustrates this active faith. Jostling for

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Understanding Genesis: Contemporary Adventist Perspectives

Along with Fritz Guy, Brian Bull argues that the biblical authors had no real concept of science or natural law — that the automatic “default” for everything, good or bad, was seen by the biblical writers as resulting from God’s “miraculous” will and action without any sense of natural law or chance events outside of God as a direct cause. The problem here is that many biblical writers describe various tests to rule out “natural” or “chance” events.

Consider, for example, the interesting account of the Philistines sending the Ark of God back to Israel by ox cart. If the oxen went to Bethel, it was clearly divine intervention and not “chance” because the oxen would “naturally” tend to remain with their newly born calves. Or, consider Gideon’s fleece experiment . . .

Ivan Blazen, whom I deeply respect and admire as a brilliant theologian and Christian counselor, argues that Genesis 1 is neither scientific nor unscientific, but non-scientific; having other “transcendent interests” beyond the realm of science. The problem here is that without the potential of physical testability and falsifiability no transcendent notion of “truth” (like God and his Nature) has any validity over any other potential theory of God’s existence or action. Yet, Blazen concludes that, “God sustains the world against the powers of chaos.” Based on what? Even Christ referred to his miracles and to fulfilled prophecy as evidence for his metaphysical claims.

But what about Ervin Taylor’s argument that the theory of evolution did not affect or bias the theory of long ages being represented by the geologic layers and fossil record? Regardless of motive, the theory of evolution is generally understood to be dependent upon vast spans of time; that evolutionary mechanisms could not produce the vast array high-level biosystem complexity that we see today in just a few thousand years. What most scientists do not seem to realize is that even if trillions of years were available, it wouldn’t be nearly enough time to overcome the statistical problems with the proposed evolutionary mechanism of random mutation and natural selection.

Then there is the argument that very reliable dating methods that all seem to agree with each other so perfectly. As far as I’ve been able to tell, a little healthy skepticism goes a long way in this regard. Many of the dating methods discussed are calibrated against each other. Various patterns are even manipulated and refined by a process known as “tuning” in order to match a predetermined

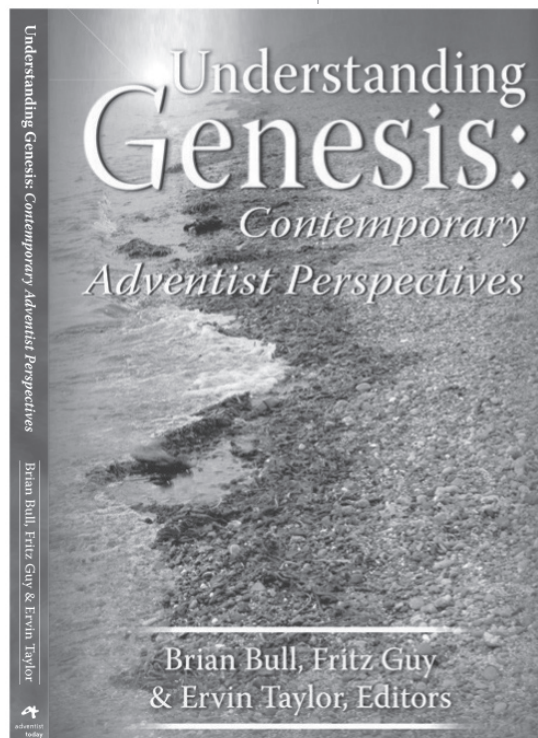
pattern. I’ve done a little bit of reading into the technical aspects and underlying assumptions behind several of these dating methods. So far, the more I read about them, the less solid they appear.

Now, it does seem to me that the material of the Earth and of the universe as a whole may be very old indeed. However, as far as I’ve been able to tell so far, there is a great deal of physical evidence to suggest that *life* on Earth and the formation almost all of the sedimentary layers of the geologic record were formed recently and rapidly.

So what? What does it matter? Why does the governing body of the SDA Church consider its interpretation of the first few chapters of Genesis so “fundamental”? Well, as I understand it, the traditional SDA view, if one sees the evidence for it, is a much more hopeful position than that espoused by the contemporary Adventist authors of this book review. Their view, if true, removes much of the solid basis behind the hope of the Gospel’s “good news.”

So, how do we really know what God is like or even if he exists at all, if little in the Bible really happened as described? Sure, the creation story, the story of Adam and Eve in a perfect garden paradise, story of Noah’s flood, Jonah and the whale, or the virgin birth are all nice stories. Even as fables they may present some important truths, no doubt. But they say a whole lot more if they are *really* true. Is Genesis just an interesting tall tale? Or did it really happen? How about life after death? Is heaven real, or just a tall tale? Does it matter?

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Feature | Alden Thompson

Devout Calvinist Manoah and His Practical Methodist Wife

In Christianity, the differences between inquiring and affirming minds have often led to sharp divisions between people and communities, between those who celebrate God's power and those who celebrate his goodness.

If you've grown up with the Bible, you know about Samson: Delilah's muscle-man, gate crasher, fox hunter. That Samson.

But have you recently read the story from the Bible itself, not from Uncle Arthur, but from Judges 13 to 16? And were you inspired to worship God more fervently and to love your fellow human beings more graciously?

"Yeah, right!" mutters the "liberal," suppressing a cynical impulse. Party animal, liar, murderer. "Yeah, right!"

"Why, of course," exclaims the "conservative" who conscientiously reads the Bible through every year. "It's an inspiring story of how God can bless the efforts of even flawed human beings."

Between those two extremes are a great multitude who don't read anything at all, or at most, headlines, ads, and street signs. Or who read everything except the Bible. Or who read it selectively in a sanitized modern revision. And these can all be good, church-going people.

