

The Future of Adventist  
Congregations

The Shrinking of My  
Fundamental Beliefs

Doctrine Doesn't Matter—  
Except When It Does

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# Adventist *Today*

WHAT DO YOU  
BELIEVE?



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## The Shrinking of My Fundamental Beliefs

By Loren Seibold

A WHILE BACK I GOT A NOTE FROM AN *Adventist Today* reader with what seemed a simple question. “How many of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs can I disagree with,” he asked, “before I can no longer consider myself a member ‘in good and regular standing’?”

He might have been surprised if I had written back: “Precisely 21 of the 28, sir. If you agree with only 20, it is time for you to leave.” Rarely, given my formulation of faith, have I found numerical answers to be theologically useful, the 2,300 days notwithstanding.

The older I get, the fewer doctrines I need. I’m down to a mere handful of personal fundamental beliefs. I regard it as a mark of spiritual maturity that I don’t need you to agree with me (and of your immaturity, should you insist that I must agree with you). For me, it is enough that you and I love Jesus Christ, are earnestly striving to be like him, and find ourselves in a community of Adventists who enrich our lives. I suspect I’d be in a minority among Adventists in this, however; I know some who would tell the questioner, “You *must* believe *all* 28!”

How did we get to the point where one’s spiritual suitability is defined by assent to a list of theological statements?

### Crafting Commonality

Human beings are by nature tribal, and tribes instinctively attempt to set up comforting and protective relationships of commonalities.

At first, it was enough to be a descendant of Abraham. But that tribe grew and, by the time of Jesus, was known for its many rules and

customs. A central conflict in the four Gospels, you should remember, is Jesus’ objection to the heavy requirements to qualify as a good Jew. Jesus’ sharpest criticisms were not of ordinary sinners, but of self-righteous leaders who “tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders” (Matt. 23:4, NIV).

Jesus’ own church was small and informal, with Jesus himself at the heart of it. When Jesus left, Paul set about organizing a formal church structure which, I would argue, he did rather too well. Although the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 is now offered by some church leaders as the first General Conference, there’s little evidence that the missionaries followed its advice. Romans 14 directly contradicts the Jerusalem elders’ concerns about meat offered to idols! The church grew not because of them, but in spite of them.

### Formalizing and Enforcing

As long as Jesus, Paul, and the apostles were present, beliefs were alive and dynamic. After those founders had disappeared from the scene, the church hardened into a hierarchical structure.

The Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 was the first of a series of ecumenical councils to formalize doctrine. At this meeting, called by Emperor Constantine I, a presbyter named Arius took issue with the others about the nature of Christ. Arius is often thought of as the first anti-Trinitarian, though in this council the question wasn’t if God were three-in-one, but whether Jesus was God at all.

The attendees voted, contra Arius, that Jesus were “begotten, not made” and was of the same

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substance as the heavenly Father. This abstraction resulted in something more serious: because Arius didn't abandon his disapproved beliefs, one of his clerical enemies poisoned him about 10 years later. (The finger has been pointed at Athanasius, though no one knows for sure.)

Forcing conformity with voted doctrines was henceforth a deadly serious matter; for over a millennium and a half, Christians were episodically persecuted, even martyred, for not believing the right things.

Our Adventist pioneers, fearful because of their minority beliefs, were prescient in understanding the logic of persecution. J. N. Loughborough wrote: "The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth, to commence persecution against such."<sup>1</sup>

Adventist church leaders today have fully accepted that, at minimum, steps one through four are necessary to maintain the integrity of our church. All four were used against controversial Adventist theologian Desmond Ford, and they would be used today against a similarly articulate objector. Church leaders might disown physical persecution, but they're not averse to other types of punishment.

## Voting on God

I find the whole matter of voting about God disturbing. Does a vote by a group of well-meaning believers make any difference to the truth of a matter?

In 1633 Galileo Galilei was taken before the Roman Inquisition, where he was forced to recant his claim that Earth moves around the sun. After his trial, one of his colleagues heard him mutter, "*Eppur si muove*" ("and yet it moves"). Galileo would later write, "It vexes me when they would constrain science by the authority of the Scriptures, and yet do not consider themselves bound to answer reason and experiment."

Suppose a group of Adventists got together and

voted that our planet is flat. Should that affect how an Adventist navigator pilots a ship or airplane? What if we voted that Earth is only 6,000 years old? Does that make it so, regardless of contrary evidence? Or—to continue with the doctrine that resulted in Arius' murder—if we voted that God were three individuals instead of just one, does that separate God into three parts?

To insist that we must all agree on such matters because a General Conference Session voted it suggests a literal misinterpretation of Jesus' teaching that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18, NIV).

You may say that we're only voting on what we agree to hold in common. Yet the moment some modern Arius says, "Wait a minute...I don't believe this part of what you voted for; it doesn't make sense to me," if the church replies, "Okay, henceforth you can no longer hold your job in this church," then we have given that belief power. We won't burn the church worker at the stake, but the threat of losing his job is enough to reify an abstraction into a consequence.

When you set up a creed, you create a wall, a barrier, a thing to either shelter behind or battle against. What need never have been a matter of contention becomes one. The more beliefs—and the more *specific* the beliefs—the greater the potential for conflict. Those who disagree with a doctrine become frustrated, impatient crusaders who threaten the stability of the organization, and their resultant anger is frequently the reason a church must part company with them.

I suspect some readers are right now thinking, "But what else can a religious organization do?"—and there we have precisely identified the embedded problem. Religious organizations act similarly to secular ones when their existence is threatened. They become political and punitive. Religious organizations use the enforcement of beliefs to keep peace, advance growth, and keep the powerful in power, and they will steamroll over

those who object. In the words of organizational analyst Brené Brown, “When the culture of an organization mandates that it is more important to protect the reputation of a system and those in power than it is to protect the basic human dignity of individuals or communities, you can be certain that shame is systemic, money drives ethics, and accountability is dead.”<sup>2</sup>

### They Aren’t Written for You

Churches don’t write fundamental beliefs for you, the believer. “Fundamental” means fundamental for the survival of the *organization*, not fundamental for your happiness or fundamental for your salvation. While church leaders would argue that creeds are needed to reduce confusion and keep us all on the same page, the greater advantage is to the church, to consolidate its power.

Let the doctrine that got Arius killed continue to serve as our example. The “trinity” is an abstraction that was decided by churchmen; the classical trinity formulation appears nowhere in the Bible. So, we may ask: Does salvation depend upon believing that there are three Gods rather than one? Abraham didn’t believe that, and we don’t doubt that Abraham will be saved. (Some have argued that the patriarchs may have thought that a multiplicity of gods and goddesses existed, though they chose to serve only Yahweh.)

There is a long history of leaders who regard religion as a way to control people. Beyond Karl Marx’s dictum that religion is *das Opium des Volkes*, the 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon wrote: “The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.”<sup>3</sup>

Creeds control people in several ways.

First, religious leaders count on the probability that most people won’t question the notion that *official beliefs must be believed*. “I don’t understand how one God is actually three, but ministers and priests know more than I do. It must be important,



or they wouldn’t make such a point of it.” All of us at times let others short-circuit our own thinking.

Second, it silences those who *do* think for themselves. I joined many other pastors in making a compromise with the church: if we’d shut up about our heterodoxies, we would keep the opportunity to minister the grace of Jesus Christ, which is what really mattered to us.

Third, it can be adopted by the “magistrates,” to use Gibbon’s word, and used to enforce religious behaviors—something the United States is currently experiencing with Christian Nationalists in the highest levels of government.

Fundamental beliefs seem more foundational to a religious organization than mere policies, but they are arguably less defensible. Policies are rules that keep the organization running. For example, you shouldn’t have a conflict of interest with the organization that employs you. Such policies have an immediate and concrete purpose: they are rules for

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the organization's healthy functioning. They may be based on biblical principles (i.e., not having conflicts of interest is an expression of honesty), but they aren't claimed to be explicit statements by God.

Most (but not all) doctrines are abstractions said to have the full authority of God behind them. To come back to Arius, the Bible doesn't explicitly define a three-part God, nor is belief in such a three-part God necessary for being a godly person. Plenty of unitarians, Jews, and Muslims are godly. Yet believing that "The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4), as Moses presumably did, would get you fired as an Adventist pastor—even if you argued that you were only following the example of James White.

Church leaders writing fundamental beliefs should heed this warning: "Who could ever have told GOD what to do or taught him his business? What expert would he have gone to for advice, what school would he attend to learn justice?" (Isa. 40:13-14, MSG).

Indeed, adds Isaiah, "He ignores what all the princes say and do" (verse 23, MSG), which undoubtedly includes the princes of the church.

## Progressive Truth

When I read Adventist history, I am astonished by how well our pioneers understood that truths were for a particular time and setting. Two early publications were named *Present Truth* and *Signs of the Times*. The greatness of these women and men was that they responded to the world they lived in; they had the intellectual dexterity to pivot into the moment.

As the years passed, they kept the message contemporary. When the expected return of Jesus didn't happen, they refashioned the message. In an era with nonexistent food laws, poisons employed as medicines, and little understanding of wellness, they introduced preventive health principles, teachings that evolved into scientifically based healthcare institutions that still exist.

Our pioneers were advocates for social justice; almost all were abolitionists and temperance reformers. Ellen White spoke resoundingly against slavery and contributed heavily to Americans of African origin.<sup>4</sup> Early Adventists addressed the tragedies of the world they lived in, resulting in our world-renowned helping agencies.

The church grew because our pioneers mastered the mass media of their day: the printing press. Later, Adventists were among the first to make use of radio and television.

What happened to *progressive* truth? Why has it become so terribly threatening to change teachings and methods to fit the times? Even to say that women should be ordained has led to embarrassing scenes on the floor of major Adventist meetings, where venerable elder church leaders are berated like naughty schoolboys!

James Russell Lowell, writing in the same era as the blossoming of our church, called the failure to embrace contemporaneity "The Present Crisis":

“New occasions teach new duties;  
Time makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still, and onward,  
who would keep abreast of Truth.”

Around the same time, Ellen White wrote: “God wants us all to have common sense, and he wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things”<sup>5</sup>

### Over-defining Faith

As a pastor, I often wondered why Adventist congregations were so prone to conflict. Adventists are generally good people, capable of great kindness and tremendous generosity. But I’ve rarely seen an Adventist congregation that is, as a group, very happy. Even though Jesus and Paul both gave principles for living together in peace, in every congregation I’ve known, discontent is almost always bubbling somewhere, threatening to boil over.

Of course, there will always be hurt feelings and personal disappointments—biblical guidelines for peaceful coexistence notwithstanding. But as I and many of my pastor friends have found, there is something more that keeps Adventist churches from being happy: we simply have too many things that we must agree on and, consequently, many opportunities for conflict.

The excessive number and unusual specificity of beliefs and lifestyle issues lead inevitably to conflict. Human beings aren’t able to march in lockstep to so many, many things. We have overdefined our faith to the point that it is nearly impossible for people to smoothly function together, much less to bond in loving fellowship.

I’m what some people (sometimes disparagingly) call a liberal because the bigger the intellectual and lifestyle space we can create, the more chance we have of acting decently to one another.

