

Why There Isn't  
One True Church

How Many of Us  
Can God Save?

Adventists on  
the Back Porch

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# Adventist *Today*



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GOD'S PEOPLE?**





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## The Problem with Being the One True Church

By Loren Seibold

I CONFESS TO A CERTAIN SOUR FASCINATION WITH the kind of Seventh-day Adventists who barricade themselves into the tiniest possible religious space. They seem driven to restrict rather than to expand their spiritual experience.

Thus, they study inspired words with extreme literalism, ignoring or explaining away every passage that threatens a more expansive understanding. They fear learning too much about the big world around them. They restrict their information input to evidence of how bad things are outside their boundaries.

Over time the walls get thicker, the thinking space smaller. Their doctrine can exist only in narrowness. Wide and free space frightens them; they seal their intellectual windows, rebreathing only interior air. Some of these folks have sharp minds and good memories, but they use their intelligence to build fortifications rather than bridges.

If I had another life, I would study such people. I believe psychology and sociology would explain them better than their religious reasoning, which often is so tortured as to be palatable only to fellow sufferers.

One example of this is their conviction that of the 8 billion people on Earth, God wholly approves of only one small set: the roughly one-quarter of 1 percent whose names are on the books of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—and not even all of them!

### The History of Adventist Separatism

Ellen White in *Spiritual Gifts* described the expulsion of her family from the Chestnut Street Methodist Episcopal Church in 1843, saying it was because the Harmons believed that Jesus was returning soon.

That was only partially true. According to the records of that congregation, her parents were expelled for “long absence from our Church and

ordinances and [for] supporting an anti-Methodist doctrine and congregation, viz.: Millerism, etc.”<sup>1</sup> The Methodist Church of the day believed in the return of Jesus, but time-setting was going too far. And when they stopped showing up in church, they were dropped.

Given how much White in her writings dwelled on the trauma of this event, I think I’m not drawing too strained an inference to say that this was the seed of Adventist separatism. Reflecting upon it, White drew a martyrish line between her family and the believers who didn’t follow them out, saying that “some sold their favor with God for a place in the Methodist church. Many believed, but dared not confess their faith for fear of being turned out of the synagogue. They loved the praise of men more than the favor of God”<sup>2</sup>

The 1844 disappointment drew the embarrassed Millerites more tightly together under the twin banners of an imminent second coming and, soon thereafter, the spiritual seal—set only upon them, and no other Christians—of Sabbath-keeping. Because keeping the Jewish Sabbath led to criticism by other Protestants, which the Adventist pioneers took for persecution, this marked a decisive separation from the rest of Christendom.

The result was an us-versus-them attitude that lasts to this day. By the time *The Great Controversy* was written, “apostate protestantism” had joined Roman Catholicism and spiritualism as the enemies of God<sup>3</sup>—and Adventists were well and truly a sect.

### Biblical Arguments

Adventist separatism relies upon three biblical arguments.

First is the belief that God’s mercy extends to just a few. “But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”

Where on a Venn diagram would you find the Adventist concerns about living perfectly, according to a Victorian-era design, overlapping with the needs and concerns of secular people?

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(Matt. 7:14, NIV). Our minority proves that we are right. Like the Marines, God wants only a few good men—not everyone.

Second, then, by what sorting mechanism does God keep the group small? By making extreme demands upon the believer. We believe in Jesus, but that is not enough: we must show our dedication in specific actions that go beyond, say, living the fruits of the Spirit or the Beatitudes. We become detailists, identifying in the Bible and the writings of Ellen White precisely how to live, which is why diet is more important to many Adventists than believing that Jesus rose from the dead.

Third, God's chosen denomination is identified by our two eponymous doctrines. By twinning Revelation 14:12 ("Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus") with Revelation 19:10 ("for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy"), we conclude that these saints can be none other than the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for we alone claim all of the commandments (including the fourth) and have a prophet.

As for that small gate and narrow way, we labeled ourselves "the remnant"—the few who, by reason of our faithfulness, can fit through heaven's narrow door.