But we should note one more group of believers who may or may not be reading their Bibles, but who would quarrel with the premise that reading the Bible should help us love God and one another. If I had said "fear" God and "warn" people, we'd hear an amen. But I used the word "love" — too soft a word for these well-intentioned and serious-minded conservatives. They are a startling counterfoil to the laid-back liberals who think that love is a very good word indeed.

The trouble is that "love," "warn," and "fear" are all quite biblical. So we pick the words that suit our temperament and off we go, intent on remaking the church into our image, rather than God's. But those of gentler stock may not stay to watch; they'll just leave. Seeing all that, George Bernard Shaw commented wryly: "No one ever believes that the Bible means what it says; he is always convinced that it says what he means."

Samson and his parents to the rescue. It is one of those marvelous "examples" Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 10:11, examples "written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come." So, according to Paul, everything in the Bible somehow points to "last-day events," to use traditional Adventist language. Let's explore how that works out in this wild story from the era of the judges. Here the preamble is longer; the punch line comes at the end.

First, a guiding star from Jesus: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12 NRSV). Amazing! A one-verse summary of the Old Testament, a *Reader's Digest* version for those who don't want to read the whole thing. And taking that verse seriously means that even the story of Samson belongs inside the tent.

Thoughtful attention to the story of Jesus also reveals the startling truth that he reverses traditional attitudes toward authority. In a traditional culture like that of the Old Testament, one finds a hierarchy of people, not a hierarchy of values. You obey the authority at all costs: prophet, priest, or king. Refusal puts your life at risk. When Joshua took over from Moses, for example, the people sounded precisely that note: "Whoever rebels against your orders and disobeys your words, whatever you command, shall be put to death." (Joshua 1:18). In short, don't think, obey. All commands are of equal value.

By contrast, Jesus taught a hierarchy of values (not of people) and equality of people (not of values). When James and John asked for the top rank in Jesus' new kingdom, for example, he brought them back down to earth: "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:25-27, TNIV).

Now to speak of a hierarchy of values (e.g. greatest command, second greatest [Matthew 22:35-40]) and the equality of people as the guiding

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principles of Jesus' kingdom, does not negate those enduring values that define the very character of God: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23, NRSV). Nor do we negate respect for authority. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities," wrote Paul. Why? "Because rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" (Romans 13:1, 3, NRSV).

But what if a ruler turns out to be evil, working against the fruits of the Spirit? If we belong to Jesus' kingdom, we may choose to confront the authority, even with anger. Indeed, the one passage of Scripture that actually commands us to be angry is in the context of communication: "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil" (Ephesians 4:25-27, NRSV).

What complicates all this is the horrible twist that sin has brought into our world. When rulers or leaders turn evil, it is our responsibility to confront evil. In Revelation 13, for example, those who submit to the authority of the beast receive the dreaded mark of the beast. That's why believers in totalitarian regimes face such hard times. If they submit to authority (Romans 13), they could receive the mark of the beast (Revelation 13).

Even in our daily lives there are complexities that drive us to our knees. Kindness, for example, is a fruit of the Spirit, but to be kind without being firm could result in what Ellen White called "a cruel kindness," a softness that results in flabby character and eternal loss.

It is also true that some temperaments confront authorities more easily than others. Some need to ask questions (the liberals) while others need answers (the conservatives). Yet both are necessary. And these temperaments shape our view of God (theology). If a church (or a business, or a government) doesn't maintain a proper balance between inquiry and affirmation, heavy weather is sure to follow.

In Christianity, the differences between inquiring and affirming minds have often led to sharp divisions between people and communities, between those who celebrate God's power and those who celebrate his goodness. Even though both traits are part of God's character, we tend to gravitate to one or the other. In the Christian era, "power" people have looked to Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and Whitefield. They revel in the knowledge of God's sovereignty, human depravity, and divine grace, and they love the New Testament books of Romans and Galatians.

By contrast, "goodness" people line up behind Pelagius, Arminius, and Wesley. They revel in God's goodness and celebrate human freedom and responsibility. Their favorite New Testament books are likely to be Matthew, John, and James.

We should note carefully that God has included both kinds of books in the Bible. There is crossover between them, to be sure, but balance is more likely to come from hearing the whole choir, not a solo.

And now let's see how the story of Samson's parents illustrates all that.

The story begins when the angel of the LORD — a polite Old Testament way of referring to God himself (Yahweh) — appears to Samson's unnamed and barren mother to announce that she will bear a special "nazirite to God," a child set apart for service to God.

After hearing his wife's story, Manoah pleads with Yahweh for a return visit to tell them how to raise the child. His prayer is answered by a second visit — remarkably, to his wife again, when she is alone. She runs to get her husband. When he arrives the messenger simply reaffirms what he has already told the woman.

Manoah still thinks he is speaking just to a "man" and asks if he can prepare him a meal. "I won't eat it," says the messenger, "but you can prepare a burnt offering for Yahweh."

Food. Flames. The angel of the Yahweh ascending in the flames. Terror. "We shall surely die for we have seen God," exclaims Manoah to his wife. Manoah is a "Calvinist," a devout believer in the overwhelming power of God. He "knew" you don't just saunter into God's presence and survive.

But his wife has been deeply moved by God's goodness, and she speaks a practical "Methodist" exhortation to her frightened husband: "If Yahweh had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these, or now announce to us such things as these."

"The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and the LORD blessed him."

The rest of the story is not pretty. But that doesn't matter. Samson's parents can still teach us that a sovereign-God "Calvinist" and a free-will "Methodist" can indeed live together and help each other experience God's presence in their lives. That's a good message for Adventists living in these last days.

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