### Boiled Down

This is all to say that I have experienced a shrinking of my personal fundamental beliefs. Decade by decade, year by year, even week by week as I’ve prepared my sermons, my list of requisite beliefs has dwindled. My current theological position is expressed nicely by this hymn:

*My faith has found a resting place,  
Not in a manmade creed;  
I trust the ever living One,  
That He for me will plead.  
Enough for me that Jesus saves,  
This ends my fear and doubt;  
A sinful soul I come to Him,  
He will not cast me out.  
I need no other evidence,  
I need no other plea;  
It is enough that Jesus died,  
And rose again for me.*<sup>6</sup>

So much religion is indicted here. I grew up in a denomination that made fear and doubt its keystones, and it isn’t the only one. But a “good news” faith shouldn’t rest on fear and doubt. To believe in Jesus promises both a personal resting place and happier church communities.

I realize that such a broad definition will worry some, because it makes the Seventh-day Adventist Church somehow less “special.” But I don’t see any other option than to follow Jesus in seeking to create a broad, accepting church. It’s past time that we turned from this peculiarly complex, guilty, and fearful faith to one that encompasses all of God’s children. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> “Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, October 5 and 6, 1861,” *Review and Herald* (Oct. 8, 1861), p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1 (1995), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> See Ellen G. White, “MR No. 109—Items Relating to Tithe” written in 1905, *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 2 (1987), p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> White, *Selected Messages Book 3* (1958), p. 217.

<sup>6</sup> Lidie H. Edmunds, “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place,” *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, No. 523 (1985).

# Why Doctrine Doesn't Matter, and Why It Does

By Charles Scriven

MANY LONG-TIME ADVENTISTS ARE TIRED OF PROPOSITIONAL clutter. Certain doctrines, sometimes ones that once defined our movement, no longer resonate, feeling implausible or unimportant or even spiritually devastating.

One example is the investigative judgment. Its image of Christ relocating to a different room in the heavenly sanctuary to commence end-time review of written records concerning individual fitness for heaven has become, if I may understate the matter, unconvincing. Of this reality Silver Spring remains, however, officially oblivious.

Such dubious doctrinal preoccupations only cast doubt on the whole idea of doctrine, which has come for many to seem suffocating and divisive. But doctrine is just another word for “teaching,” and a church, or any community, that has nothing to teach is impossible. You might as well speak of games without rules or science without hypotheses.

Who, then, can save doctrine—or doctrine gone awry—from choking the life out of Adventism? The short answer is God. The longer answer is God, who takes human creatures as partners—covenant partners—in the long adventure of renewing creation and saving the persons and communities who occupy it. Salvation is God's gift and a project in which, by divine grace, we ourselves play a role.

In that light, let me make three points about our teaching responsibility, then end with an illustration of what could immediately breathe new life into the most important of all Adventist institutions.

## Urgency, Humility, Unimportance

The first point is the *urgency* of the challenge. Our own members are impatient with all that has gone wrong in our church's life, not least its doctrinal life. Many realize, too, that this is a problem in Christianity as a whole. And the concern now, besides worry and resentment inside Christian institutions, is the attitude of the wider society. People outside of Christianity have become not only more and more indifferent to Christian life, but also more and more furious about it.

Just a few decades ago, the nonreligious would typically allow that churches, by providing community and moral education, play a useful role. I do not need to tell you that it is now commonplace to think of Christianity as being not only useless, but also wicked. Does this development reflect, at least in part, misguided Christian teachings? Well, if we don't at least consider that, we become instruments of our own doom.

The second point concerns humility. Some Adventists—once, at least, the editor of the then-named *Review and Herald*—say our doctrines are so well-established that theological questioning and disagreement are no longer necessary, and we can concentrate on pointing out the mistakes of others.<sup>1</sup>

But according to the Old Testament, God's thoughts are higher than any of ours (Isa. 55:9). According to Paul, we all—unlike God—are “earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7, NKJV); thus, we see dimly, as in a fuzzy reflection, and know only “in part” (1 Cor. 13:9, 12).

With similar perspective, Ellen White wrote: “We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible.”<sup>2</sup> In that light she and other Adventist pioneers had to disavow the “shut door” theory (that only Millerites could be ready for the second coming) they had formerly accepted. So here, from our own history as well as from Isaiah and Paul, is permission for us (like Peter's vision in the book of Acts) to change our minds.

But it is more than permission; it is an obligation. Anything less than open-minded humility, after all, makes an idol of self, putting a mere creature in the place of God (Rom. 1:25). That is why sustained resistance to doctrinal humility can only hurt us, only leave our witness damaged and deadly.

Besides urgency and humility, a third point concerns the status of doctrine. If we hope by God's grace to save doctrine from



choking the life out of Adventism, we need, in a word, to grant its *unimportance*. The Bible has much to teach, certainly, but the correct response to questions of the mind is not, in the end, what matters most. Giving God our lives, being God's covenant partners, following Jesus as disciples—*this* is what matters most. True Christian conviction shapes true Christian life. When it doesn't, it is irrelevant, and if it misshapes Christian life, it is worse than irrelevant.

## Our First "Covenant"

We cannot always learn from our church's pioneers, but often we can. Consider something I often mention but our current leaders seem not to acknowledge, at least not in a full-blooded way. In 1861 a group of Michigan congregations banded together as the first Adventist conference. Though united by shared conviction, they resolved to forego a creed-like statement of belief. It would block "new light," said James White. They did agree, though, on a simple pledge. They were "covenanting together to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ." That was it.

The delegates realized what people who are belief-obsessed overlook: the whole point of Christian teaching is the *practice* of our covenant responsibilities. Missing this is like haggling over the Constitution and failing to vote. Words alone fall short.

Blind guides suppress or play down stories such as this one. But why? There is no evidence at all—at all!—that anyone during God's judgment will be quizzed on our church's 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Evidence to the contrary leaps out, as Bible readers know, from Matthew 25, with its famous parable of the last judgment. When recent General Conference Sessions have considered Adventist identity, however, this chapter has disappeared into the fog of propositional clutter.

## A Misguided Obsession

But let me back up. When I speak of the unimportance of doctrine, I mean only to disavow our misguided obsession with assent to (often convoluted) propositions. Christian life—covenant responsibility, discipleship—is the main thing, not what we agree to intellectually. Still, teaching and assent to teaching do matter. It is just that they matter only for illumination of or support of Christian life.

Think of doctrine like this: With any way of life, certain assumptions, or premises, come into play. Is reality itself, for example, hospitable to that way of life? Christians must ask: Is God's grace real, or is the universe wholly indifferent to human striving? Is there a circle of support adequate to the sustaining of Christian life? Do we grasp the *practical* significance of the

church's undergirding story? Do we truly *get* what Christian existence means? Perspective on questions such as these is what constitutes truly Christian teaching. Doctrine, in other words, considers the premises that support covenant responsibility. Our beliefs are the intellectual substance behind faithfulness. In a phrase, they are *premises for practice*.

This is why doctrines, though not the main thing, are (despite my initial overstatement) indispensable. They are only unimportant *relative* to what matters most. To be a Christian community at all, we must teach life-shaping convictions that form and sustain Christian life. We must do so, moreover, even if we know that official teaching includes mistakes. (Given our humanity, it would be imperfect even if endlessly revised.)

## Local Doctrine

But there is a constructive way to deal with official fallibility. Local congregations—the most important of all Adventist institutions—can continue, on their websites and in their bulletins, to publish briefer expressions of Adventist conviction and mission. These briefer expressions (that will themselves, of course, be fallible) need not parrot official mistakes. And taking a cue from the simple pledge adopted by the Michigan Conference in 1861, they can put covenant responsibility up front, so that our local congregations, at least, put doctrine in the right perspective.

I offer my own example—only as a conversation starter—of what a local Adventist congregation might say it stands for:

*Thanks to the grace of God, we covenant together to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ.*

*Our promise to God reflects God's promise to us. We embrace the Christian Way because we believe God makes us in the divine image, gives us a mission of blessing and peace, forgives and heals those who sin, and persists in such loving kindness until loving kindness reigns supreme.*

*All of this reflects the witness of the Bible and came to perfect clarity in Jesus, God's own self in human flesh. By his life, cross, and resurrection, he became our center and Messiah. In his Sabbath, we find rest and renewal. In his promised return, we find a hope to live by.*

Here there is plenty of teaching, or doctrine, and not least plenty of the grace that reform-minded Adventists have long wanted to emphasize. But here, too, is unmistakable response to the covenant-making God who invites us into the discipleship, the divine-human partnership, by which the healing of creation is meant to proceed. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Wood, *Review and Herald* (July 1, 1972), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages, Book 1* (1958), p. 37.

# BELIEVING IN, BELIEVING THAT

BY DAVID GEELAN

I OFTEN GET SONGS STUCK IN MY HEAD. WHEN ASKED TO WRITE about belief, I instantly heard Cher warbling “Believe”—that first really massive hit to use autotune as an intentional technique.

A bit older and darker than Cher: Metallica has a line that says, “Deceit, deceive, these are just what you believe.” James Hetfield, who wrote the lyrics, was raised in a Christian Scientist community that believed in prayer to the exclusion of medical treatment. This song is about his mother’s death from a treatable illness; my point in bringing it up is that beyond the eternal consequences of a Christian perspective, beliefs have consequences here and now.

## A Critical Distinction

Let’s start with a crucial distinction. “Believing that” is giving mental assent to a *proposition*, which is a statement about something. I believe that the moon is approximately 380,000 km (240,000 miles) from Earth, though I’ve not personally measured it.

On the other hand, I believe in my marriage, and while there are various propositions I could assert about my marriage (i.e., we have recently celebrated our 36th anniversary, my wife’s name is Sue, and we have two daughters), they don’t capture the full reality and lived experience of “believing in” my marriage.

It seems to me that the best religious beliefs are the “believing in” kind rather than the “believing that” kind. While many propositions can be stated and agreed with, “believing that” doesn’t capture the full lived experience.

This is one of the ways in which atheists who seek to debunk religious beliefs sometimes miss their target. They snipe at the *propositions* with statements of fact and evidence, while failing to consider the lived experience of faith. It’s what religious people are referring to when they talk about a “personal relationship.”

Some philosophers define knowledge as “justified true belief,” and perhaps we can reverse-engineer that definition to come to an understanding of the nature of belief. This applies best to the “believing that” kind of belief—to matters of fact that can be justified with evidence. The idea that a belief must be true to be considered knowledge implies that a belief can be false, which naturally accords with our own experience. Many people believe things that are false, such as that our planet is flat, unlike the rest of Earth’s siblings in the solar system. The fact that someone believes something is not in itself evidence of its truth.

So, to be considered knowledge, a belief must be true and must also be *justified*. It is possible to hold a belief that is true but to have no grounds—no evidence—on which to base that belief. I believe that my daughter, who lives in London, is asleep as I write this, and given the time zones and the balance of probability, there’s a good chance that it is a true belief. But unless I call her

(which, ironically, would mean she would no longer be asleep), I don’t have any evidence to support my belief. It’s a good guess, but merely a belief without evidence to support it.

## Grounding Belief

Philosophers further qualify the *grounds* we should have if a belief is to be considered knowledge: it should be adequate and relevant.

Adequate simply means that it must be strong enough for the purpose. If I phoned my daughter in London to ascertain whether or not she was sleeping, I think most people would consider that to be adequate grounds for my belief, even if I’d just awakened her.

But what if I were talking to an impersonator, or a computer-generated deep fake, and my daughter is actually out doing something? How strong the evidence needs to be depends on the stakes. In this case, I’m just interested in whether my daughter is sleeping; I’m not, for example, prescribing sleep medication on the basis of my knowledge of her insomnia. When the stakes are higher, there needs to be a higher standard of evidence.

Relevant grounds mean that the evidence I use to support my belief must in some logical way actually support that belief. If I say, “I know that my daughter is sleeping, because I saw eight dogs on my walk this morning and I usually see only six,” that’s not relevant evidence, even if my daughter loves dogs. Frequency of dog observation on a sunny morning in Sydney has no causal connection with sleep patterns in a London winter.

All of this is to say that beliefs can be false, or they can be true but held without the right kind of evidence to support them. Ideally, we’d all want our beliefs to have a firm foundation: to be true and to be justified on the basis of adequate, relevant grounds.

## Choosing Beliefs

Do we freely choose our own beliefs? It certainly feels as though we do. I think that I have arrived at the beliefs I hold through careful thought, over many decades. Some have remained the same, some have become stronger, and others have moved quite a distance from the beliefs I grew up with.

Do we actively choose what to believe (and what not to believe), or are we the product of the manifold influences on us across our lives: parents, teachers, friends, co-workers, partners and children, books we’ve read, movies we’ve watched, games we’ve played, and churches we’ve attended?

Philosophers discuss this but have come to no firm conclusion. Some say that we do have free choice, others that we don’t, and still others suggest that we choose the influences around us and that those choices indirectly influence our beliefs.

Among the dramatic influences on patterns of human belief are the social media algorithms that can (unless we make conscious and careful efforts to fight against them) lock us into “echo chambers” of people who already think and believe as we do. We’re only just beginning to see the consequences.

The beliefs we have, whether chosen or not, matter. The Metallica song I referenced earlier is called “The God That Failed.” In context, it’s not an anti-religion or anti-Christian statement. It’s about a particular case in which a flawed belief system had horrifying human consequences.

And such things happen. People have died because they believed that a particular piece of equipment or a medication would protect them, and it failed. Parents have treated children abusively based on harmful beliefs about the nature of human beings and how best to raise the next generation. Our beliefs matter because we act on them, and our actions have consequences.

Can we have adequate, relevant grounds for knowing what someone else believes? Since we can’t be inside someone else’s mind, probably not. Individuals may lie to us about the true state of their mind in relation to a particular belief—or perhaps they don’t really have insight into their own beliefs. The best we can do is to make inferences based on what we know about that person, about other people we have interacted with, and about ourselves. Because other people’s minds don’t necessarily work precisely as mine does, judging their actions based on what I would be thinking if I acted in those ways is unreliable.

It’s best to have some humility when we make judgments about the beliefs of others; we may be wrong, or misinterpreting, or projecting. Listening carefully to people, and generally believing them (unless they have shown themselves to be unbelievable), is the Golden Rule in action.

## Your Beliefs

Can you confidently say, “I know what I believe”? As far as propositions are concerned, the 28 Fundamental Beliefs are probably a decent summary for Adventists, and some people would “believe that” these are true. But perhaps “believing in” is more important here. Think of the campfire chorus based on this New Testament scripture: “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:12, KJV). Here, belief is more than just propositional; it is *lived in*, with local and eternal consequences in the mind of the believer.

The title of a science education research paper I read many years ago has stuck with me: “How will I know what I think ’til I see what I say?” Think of the times when a thought popped out of your mouth before it was thoroughly vetted by your

brain! At least for me, the processing of beliefs and ideas and influences goes on in my unconscious mind, such that even I can be surprised at how I speak or act in a particular set of circumstances. The broad propositions (the value of human lives and the natural environment, the value of education, our obligation to serve the most vulnerable) are there, but the details can be in flux, and the ol’ unconscious is churning constantly. Sometimes the way I speak or write something expresses a novel idea that I hadn’t consciously worked out.

## Knowledge vs. Action

I submitted to you above that knowledge is justified true belief. Another understanding of knowledge used by philosophers is that knowledge is a *disposition to act*. Rather than merely the “believing that” sense of assenting to a proposition, knowledge as a disposition to act means that our knowledge—founded in our beliefs—changes how we behave.

Here we must deal with hypocrisy. When someone publicly and verbally assents, loudly and repeatedly, to a particular proposition—about the sanctity of marriage, let’s say—and advocates that everyone else should also assent to that proposition, we call that person a hypocrite if his actions run counter to such a belief.

The etymology is helpful: *hypo* and *critical* mean “insufficiently critical of one’s own actions, in the light of one’s stated beliefs.” If a belief has not resulted in a disposition to act in accordance with it, we correctly question whether the belief is really held at all. The Bible doesn’t approve of hypocrites; however, we should remember that all of us are capable of insufficient self-awareness of how our beliefs line up with our actions—which is to say that we all are occasionally hypocrites.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is the last part of Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats. In it, Jesus describes two groups of people. One gives assent to the propositions: they said they believed, but they left the hungry famished, the naked cold, prisoners uncomfortable, widows and orphans unsupported. Their belief didn’t dispose them to act in Christlike ways. The other group was much quieter about their faith. They didn’t think they were doing anything particularly noteworthy when they served the most vulnerable in their communities. Their belief led to actions that had real-world consequences by making the lives of the people around them better. This was the group welcomed into God’s kingdom.

So, when the Bible says, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31, KJV), do you think it’s only about “believing that”? Or is it also about “believing in” and showing belief as a disposition to act? **AT**



# IN SEARCH OF A SECURE SPIRITUAL HORIZON

*By Herold Weiss*

FOR A RELIGIOUS PERSON, FAITH IN GOD IS THE FOUNDATION on which a person may stand. As such, it is a power within the self that gives a person inner strength. To express faith in God, a believer needs a symbolic universe to transpose what is within to a key that may be analyzed by the believer and understood by those whom the believer wishes to inform about his faith in God.

Karl Barth rightly said that faith and religion are not the same thing. Religion is the way in which faith is objectified in an intellectual structure provided by the culture in which a person lives. To convey meaning within the mind and inform the way in which a person acts, a symbolic universe is necessary. It is within the structure of a symbolic universe that faith becomes religion. Religion is a human construct that provides security for life under an open horizon. It gives faith the vocabulary for its expression. By means of it, believers maintain their relationship with the One on whom their faith rests, as well as with each other.

## Early Symbolic Universes

The authors of the Bible put their faith in the God who created the heavens and Earth. The symbolic universes of their times provided a way to communicate their testimonials on behalf of the Creator God. Since the authors wrote over a 1,000-year span, the Bible contains within its pages more than one horizon with corresponding symbolic universes. In this article I intend to identify a few of their symbolic universes.

Repetition of the seasons framed the symbolic universes of the earliest religions, which are still in evidence. To be in tune with what the gods were doing, worshippers attached rituals to natural events, thus ensuring stability and fertility for the fields and the

flocks. Festivals of the new year, as the most important rituals, facilitated the transition to a new cycle. To this day, traditional societies live in tune with the yearly cycle of the seasons.

## Israel's Symbolic Universe

The prophets of Israel broke up the yearly cycle and set time on a linear course. They created a new symbolic universe, with the future as the goal of life. They began by giving new functions to the rituals that had been attached to the seasons. Feasts that celebrated the time to plow, to seed, to harvest, to store the harvest, and to eat year-old lambs became the religious feasts of Pentecost, Passover, Booths, Purim, etc. The seven-day periods of the phases of the moon became sabbaths to celebrate liberation from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 5:15), as well as the formulaic account of God's creation (Exo. 20:8-11). The new moons were anchored in creation, too, with specific rituals assigned to each of them (Eze. 45:17; 46:3-7).

The prophetic future would culminate in the Day of the Lord, when God would accomplish the purpose of creation by establishing his kingdom. In the meantime, God's people were to enjoy his blessings, though departures from God's will could bring droughts, locusts, pestilence, and foreign invasions.

As long as the Hebrews identified themselves as members of a tribe or family, the way in which the Lord sent blessings and punishments to guide them to his kingdom was considered just. After all, even if the blessings and punishments didn't happen immediately, they could still come upon a person's family or tribe over many generations (Exo. 20:5; Joshua 7).

By contrast, Greek thinking emphasized the value of individualism and personal responsibility. Greek intellectual currents spread throughout the Mediterranean basin, and the Hebrew prophets took this into account (Jer. 31:29-30; Eze. 18:2-4; 14:14).





From an individualistic perspective, the prophetic understanding of God's retributive justice no longer made sense. After all, didn't experience show that sometimes the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? How could this be in God's world? It is a question that still troubles us today.

### **Wisdom and Prophecy**

Within the Bible we can find two discrete answers to the question of God's justice.

The wisdom writers thought that trying to understand the ways of God was a fruitless endeavor, since God abides in a different, totally transcendent world. The writer of Ecclesiastes said that "God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few (Eccl. 5:2, RSV). The wisdom tradition claimed that God's ways are beyond the human ability to know: their symbolic universe posited a vast gulf separating heaven from Earth. Trying to discover where justice may be found, one wisdom writer confessed, "I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show them that they are but beasts. ... Man has no advantage over the beasts; for all [their efforts to claim otherwise] is vanity" (Eccl. 3:18-19, RSV).

The prophetic tradition offered a different answer. The Hebrew prophets insisted that retributive justice is God's way of dealing with humanity. To do this required the introduction of three new ideas into their symbolic universe: the fall of creation, the two ages, and the resurrection.

First, humanity no longer lives in the creation that God set up at the beginning; it now lives outside of Eden, under the power of sin and death. Paul said that people are blinded by Satan, "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4, RSV).

Second, life in "the present evil age" (Gal. 1:4, RSV) will culminate in a final judgment. After that, only the righteous will go on living in the age to come.

These two modifications of the timeline needed a third factor to accomplish their purpose: God will resurrect all who ever lived, in order to activate retributive justice at the Day of the Lord. The prophetic symbolic world became apocalyptic by adopting the doctrines of the fall of creation, the two ages, and the resurrection.

The doctrine of the resurrection, with which the Jews had become acquainted in Babylon, was rejected by the wise men of Israel (Job 10:21; 14:7-12) but was essential to the apocalyptic prophets (Dan. 12:1-2). Job was written by a wise man who wished to argue against the new doctrines introduced by apocalyptic prophecy. He makes clear that Satan is a member of the heavenly council and can do only what God allows him to do (Job 2:1-6). After a long argument, exploring every possible excuse to prove that in God's world retributive justice does not work, Job is forced to admit that he had been talking about matters he knew nothing about (Job 42:3-6).

The two main traditions of the Old Testament are in evidence in the writings of New Testament authors. The wisdom symbolic universe—evident in the creation account of Genesis 1, where the lunar period that established the Sabbath determines the agenda and where an abyss separates God from his creation—was maintained by the Sadducees, who were quite open intellectually and saw themselves entrusted to keep the world in a good relationship with God. This tradition informs the symbolic universe of the Gospel according to John.

The Pharisees, who insisted on ritual purity by the avoidance of sin rather than by obtaining unexplainable forgiveness through sacrifices, reaffirmed God's retributive justice based on the



commandments of the law. The story of Adam and Eve makes obedience to the commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil the condition for access to the source of life, thus giving validity to retributive justice as God's basis for dealing with human beings (Genesis 2 and 3). Obedience and retributive justice, already set up at creation, are to be the standard at the final judgment, the pivotal event in the cosmic cycle of the symbolic universe of the gospel. This tradition informs the letters of Paul, the Revelation of John at Patmos, and the Synoptic Gospels.

### The Apocalyptic Message

The apocalyptic prophets tried to assure people that even though the justice of God is not evident in this present fallen age, obedience to God's will is necessary because at the final judgment,

**Among the symbolic universes found in the Bible, I find the one used by Paul—built from both apocalyptic and wisdom elements—to be the one most helpful to Christians today as a model for the transposition of faith into religion within my cultural environment.**

retributive justice will be fully in evidence. Having eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humanity finds itself now in the midst of good and evil, and the choices made by individuals have eternal consequences. The same message is the core of the apocalyptic authors of New Testament books.

The apocalyptic prophets redefined the Day of the Lord as the time when God would conduct the final judgment, put an end to the fallen world, and bring back the Garden of Eden as the home of the righteous. They revised the prophetic timeline that extended into the future establishment of the kingdom on Mount Zion (Mic. 4:1-7; Isa. 2:1-4), making the cycle cosmic rather than yearly.

The apocalyptic horizon had a beginning (the appearance of a snake, Satan, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden) and an end (the final judgment). This helped to resolve the problem created by the transition from a corporate, or tribal, identity to the Greek-oriented individual one. Apocalyptic writers sought to guide people in the ways of the Lord through a cosmic cycle. The original Hebrew prophets had confronted kings with the evil of their ways; their apocalyptic successors continued to play that role for individuals, warning them of the coming final judgment.

These later prophets described the future in scary terms: dark and threatening, but with signs to alert believers when the end was imminent. Their agenda was not to provide mere information about future events, but also to emphasize the need to live faithfully in the present evil world to avoid traumatic punishments in the coming age. By making the final judgment the eternally decisive event, however, they implanted fear, thus weakening the security of their faith horizon.

In the apocalyptic symbolic universe, the space between heaven and Earth was not empty. It was crowded with heavenly beings, good and evil. Angels, and even human beings, can travel through the spheres of the heavens. Descriptions of battles between the forces of good and evil show that the fall of humans involved the whole of creation and that the age to come would be "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1).

In spite of its description of cosmic battles, this approach lacks drama due to its predetermined understanding of history. Not only has the outcome already been determined, but it has been revealed to the elect. The Son has conquered the forces of evil and is already seated on his Father's throne. To be meaningful, the apocalyptic ethical appeals for faithfulness needed to be couched in a symbolic universe with a predetermined end of history. Their message carries weight because God is not about to change his mind. The urgency of obedience would be diluted if the future were open.

The apocalyptic prophets urged the elect, who had been chosen before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), to "patiently endure." History, according to them, runs on a fixed course, and all things take place at their appointed time (Dan. 8:17-19; Matt. 24:36; Gal. 4:4; Rev. 6:9-11; 10:5-7; 14:7; 15:1).

### The Elect

The apostle Paul preached a gospel that was cast in an apocalyptic universe in which the fall of creation, the two ages (the age of promise and the age to come), the resurrection, and a predetermined understanding of history were on full display. But Paul was an intellectual, with a good understanding of the wisdom tradition and its transcendent God. When he began to minister

among the Gentiles, he was accused of many things by those who saw themselves as part of a movement within the horizon of Judaism and the temple. One of their charges was that if Paul's gospel was correct, God was proving unfaithful to the Jews.

Paul argued against this misunderstanding of his gospel by explaining the nature of God's election. The election of Abraham did not mean that all of his descendants were automatically members of the elect people of God. God's election is dynamic in history; Ishmael, Esau, and many others who were direct descendants of Abraham were not among the elect. Just as a potter chooses to make either pots for daily use, which will end up as shards in a dump heap, or vessels to be kept as heirlooms and displayed in a cupboard to be admired by coming generations (Isa. 45:9-10), so also is God free to choose the elect.

Paul concludes his explanation of God's freedom with this confession: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Rom. 11:33-34, RSV). Paul, the apocalyptic prophet, gave the wise men of Israel their due by recognizing God's freedom and transcendence.

### **Paul's New Apocalyptic**

In contrast with the usual apocalyptic symbolic universe, Paul did not instill fear by describing macabre torments of wicked idolaters. In fact, he appeared unconcerned about their destiny! His gospel is not about the final judgment or about the sadistic vengeance of the Son who watches those being tormented with fire and brimstone forever and ever (Rev. 14:10). He wants to show how the power of the gospel energizes the faithful living in this age, even while they live still "in the flesh" amidst the deceptions of the fallen world.

Paul radically modified apocalyptic prophecy by identifying the prophetic Day of the Lord with the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, rather than the final judgment. The justice of God has already been revealed; there is no need to wait till the end for its manifestation. Paul's gospel announced that God had broken the power of sin and death by the death of an innocent Jesus, who faced his crucifixion with faith in God. The power of God had brought about the resurrection of Jesus Christ to new life in the Spirit, thus installing a new creation (Gal. 6:14-15).

Those who imitate the faith that Jesus had in God as the giver of life, and who in faith crucify themselves with Christ, are also raised by the Spirit that resurrected Christ from the dead. Paul confesses, "The life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20, my own translation). The gospel is not mere information; "it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith. ... In it the righteousness of God is revealed

through faith [that of Jesus] for faith [that of human beings who participate in his crucifixion]" (Rom. 1:16-17, RSV).

Paul refers to one who "was in the form of God" as the model for living in the fallen world. This divine being did not think that equality with God was something he needed to reach for (Phil. 2:6). Rather than grasping for a higher position, Jesus joined those in a lower rank. He "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (verses 7-8, RSV).

His descent could not have been more dramatic, because death on a cross was the ultimate humiliation. As a consequence of his choice, God "highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (verses 9-11, RSV). Paul calls attention to the trajectory of this heavenly being to give his converts the example to be imitated.

### **Right Choices**

Paul advised his converts to cultivate a mind capable of making right choices.

Faced with temptation, Adam and Eve had reached out and grasped the means for becoming "equal to God." As a result, they ended up living in a world where death is inevitable and pain and suffering are never far away. They made the wrong choice, and the consequences are still with us. Paul spells out this counsel: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4, RSV). He reminded them, "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him. For Christ did not please himself" (Rom. 15:2-3, RSV).

That is how Paul creates a secure horizon under the power of the gospel: God pours his love on sinners and empowers them to be exhibits of God's justice. Rather than implanting *fear* of God's retributive justice, the apostle rejoices in and exalts the *love* of God, even while suffering the injustices of life in the flesh (Rom. 5:2-6, RSV).

Apocalyptic Paul proclaims a gospel that empowers us to live fruitfully in a fallen world, not one that injects fear of the final judgment. In a world full of insecure horizons, the apostle offers security by the power of God that gives life to sinners. That is something no law could ever do; the only thing the law can do is to condemn transgressors.

The power of the gospel, by contrast, is the pouring forth of God's prodigal love on sinners. The only secure horizon is the one sustained by the most powerful force in the universe: the love of God (Rom. 8:38-39). As a prophet, Paul is concerned about the need to live faithfully "in the flesh" (verses 5-9). He describes this living as watered by faith and hope, then flowering in demonstrations of love.

The trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is actualized in the trinity of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13). A person with faith grasps what God did through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the past. With it, he hopes for the fulfillment of God's promised full life in the future. He is able to activate the past and the future to live faithfully in the present. Those with the faith of Jesus who participate in his death also participate in his resurrection while still living "in the flesh." Full of the love that has made this possible, they enact the justice of God in the present (Rom. 5:1-5).

## The End

While Paul's agenda was to preach the gospel of the power of love made available to human beings by faith, he also had a clear vision of what the end is all about. It is not about torments in fire and brimstone, in which the wicked have no rest day or night; nor is it a new Jerusalem with the tree of life. At the second coming, "the dead in Christ will rise" (1 Thess. 4:16). They were buried in perishable, dishonorable, weak, physical bodies, but they will be raised in imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual bodies (1 Cor. 15:42-55). They will bear the image of the man of heaven in immortal bodies.

In Paul's symbolic universe, those who have faith also hope that "the Lord Jesus Christ ... will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:20-21, RSV). That will be "the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:23-24, RSV). Just as the one "in the form of God" ended up at a higher position after God highly exalted him above every other creature, so those who live and die in Christ will be elevated, no longer limited by a material body. They will express themselves fully in spiritual bodies.

## Paul's Wisdom Universe

As already noted, Bible authors living at different times expressed their faith in the God who created the heavens and Earth in different symbolic universes. All of them are no longer used. They have become obsolete. This does not mean, however, that the symbolic universe of our current scientific culture is the true one. (After all, the main premise of scientific culture is that a new

piece of evidence may at any time change what is described at the moment as true.)

If faith in God is to be expressed at all, it needs a symbolic universe for its expression, and those used by the authors of the Bible are no longer helpful. Wishing to express in the 21st century my faith in God, the Creator of heaven and Earth, and aware that all symbolic universes are constructed by human beings, I would nevertheless like to stay within the tradition of biblical authors. I find the symbolic universe used by Paul—built from both apocalyptic and wisdom elements—to be the one most helpful to Christians today as a model for the transposition of faith into religion within my cultural environment.

Symbolic universes are the product of culture, and they make possible communication between individuals who live in it. They are not created *in abstracto* by isolated individuals. For example, artists create a language of their own, but their work must be translated to the language used by their contemporaries in order to be recognized. What I am suggesting here is that the language in which Paul cast *his* faith may serve as a guide in my efforts to express *my* faith. Paul's faith can be understood only in his symbolic universe. Giving to the words of biblical authors eternal value, untouched by any culturally constructed symbolic universe, is to impose an ideology that tries to hide an underlying agenda.

Paul's faith was founded on the examples of the faith of Abraham and of Jesus. The way he expressed it emphasizes God's impartiality in dealing with Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 2:11; 10:12) and can be expanded to include religious traditions of the 21st century that also speak of a loving God. A contemporaneous symbolic universe that is useful to express biblical faith in the Creator will keep in mind that God's freedom and transcendence set limits to any understanding of what he is doing or will do. It will not bind God to theological constructs that express what some consider verities. It will also affirm that God's justice is being demonstrated by human beings, who are guided by the Spirit of God in their daily efforts to accomplish his will by the power of his love. It will make clear that the life of faith is also a significant element in the cosmic reality. What science can study is not the totality of what goes on in the cosmos. Paul's symbolic universe cannot be ours, but what he expressed with it can guide us in our efforts to communicate our faith in the 21st century.

Symbolic universes may include prejudices and theories incapable of demonstration, or contrary to good evidence. On account of this, it will be well to remember Paul's advice to his converts. When a believer speaks during worship, "let the others weigh what is said" (1 Cor. 14:29, RSV); "Test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21, RSV); "I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say" (1 Cor. 10:15, NIV). **AT**

# THE ADVENTIST COMPLEXITY PROBLEM

BY RICH HANNON

THE WORLD OF OUR ADVENTIST PIONEERS SEEMS RELATIVELY simple by today's standards. After all, they encountered minimal conflicting science, viewed the Bible as WYSIWYG, and seemed to pull great, hidden truths from its pages almost daily. Guided by the direct inspiration of Ellen White, the "remnant" church proved quite fearless in standing up to Babylon.

In actuality, the world of our church pioneers *was* complicated—though its complexity was largely unknown or unrecognized in their somewhat insular environment. Geology and paleontology were still in their formative stages, and the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin was barely opening the door to the topic of evolution. Liberal—albeit often atheistic—biblical scholars were beginning to examine their source material more contextually. In time, these activities would be perceived as dangerous, then condemned by conservative Christianity.

## Get it? Got it! Good!

In a comedic sequence from the 1955 film *The Court Jester*, actor Danny Kaye and others repeat the line: "Get it? Got it! Good!" To me, that trifecta also seems applicable—although not humorously—to Adventist history.

In the initial "Get it?" period, our pioneers were finding "present truth" and developing an identity. Next was the "Got it!" timeframe, when 19th-century Adventists internalized the notion that we now have the truth and proclaimed "Come out of her, my people" to apostate Christendom. Finally, a "Good!" identity marked a solidification into fixed orthodoxy. This would come to be labeled "historic Adventism," a collection of inspiration-affirmed positions largely developed during Ellen White's lifetime.

Admittedly, Adventist doctrine and culture follow a shifting continuum and cannot trivially be broken into three separable intervals. My three-phrase metaphor is merely an attempt to simply yet fairly define this historical/doctrinal arc, from initial discovery to eventual resistance against external dissonance. It

ends where the confident story developed and told by Adventists became entrenched and immobile, where questions are perceived to be threats and attacks.

The first two phases—"Get it?" and "Got it!"—contain verbs implying action. From roughly 1850 to 1920, spanning the formative years until just beyond Ellen White's death, the church's understandings were still moving through development into confidence. This overlaps a time when both scientific and theological context were still comparatively simple.

But "Good!" suggests stasis, where truth has been fully (or at least sufficiently) revealed. After this, the primary concern is maintaining purity. The 1919 Bible Conference could be considered a sort of inflection point: it focused on how to not just interpret Ellen White, but more broadly, how to read and understand the Bible.

Meanwhile, a surrounding conservative Christianity was beginning to wrestle seriously with increasingly unsettling challenges from science, culture, and biblical scholarship. The rise of Christian fundamentalism overlapped multiple changes within Adventism, notably Ellen White's death, the church's numerical and worldwide growth, a generational leadership turnover, and the cataclysmic World War I, which seemed to signal a world-ending eschatological/evangelical urgency.

So, if you examine this past century of Adventism—via historically responsible portrayals such as *Seeking a Sanctuary* by Keith Lockhart and Malcolm Bull, the more recent 1922 by Michael Campbell, and *Ostriches and Canaries* by Gilbert M. Valentine—you find a shift from the Adventism extant in 1915, the year Ellen White died. It involves more retention than revision, with change too often having been characterized as a drift into apostasy.

Of course, this perspective has experienced inevitable ebb and flow, along with some permanent theological rewiring. But those who perceive the Adventist movement as a solidified "Good!" will view any change as necessarily regressive, or even satanic.

## The Challenge of Complexity

The gospel can fairly be viewed as simple: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31, KJV).

But questions immediately arise. And when believers organize into denominations, the questions expand as religion intersects with the world at large. Even if these issues are not salvific (although they sometimes are), that doesn’t make them trivial or irrelevant.

THE CORE PROBLEM IS NOT THAT ADVENTISM IS WRONG ON SOME DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES, EVEN THOUGH I BELIEVE IT SOMETIMES IS. A MUCH MORE BASIC ISSUE IS THAT THE CHURCH HAS BEEN UNWILLING TO FAIRLY AND OPENLY EVALUATE COMPLEXITY.

Believers who join a particular denomination also trust their community to be both faith-affirming and truth-seeking. This latter requirement leads all churches into territory where they must engage with the complex sweep of ideas, culture, and physical reality.

Consider now some issues that Adventism has encountered since its inception and continues to wrestle with. My specific list is not intended to be exhaustive, and it both overlaps and is partly hierarchical. I suggest two levels: the foundation, and building upon that foundation.

Foundationally, God’s “two books”—Scripture and nature—ultimately must agree, whether or not we humans can always detect their unity.

### Level 1: The Foundation

A. *Physical reality, examined by science.* At least three specific issues, on which I will elaborate later, sit fully or partially atop this foundation block:

1. evolution and the age of Earth
2. homosexuality

3. the role of women in society

B. *Biblical understanding.* Examination of the Bible’s history, culture, and language began in the 17th century but accelerated dramatically in the 19th. Findings and opinions, at times labeled “higher criticism,” began diverging from normative Christian understandings. Some of this analysis threatened entrenched orthodoxies such as inerrancy, supernaturalism, and a short chronology for Earth’s history.

Further 21st-century scholarship has suggested re-examination of a traditional Genesis reading in more detail, and resistance toward hermeneutical openness continues unabated. Books such as *Earth, Sky & Land* by Brian Bull and Fritz Guy, as well as John H. Walton’s *The Lost World of Genesis One*, take issue with historic understandings developed with a so-called “plain reading”—that is, interpreting material as if it were written to our modern mindset.

Considering a more complicated contextual understanding carries the genuine risk of destabilizing normative Adventist positions, not just about a young Earth or a planet-wide flood, but the nature and extent of inspiration itself.

### Level 2: Upon the Foundation

Here I’ll briefly consider four areas of complexity. The first three straddle physical reality and biblical understanding. The fourth is largely a scriptural issue.

A. *Evolution and Earth history.* Evolution requires deep time. The scientific fields of geology and physics address the so-called “age of the earth” question, and the direct question of whether evolution is true falls (at minimum) within the fields of paleontology, genetics, and biology. These represent a wide range of disciplines that tell a coherent story: that Earth is old (~4.54 billion years) and that life has evolved. These understandings are incompatible with long-held Christian (specifically, Adventist) beliefs that both our planet and humanity were created recently and *ex nihilo*. Some have argued that acceptance of evolution is a death blow to core Christian doctrine.

B. *Homosexuality.* The rationale for condemning homosexuality as moral perversity is derived from interpretation of the so-called “clobber texts,” notably Paul’s words in Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. But in modernity, science suggests that some—perhaps even most—homosexuality is grounded in physiology and, thus, is not a moral choice. The church has mostly ignored this complicating pivot point.



C. *Women's societal role.* Adventism was born at a time when women were firmly subjugated in society. Ironically, Ellen White's leadership proved to be a major anomaly to that cultural assumption. Adventist ambivalence about whether women should be given nontraditional roles within the church pretty much ended after her death, which ushered in the church's subsequent tilt toward fundamentalism.

Women's subordination is a three-legged stool, supported via historical norms, appeal to physiology, and interpretations of Scripture.

1. Historical norms – The church grew up in an Americanized Victorian world, in which cultural assumptions treated women as fit only for domestic roles. This was accepted nearly universally by men, but also by most women. Because it was normative, no deeper justification appeared necessary.

2. Physiology – Recognition that the sexes have physiological differences has been used to rationalize sweeping subordination of women to men. Considered temperamentally unsuited for certain aspects of public life, women have been denied full social equality with men for inherent physical reasons.

3. Scripture – Biblical limitations on women have been universalized and woven into a doctrine sometimes labeled “male headship.” Leaning heavily on the apostle Paul's prohibitions on women's behavior, that doctrine seeks to subordinate them via inspiration.

D. *Eschatology.* Adventist preaching in the “Got it!” period exuded confidence, as evidenced in Uriah Smith's book *Daniel and Revelation*. But the details haven't aged well, which is unsurprising, given the more than 125 years since publication. The once-crucial doctrine of the investigative judgment, while still definitive for many, has also faced significant criticism, notably by Desmond Ford.

## What About Ellen White?

Adventists have struggled from the beginning with how to understand Ellen White's inspiration. Historically, members have considered her to be subordinate to the Bible, co-equal with the Bible, or even more foundational than the Bible, which has led Adventists to read Scripture through the lens of her writings. Where we place her has been an ongoing, unresolved complexity.

Mixed with the issue of primacy is the question of inerrancy. The historically pervasive belief in her inerrancy partly unraveled with the “borrowing” revelations by Walter Rea in his 1982 book *The White Lie*.

Charges of plagiarism aside, the humanity—and thus, fallibility—of White's life and words has become increasingly evident. Still, many Adventist denominational leaders seem to operate under a White-inerrant paradigm. When her statements appear to conflict with some scientific or religious scholarship, playing the “inerrancy card” to shut down discussion is an attempt to preserve an uncomplicated intellectual landscape where such unpleasanties can be marginalized as inconsistent with trusted inspiration.

## What the Issue Is—and Isn't

The comparatively simple 19th-century narrative adopted in the “Got it?” phase of Adventism has faced many challenges. The church has struggled to deal with evidence and arguments that draw heterodox conclusions. In present-day Adventism, such examinations are most accessible in the independent journals/websites of *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today*. Almost never do they appear in official denominational sources, with the notable exception of academia. The Wilson administration has taken an even more hostile attitude toward considering the complexity I've been illustrating here.

However, I propose that the core problem is not that Adventism is wrong on some doctrines and practices, even though I believe it sometimes is. A much more basic issue is that the church has been unwilling to fairly and openly evaluate complexity.

The idea that we have the truth (“Good!”) has too often produced a protracted adherence to a simpler worldview, without willingness to impartially validate it. A glaring example was the so-called Faith and Science Conferences that began in 2017 in St. George, Utah, which refused to actually consider the full range of problems facing a Young Earth position. The result was propaganda, thinly disguised as scientific study.

The biblical principle of openness is illustrated in Acts 17:10-15, which praises the Bereans for their thorough examination of Scripture. Adventist leadership has largely failed to encourage open examination of alternatives.

Perhaps the ingrained memes surrounding the idea of a “remnant church” have produced unintended harm. If our church identifies so strongly as the “good guy” that it will not consider possible God-honoring correctives, then the core failure is closed-mindedness. However God-ordained it may be, Adventism is also a fallible, human institution that would benefit from a greater receptivity to change. **AT**

# BELIEF IN THE PERSON, NOT THE PROPOSITIONS

## THE MESSAGE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

BY STEVEN SICILIANO

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN WAS WRITTEN FOR ONE PURPOSE: TO persuade readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ, so they might receive eternal life.

Its author was a Jewish disciple, in conflict with fellow Jews who centered their faith around Moses and law. He shared in the life of God through the Holy Spirit and asserted that through Jesus, believers like him had passed from death to life and from condemnation to vindication before God.

### It's All About Belief

The writer states his purpose explicitly in John 20:31. After saying that he could have included many other stories, he adds that these were “written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that [by] believing you may have life in His name” (NKJV).

The other Gospels don't talk that way, and neither do most storytellers, ancient or modern. Apart from Aesop and his fables, most writers let the action and dialogue speak for themselves.

But John, whose Gospel was the last composed of the four, says what the other three left unsaid. From the prologue on, John declares who Jesus is and why he came.

The book's opening verse (John 1:1) declares Jesus to be the eternally existent Word who was with God and was God. Jesus is rabbi (John 1:38, 49); prophet (John 4:19; 6:14; 7:40), Lord (John 20:28), and Christ (John 1:40-42; 4:24). These labels are meant to make Jesus' identity and status unmistakable. Almost every one of John's accounts deals with believing versus not believing. Nathanael's declaration of faith in chapter 1; the disciples' response to the water turned to wine in chapter 2; the declaration of the Samaritans at Sychar and the centurion whose son was healed in chapter 4, the blind man who received his sight

in chapter 9, and Martha's declaration at the tomb of Lazarus in chapter 10—all of these incidents (and others) culminate in statements relating to faith in Jesus.

In short, John's purpose is clear: it is all about belief versus unbelief. John uses the words “believe” or “believes” 64 times, referring in almost every instance to what people think about Jesus.

What John wants is for people to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, or the Christ. The meaning of those equivalent words (*Messiah* from Hebrew and *Christ* from Greek) is not self-evident, apart from its background in Jewish and then Christian tradition. To John and his contemporaries, the Messiah was the prophesied leader who would come from the line of David to rule over Israel, restore the nation to its earlier preeminence, and govern the world in righteousness.

John lived within that tradition, but he did not multiply Old Testament quotations to link Jesus with messianic expectation. For him, Jesus of Nazareth was simply “the One” who was to come.

The most powerful among John's fellow Jews opposed Jesus and his followers, whom they harassed and ostracized. That is the reason he wrote. Acknowledging this conflict will help clarify the meaning of the word “believe” as it is used in the Gospel of John.

### Isn't Believing Just Believing?

The Greek word underlying the English “believe” can involve a range of meanings, some more active and outward than others. Churchgoers have often been told that faith means more than mere mental assent, and that's true. Biblical faith is not limited to agreeing that something is factually true; it includes acting on one's beliefs.

It may be surprising to learn, therefore, that in this Gospel the more limited meaning is primary! John was engaged in a battle of

opinions, so his principal goal was convincing people to believe (in the colloquial sense of the word) that Jesus was who John said he was. Almost all of the 60-plus occurrences of the word reflect that meaning.

Simple as this definition is, two things should be noted.

First, since the object of belief in this case is the Messiah, believing in Jesus assumes that followers will render allegiance to him, because that is what people do in response to a lord or ruler.

Second, and perhaps more relevant, is that genuine belief always involves more than just the mind. It also carries the heart. Whether in reference to a product, a candidate, an institution, or anything else, when people say that they “really believe in” something, they convey a position deeper than mere mental assent. They express emotions as well, which can include honor, affection, trust, and even love. So, “believing” is a holistic phenomenon.

But this doesn’t negate the fact that John’s first goal was to persuade readers to accept the claim that Jesus was Messiah. Simple belief is where the action begins.

## Vindication and Eternal Life

If belief is the starting point, then what are the outcomes? In the Gospel of John, two significant consequences stand out.

The first is freedom from condemnation. Jesus touched on this in his conversation with Nicodemus, when he said that the person who “believes in Him is not condemned (John 3:18, NKJV).” Similarly: “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24, ESV).

“To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12, NIV).”

The second benefit of believing is what John calls “eternal life.” In everyday parlance that term means unending existence, and this Gospel does incorporate that meaning, as where Jesus says: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26, ESV).

This appears again in John 12:25, where Jesus contrasts life in the present world with life in the age to come. Both of these sayings likely comport with popular beliefs at the time regarding the kingdom of God, which would be final and everlasting, as stated in Daniel 2:44.

However, John also describes eternal life as something *present* and *qualitative* rather than *future* and *quantitative*. For instance, John 17:3 defines eternal life as “knowing God and Jesus Christ,” whom God had sent. Other quotes along the same lines include John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (NIV).

A vital clue to what Jesus meant when he described eternal life as a present experience appears in his sayings about living

water. In John 4:14 Jesus says that eternal life will be like water springing up from inside a person. John 7:38 indicates that living water is the Spirit, whom Jesus would give after his death and resurrection. Taken together, these verses and others convey that possession of the Spirit is *itself* eternal life, because receiving the Spirit constitutes nothing less than sharing in the life of God.

## What Must We Believe?

Again, the Gospel of John was written within a context of conflict about Jesus and his claim to be Messiah. John and his opponents, despite their disagreement on that point, shared a common worldview that included both the idea of a messiah and all of the details that framed it: creation, the fall, the call of Israel, the nation’s past failures, and the sentence of judgment that followed.

But what about people today, many of whom do not assume any of those doctrines? Are they expected to adopt the entire biblical construct in order to exercise faith in Jesus? A vocal group of apologists would argue that removing any of the pegs on which the Jesus story hangs will invalidate the whole thing.

It seems likely that many Christian believers—even those who are passionate about upholding the entire framework—probably began their spiritual journey without knowing much theology. They knew only that God had come to them in the Person of Jesus and made a difference in their lives, bringing meaning, fulfillment, and in some cases, miraculous transformation. Like John’s fellow believers, they had begun sharing in the life of God through the Spirit. It was only afterward that they were taught to accept a grand dogmatic system. Others have grown up in the faith and learned the doctrinal framework alongside that kind of encounter.

Responding positively to God is the substantive element. Jesus called it being born again, and conversion stories throughout history attest to the reality of that phenomenon. It still happens today, regardless of an individual’s level of biblical knowledge.

When answering the question “How many things are people today expected to believe?” it may be better to focus on the dynamics of believing rather than enumerating a list of theological tenets. In John’s era and ours, effectual belief consists of essential attitudes or inclinations of the mind and heart—being open to the call of God in Christ and responsive enough to say yes with affection.

Here is what believing means in practice: finding peace, meaning, and purpose in God. Those who open themselves to God in this way are certified, validated, and exempt from judgment because biblical faith is more about the Person than the propositions. They’ve been born of the Spirit and share in the life of God.

What more should we need? **AT**



# *The Future of Adventist* **Congregations**

BY RAJ ATTIKEN

CONGREGATIONS HAVE BEEN THE bedrock of Adventism since its inception. But in recent years, they are being buffeted by swift and strong cultural forces. Some have dwindled in size, energy, resources, and impact. Buildings that once housed congregations have been converted into parking lots, homes, or even bars and boutiques.

Such cases prompt questions:

- What does the future look like for Adventist congregations?
- Where is the trendline pointing?
- What conclusions, if any, can we draw from the recent history of our congregations?

This report is a glimpse of the trendlines related to Seventh-day Adventist congregations, primarily in the United States, including a brief view of global trends.

## **The Christian Congregational Landscape**

To place the findings in context, we need to look at the larger landscape of congregations to include all denominations and faith traditions.

The United States is home to between 350,000 and 375,000 congregations,<sup>1</sup> according to estimates published in the 2020 Faith Communities Today report, a large survey of 15,278 religious congregations from 80 different denominations and faith traditions.<sup>2</sup> The report states that 70% of U.S. congregations have 100 or fewer weekly attendees and that congregations of 100 or fewer members are home to only 14% of all weekly attendees.<sup>3</sup> About 25% of these congregations are rural, and 22% are in villages or small

towns—areas where a mere 14% of the population lives, according to the 2020 United States census.<sup>4</sup>

A report by Lifeway Research, a nonprofit organization that provides resources for ministry, found that 3,700 Protestant churches closed in 2014 and that 4,500 closed in 2019.<sup>5</sup> Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend.

## **Global Adventism**

While this perspective of congregations in the United States doesn't paint a very optimistic picture, the story of Adventist congregations globally seems to be somewhat different. According to the 2022 membership statistics published in the 2023 Annual Statistical Report, the General Conference (GC) recognized 97,811 churches and 73,886 companies around the world.<sup>6</sup>

A review of these reports from past years shows a steady increase in the number of congregations. In 1900 the GC included 1,892 Adventist churches worldwide, and by 1960 that number had grown to 12,975. By 1990, 31,654 churches made up the Adventist "sisterhood" of churches. In 2016, the denomination's 154,710 congregations comprised 84,207 churches and 70,503 companies. The 2022 report showed a total of 171,697 congregations.

The number of congregations (churches and companies) has also steadily grown in the North American Division (NAD), which includes the United States, Canada, Bermuda, and Guam/Micronesia. From 5,254 in 2000, the total number of NAD congregations

grew incrementally each decade—to 6,049 in 2010, then to 6,501 in 2020—and reached 6,616 in 2022.

One factor contributing to the increase is the growing presence of ethnic congregations that hold services in a language other than English. Another factor that has added new congregations is a church-planting strategy that some conferences aggressively promote. (Due to available statistics, it is unclear whether church plants actually increase the number of members in a territory, or merely redistribute existing members.) No records were found to establish the number of Adventist congregations that have disbanded within the NAD in any year or decade. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when a church shuts down, most of its members begin attending a nearby Adventist congregation.

## **Member Reports**

The most recent Global Church Member Survey, conducted in 2017-2018 by the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University, gathered information from 1,923 respondents in the NAD.<sup>7</sup> Nearly one in five (19%) respondents reported that their church is located in a large city, with 4% indicating that their church is downtown.<sup>8</sup> Approximately two in five (42%) respondents indicated that their church is in a smaller city, 30% in a town or village, and 9% in a rural area.<sup>9</sup>

About a third (33%) of the churches in rural areas report a weekly attendance of 25-50 people, and another third (33%) of rural churches have an average attendance of 51 to 100 people.<sup>10</sup> Based on global attendance



in Seventh-day Adventist churches, the survey categorizes churches by attendance into small churches (50 people or less), mid-size churches (51 to 150 people), and large churches (151 or more people).<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, the GC Annual Statistical Report included church and Sabbath School attendance figures. Church attendance, as an indicator of the vitality of a church, shows signs of potential trouble for Adventist congregations. End-of-year membership in 2022 for the North American Division was 1,234,397,

worship attendance. For statistical purposes, attendance at churches that do not report is estimated to be 40% of membership. Attendance figures in each GC Annual Statistical Report suggest a much lower attendance average than Ford's report reflected. The GC Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research confirmed that many attendance counts do not reflect actual counts from all local churches in conferences.

When research organizations gather church attendance figures, they typically survey individuals to ascertain the number of times

Attendance is a key metric in assessing the state of congregations and the trajectory of a local church's health and viability. While we note relatively low worship attendance figures compared to membership, we also recognize that attendance is not the only factor defining the health of a congregation. It would be a mistake to imply that only the largest congregations are effective and productive. Over generations, small congregations have repeatedly demonstrated an impactful and vital ministry to their members and communities.

Although size offers larger congregations some distinct advantages, small churches likewise enjoy strengths. The 2020 Faith Communities Today Report characterized small churches as having a high level of member commitment, a greater percentage of member participation in weekly worship, a higher level of giving per person, and a higher level of volunteerism. On the other hand, churches of this size can have serious organizational stressors, including the highest budget expense per capita, the largest percentage of budget spent on facilities, the largest percentage of members over the age of 65, and the smallest percentage of children, youth, and young adults.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that Adventist congregations mirror these features.

## Church attendance, as an indicator of the vitality of a church, shows signs of potential trouble for Adventist congregations.

but church attendance was only 11.4% of membership (140,995).<sup>12</sup> If this number included visiting guests and unbaptized children, it suggests that even fewer members were in attendance. Worldwide, attendance in 2022 was reported to be 8,258,641, or 37% of membership (22,234,406).<sup>13</sup>

### The Challenge of Attendance

The compiling of church attendance information is an ongoing challenge for the denomination. In a report at the CALLED Convention in 2022, Brian Ford, director of eAdventist Membership Services for the North American Division, indicated that only about 50% of NAD churches reported

they attended a worship service in a specific period (such as, in the past four weeks), and responses are used to estimate weekly church attendance. It is generally understood that individuals often overstate their attendance practices. A more accurate method of data collection is to count the number of persons in attendance at worship services.

In our denominational context, this requires someone in the church being designated to take a count. Except in a very small congregation, this method of recording attendance usually does not isolate guests and unbaptized children and, therefore, would include persons other than members.

### Congregational Unhealth

While the GC Annual Statistical Report does not provide statistics by size of congregation, some evidence indicates that not all is well with congregations in the North American Division. At the 2022 CALLED Convention, when Ford presented statistics on church

vitality across the division, he used the benchmarks of multiplying, growing, plateauing, and declining. Ford reported that in 2017, half of the churches in the NAD were declining, and that in 2021, 62 percent were declining.<sup>15</sup> He defined a declining church as one with members whose median age is greater than 65, that had a 2% decrease in attendance over the previous year, and that had no baptisms in the past year. The greatest decline was among rural churches and small churches.

One factor that enables very small Adventist congregations to sustain themselves despite declining membership and attendance is that pastoral positions are funded through the pooling of tithe resources of all congregations in a conference. Most small churches and even districts of multiple churches do not generate sufficient tithe funds to support their full-time pastor. Unlike most Christian denominations and congregations, where the entire financial support for the pastor is generated within the local church, in the Adventist Church larger churches generally subsidize the pastoral salaries of small-church or district pastors.

The financial challenges of staffing small churches weigh heavily on conference budgets. Some conferences have begun utilizing the services of bivocational pastors or volunteers to pastor small churches. Such strategies prolong the viability of small congregations, even when the number of persons in the congregation decreases.

A primary difficulty of shutting down declining congregations is that its members are carriers of memory. Lifelong Adventists often hold memories of events associated

with their church family and local faith community—weddings, baby dedications, funerals, building projects, disaster relief, etc. The congregation also symbolizes the ultimate success of the cause to which they have committed: the triumph of God's kingdom on Earth.

Closing a church, therefore, is for many a deeply personal and emotional experience. Some congregations choose to maintain their relationships and group worship experience within the faith community by transitioning to a house church, if they must relinquish their buildings due to financial exigencies. In such cases the members take comfort in the promise of Jesus, "For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20, NLT).

### **The Future of Small Congregations**

The rapid increase in the number of congregations that hold worship services in a language other than English is an underreported phenomenon in North America. In one sample conference, 39 of 101 congregations were in this category. Most of these churches were established within the last 10 years. In Ford's eAdventist report, he defined a growing church as one with members whose median age is 50 or less, that conducts baptisms each year, and that had a 2% increase in attendance over the previous year.

Yet even while the number of Adventist congregations in the NAD is steadily increasing, attendance appears to be small as compared to membership records. Rural and village churches, especially, are generally low in attendance and populated

largely by older members. Data from the Pew Research Center show that most mainline Christians are over 50 years of age and one-third are older than 65, and this seems to hold true within the Adventist community also. With the ongoing waning of religiosity in America and the aging of Adventist members, the research data on congregational viability does not point to an optimistic future for small congregations.

The conclusion, then, should hardly be surprising. In the face of a general decline in interest in organized religion, only the strong will survive. While there is hope for larger urban and suburban congregations, as well as for non-English and ethnic congregations, researchers offer little good news for the congregations that have declined and are now aged, small, and struggling. We can expect to see more church buildings transition to a second life as businesses or homes. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> "Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview" (2021), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Earls, "22 Vital Stats for Ministry in 2022," Research.Lifeway.com (Jan. 5, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> "2023 Annual Statistical Report, New Series, Vol. 5: Report of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists' 2022 Statistics," p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Global Church Member Survey 2017-2018, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

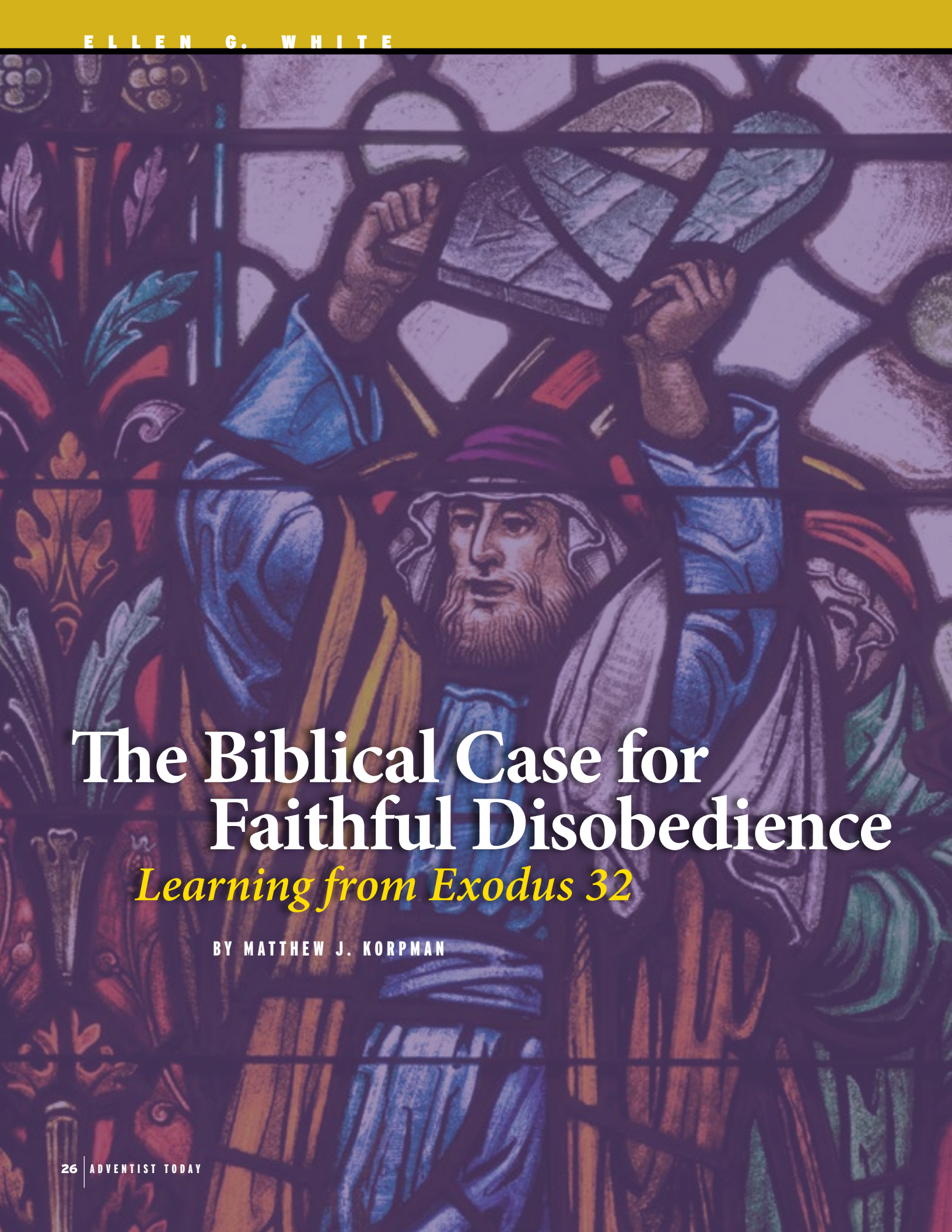
<sup>12</sup> Op cit., p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Op cit., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Jose Cortes, Jr. and Brian Ford, "Four Types of Churches," Presentation at CALLED 2022 Pastors' Family Convention in Lexington, Ky. (June 19-22, 2022).





# The Biblical Case for Faithful Disobedience

*Learning from Exodus 32*

BY MATTHEW J. KORPMAN

FOR MANY CHRISTIANS, THE TWO words in the English language that don't seem possible to combine are "faithful" and "disobedience." For Adventists, who have too often grown up hearing an emphasis solely on obeying the commandments of God, such ideas are especially unthinkable. "If God said it," the saying goes, "that settles it."

Certainly, Scripture teaches us to have faith in God's words, for they do indeed matter. Obedience is an important theme throughout the Bible. However, the idea that God's *words* are always binding and must be obeyed is, surprisingly, not necessarily biblical. We learn from both the Bible and Ellen White that sometimes God requires us to *reject* them—not out of unfaithful resistance, but in faithful disobedience.

### A Biblical Anomaly

In Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch, we read about Moses preparing to receive the law of God. Upon seeing the wicked actions of the freed Hebrews below Mount Sinai, who had just made a golden calf, God turns to Moses with a solemn command and pronouncement of his will.

"The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, and of you I will make a great nation.' But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of

the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster [evil] on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster [evil] that he planned to bring on his people" (Ex. 32:9-14, NRSV).

It's a challenging story presented in only a few verses. God commands Moses not to interfere, suggesting that he will kill the people and bless Moses in their place, but Moses rejects both outcomes and contradicts the command, interfering and arguing anyway. Given the rhetoric about obedience that we are so used to hearing in church, we might expect that Moses would be struck down or, at the very least, reprimanded for his rebellion. But instead, God agreed and "changed his mind." Notice the designation by Moses that God's plan was "evil" or "disaster."<sup>1</sup> Evil, in this context, is also interchangeable with "not representative of God's character/will."

The very notion of a human being rejecting what God says and emerging from the argument as the one who

is correct is mind-boggling for most religious sensibilities. How is that possible? And what, if anything, could this story be trying to teach us?

**The very notion of a human being rejecting what God says and emerging from the argument as the one who is correct is mind-boggling for most religious sensibilities. How is that possible?**

### Ellen White and the Test

On no less than three separate occasions that span almost her entire writing career, White reflected that in this story, the argument was an elaborate test. What sort of a test? A test to see whether Moses would disobey God. You might be forgiven if you were to assume that Moses failed the test by pushing back against God, but in fact, White suggests the opposite. The test wasn't to solicit unthinking obedience to God's words in the present moment, but rather, to promote thoughtful disobedience as a demonstration of greater fidelity and obedience to what God had taught Moses in the past.



White wrote: “Here the Lord *proved* Moses. ... He would *test* the perseverance, faithfulness and love of Moses, for such an erring and ungrateful people. ... [But Moses] showed by his intercessions with God that he valued more highly the prosperity of God’s chosen people than a great name, or to be called the

his name great. In other words, God was testing whether Moses could be persuaded to accept an evil idea if it meant personal benefit to himself. This aspect of the test illustrated for her that if Moses had accepted God’s offered promise—had turned his back on the people and embraced his own benefit—he would have demonstrated that he wasn’t worthy to be the prophet *par excellence* God was training him to become.

By rejecting the divine offer, not even mentioning it in his reply, Moses demonstrated that he was aware of the responsibility God had placed on him. God had called him to lead the people for their benefit, not his. For God to suddenly throw the Hebrew people under the bus for Moses’ own enrichment would be a betrayal of God’s call on his life and his onus as a prophet. In rejecting God’s new offer for his life, Moses showed fidelity to God’s earlier promise about the entire people’s livelihood.

But on another level, in a point Ellen White raises elsewhere, the central issue wasn’t about selfish benefits, but where we place our authority and pledge our obedience. As White asked, “If God had purposed to destroy Israel, who could plead for them?”<sup>3</sup>

In reference to their debacle with the golden calf, she remarked that “Many men would have said: ‘It is the purpose of God. If he wishes to destroy Israel, I can not help it. They will be destroyed.’” And yet, as she notes emphatically, “Not so Moses.”<sup>4</sup>

“How few but would have left the sinners to their fate!” she observed.

“But Moses discerned ground for hope where there appeared only discouragement and wrath. The words of God, ‘Let Me alone,’ he understood not to forbid but to encourage intercession.”<sup>5</sup>

White recognizes and affirms that Moses contradicted God and disobeyed God’s spoken will in Exodus 32:7, but she argues that it was a good thing he did—as the Bible itself suggests—and that it was all ultimately a “test.” The test was to see whether Moses would know God’s loving character well enough to reject God’s seemingly callous command and to instead obey what he knew was God’s deep desire: that he intercede. The result? Moses indeed knew what all humanity has learned from the revelation of Jesus Christ: that God’s love burns eternally for his children.

Moreover, God’s test probed whether Moses knew that God’s eternal will is always to heal, not to punish. Moses passed with flying colors, affirming previous promises that God does not change based on emotions or circumstances. Moses had faith in the consistently loving character of God.

Ironically, if Moses had obeyed God and quipped, “Thy will be done,” he would have failed the test. In other words, obedience to God’s spoken words on the mountain that day would have required Moses to turn away from God’s character of love. Only by resisting God’s suggestion and pushing back did Moses prove himself a true prophet. As Ellen White notes, Moses did “the work of justice to turn away the wrath of God,” and in so doing he “proved who was the true friend of God and the friend of the people.”<sup>6</sup>

Any attempt to uplift the promises of the Bible and its enduring testimony for our lives must grapple with this paradoxical reality: God’s word is not always binding.

father of a greater nation than was Israel. ... Nobly did Moses stand the test, and show that his interest in Israel was not to obtain a great name, nor to exalt himself. ... God had *proved* him, and was pleased with his faithfulness, his simplicity of heart, and integrity before him.”<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the argument White presents is this: Moses was being tempted by God’s offer to make



Clearly White judged that at least once in the life of one of faith's greatest heroes, a deep faith called for radical but faithful disobedience to even the very words of God. Although she warned believers throughout her ministry about obeying God and not transgressing his commands, she recognized an important exception that we, too, must keep in mind.

### The Reformation View

As radical as it might sound, White's interpretation was shared by many others, including the great Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. Commenting on the Bible passage, Calvin wrote: "This was, indeed, the sharpest and sorest trial of the faith of Moses; when God seemed to contradict Himself and to depart from His covenant ... when God seems at first sight to throw discredit upon His own words, we have need of unusual fortitude and firmness to sustain this assault. For, since faith is founded on the Word, when that Word appears to be at issue with itself, how in such conflicting circumstances could pious minds be sustained unless they were supported by the incomparable power of the Spirit?"<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, Calvin's conclusion is best summarized by his remarks on the similar story in Genesis 32 of Jacob wrestling God: "For we do not fight against him [God], except by his own power, and with his own weapons; for he, having challenged us to this contest, at the same time furnishes us with means of resistance, so that he both fights against us and for us."<sup>8</sup>

Like Calvin, Martin Luther (also commenting on Genesis 32) saw the issue of such divine tests focused on the theme of clinging to the truth of what

God's word had earlier promised. He wrote: "There is sufficiently abundant protection in the promise of God ... against this lofty temptation [from God]. For if God sent an angel to say: 'Do not believe these promises!' I would reject him, saying: 'Depart from me, Satan, etc.' (cf. Matt 16:23). Or, if God himself appeared to me in His majesty and said: 'You are not worthy of My grace; I will change My plan and not keep My promise to you,' I would not have to yield to Him, but *it would be necessary to fight most vehemently against God himself*. It is as Job says: 'Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him' (cf. Job 13:15)."<sup>9</sup>

For Luther, the great test is staying true to your belief about who God is, being rooted in God's confirmed character, even when God appears to be the opposite of that belief. In other words, what both Reformers (and Ellen White) agreed upon was that God didn't actually change his mind. The statement in Exodus 32:14 referred to the change in God's stated purpose, but not his actual heartfelt will. There was a distinction to be made between the divine *words* and divine *will*. Moses passed the test by discerning correctly.

### Exploring What It Means

Any attempt to uplift the promises of the Bible and its enduring testimony for our lives must grapple with this paradoxical reality: God's word is not *always* binding. Yet faithful disobedience is not undertaken by one's own rationality, apart from God, but by careful attention and reliance upon God's character and established truths. We need to be

skeptical of any obedience that requires us to betray God's teaching elsewhere.

As Luther and Calvin so carefully noted, it was only by relying on what God had promised before that Moses could discern the test and stand against the words he heard that day on Sinai. To rephrase a quotation from the theologian Karl Barth: Moses fought God's words, for the heart of God, with the words of God's heart.<sup>10</sup>

Adventists today often wonder how to read the Bible. What sort of hermeneutics are necessary to faithfully read and interpret God's will in Scripture? We need to pursue this important topic with all of our hearts. However, in seeking an answer, we must recognize that simply asking people to hear and obey falls short of counsel given in Scripture and in Ellen White's writings. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> The author has included brackets to provide a literal translation of the Hebrew where the New Revised Standard Version translators softened the same Hebrew word they earlier translated as "evil."

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 3 (1864), pp. 276, 278. Emphasis my own.

<sup>3</sup> White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890), p. 318.

<sup>4</sup> White, "Apostasy," *Youth Instructor*, Vol. 49, No. 46 (Nov. 21, 1901), p. 362.

<sup>5</sup> White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 318.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3 (1872), p. 303.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, Vol. 3 (1854), p. 339.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, Vol. 2 (1850), p. 196.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, "Reminiscere Sunday – Second Sunday in Lent," *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 5 (2000), p. 325. Emphasis my own.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, Vol. 4, Part 1 (Study Edition, 2010), p. 68 [426].



## NEWS BRIEFS

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

### GC Wants to Launch Adventist Space Colony

SILVER SPRING, Md. — General Conference (GC) officials unveiled some of the boldest plans for the world church to date: space exploration.

“For decades, we as church leaders have struggled with how to equip Adventists to live in the world but not be of it,” said GC Education Director Ian Dunkin. “We believe the answer lies in an Adventist colony somewhere in space.”

Dunkin said that church leaders are not yet sure if investing tithes and offerings in spacecraft development is justifiable, as SpaceX has “already done a pretty good job on the technology side of things.” For now, Dunkin said, the church plans to set aside funds only to prepare Adventists for the “basic

day-to-day realities” of space travel and colonization.

“We still have some work to do on the details, but the underlying logic is solid as a rock,” said Dunkin. “If we are spending all of our resources churning out pastors, teachers, and nurses but haven’t spent a dollar on readying our young people for living beyond the corrupting influences of planet Earth, we are missing the mark.”

Dunkin added that part of the inspiration for an Adventist space colony came from the many Adventists educational campuses around the world: “We Adventists excel at building compounds and creating self-sustaining communities away from the corrupting influence of cities, popular culture, and decent dining. What’s stopping us from creating the next Adventist bubble in space?”

### John the Baptist Told His Outfit Too Revealing

ICEBUCKET, Mich. — John the Baptist was banned from Shepherd SDA Church last Sabbath after turning up for a service in his usual camel-hair attire. The preacher immediately attracted the attention of church greeters, who said he would not even receive a bulletin until he’d found a shirt and tie in the Dorcas shed.

John briefly considered complying with the demand of the incensed members—not because he agreed with the dress code, but because he’d underestimated how cold Michigan could get.

### New Ruling to Prevent Potluck Disappointment

PIE TOWN, N.M. — Beginning on the first Sunday morning in March, every Adventist member who consistently turns up to potluck with dishes deemed “underperforming” by 50% or more of their church board must take cooking lessons—or prepare to pay the

price. A local church member who serves on the Potluck Monitoring Taskforce of the General Conference Executive Committee leaked the news this week.

“The lessons will be offered free of charge, as long as members can demonstrate substantial improvements to the flavor and appearance of their dishes within a month,” explained the taskforce participant.

“Members who do not attend cooking classes, yet continue to bring subpar veggie lasagna and other offending dishes to their church potluck, will face a series of penalties, including extra children’s Sabbath School teaching duties, impromptu song service coordination, or flower arrangement—basically everything we expect of pastors’ wives,” she said.

# Contributors



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

16-year tenure as president of the Ohio Conference, he advocated for innovation and change, including the consolidation of conferences.



**DAVID GEELAN** is Sue's husband and Cassie and Alexandra's dad. He has lived and taught in Papua New Guinea and Canada and worked

with teachers in South Africa and the Philippines. David is national head of the School of Education in the Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Theology at the University of Notre Dame Australia.



**RICH HANNON** is a retired software engineer. His long-standing avocations include philosophy, geology, and medieval history.



**MATTHEW J. KORPMAN** is an adjunct professor of biblical studies and theology at La Sierra University, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, and

the author of *Saying No to God: A Radical Approach to Reading the Bible Faithfully*, which explores the subject of his article in greater depth.



**LOREN SEIBOLD** is the executive editor of *Adventist Today* magazine and website and is teacher/pastor of the popular *Adventist*

*Today Sabbath Seminar*.



**CHARLES SCRIVEN**, now retired in Tennessee, taught at Walla Walla, served as pastor at Sligo in Takoma Park, and was president of Columbia

Union College (now Washington Adventist University) and later of Kettering College. For over a decade, he was chair of the board of Adventist Forums.



**STEVEN SICILIANO** is pastor of the Jackson Heights and Hartsdale Churches in the Greater New York Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.



**HEROLD WEISS**, Ph.D., is an author and scholar who lives in Berrien Springs, Michigan. A native of Uruguay who has lived in the States since 1954,

he is professor emeritus of Religious Studies at Saint Mary's College in Indiana.

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## EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

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

# CATALYSTS, NOT CRITICS



In our Adventist community, constructive criticism can serve as a catalyst for progress. At *Adventist Today*, we don't just identify flaws; we foster solutions and celebrate innovation within the world church. Our mission is not to be perpetual naysayers, but to uplift our faith community through a collaborative and constructive approach.

Our commitment is rooted in love for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We genuinely believe that it can be better: more transparent, more generous, more

forgiving, filled with more love and understanding and second chances for all of us.

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BJÖRN KARLMAN

Executive Director of *Adventist Today*

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