## The Evangelistic Gate

Despite its exegetical problems, this prophetic identity is sufficient for Adventist separatism.

To a sect, those outside of it have little to teach us, little we need to hear. We dare not attend to the outside world's interests. Those "out there" can be accepted among us only if they conform to our small world. (Indeed, most of us, even those who are progressive and open-minded, still have only Adventist friends.) Because we are so different, our evangelistic method is to barricade ourselves against the world while inviting others to join us inside—but not until passing through a series of doctrinal and behavioral sieves.

Recently I learned of a skilled young pastor appointed to an office in the denomination's Global

Mission Center for Secular and Post-Christian Mission, where his role will be to engage "secular and post-Christian people"—that is, win people who are unaffiliated with a religion or who live in Christian cultures but don't subscribe to Christian beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

Setting aside how a person can do that from an office in the General Conference building—the most restrictive space in a restrictive church—one wonders how anyone, given such a narrow product to sell, can bring it to a secular world? Where on a Venn diagram would you find the Adventist concerns about living perfectly, according to a Victorian-era design, overlapping with the needs and concerns of secular people?

There isn't any, which is why we evangelize like a trapdoor spider: stay safely underground and pull others in if they get close enough to capture.

## A Bigger God

Here is a useful diagnostic question to evaluate a theology: "What kind of God does your doctrine describe?"

I once passed by a group of people talking after church and heard snatches of a conversation—a man telling his friends about someone who was apparently not present. Whoever he was describing was very angry at all of us, didn't think we were good enough in any way, and was completely disapproving of nearly everything we did or didn't do. I thought to myself, "Sounds like an unpleasant guy. I'm glad he's not a member of my church." It wasn't until I passed the group a second time that I realized the man was describing God as he saw him!

We recognize nice people when we meet them. Why would we think that God wouldn't be nicer, kinder, more accepting than the nicest people we know? And if God really is angry and petulant, as that man in church seemed to think, why would I want to spend eternity with that kind of God?

My grandma would say of a neighbor, "She's such a wonderful person. It's too bad she's not an Adventist!"—by which she meant that as nice as she is, she won't be in heaven with us because she

doesn't go to church on Saturday. Kindness and goodness weren't enough. There were many rules to keep. Grandma's God was parochial and didn't spend much time outside of the Adventist Church.

It's hard to argue with the anthropological assertion that human beings make their gods in their own image.

## A Large and Varied World

About one-third of the people on Earth are aligned to some degree with Christianity. Another quarter are more or less Islamic. Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, animists, other folk religionists, and people unaffiliated with any religion make up the rest.

Within each of these groups are those who hold to a tight definition of their faith, as well as those who are only culturally associated with it, such as secular Jews or Christians, and belong to their tribe just enough to occasionally have a religious wedding or celebrate holidays.

Christianity, we Christians insist, is the true religion. Yet we differ so widely that we barely recognize one another. Within that broad definition are those who, like Roman Catholics and Seventh-day Adventists, claim to be the sole practitioners of true Christianity.

Muslims also say that Allah is the true God and that faith in Allah the true faith. Hindus are astonishingly syncretistic: Jesus can take his place in the pantheon of deities, alongside Ganesha and Lakshmi. Buddhism is a sort of open-source religion; many formulas for living a worthwhile life, some quite vague, fit comfortably into it.

At the risk of seeming to not take Matthew 7:14 seriously enough, I think any right-minded person must ask: what kind of God would design a world in which only a small fraction of people could possibly win the prize of eternal life? And worse: what kind of God would destroy in anger those who didn't have the chance to know the necessary details? Only a very cruel one.

John in his first epistle warns us to not love the world, but he is equally emphatic that we must

love the *people* of the world. Anyone who becomes acquainted with the people of the world—who looks at them with hope and optimism, not disdain—will realize that a good God is not one who does wholesale slaughter of everyone who doesn't see everything as you and I do. To say that, as some of us do, is petty selfishness.

A God of esoteric detail and impossible demands is impossible to reconcile with God's qualities of love, mercy, and goodness. Let's admit that the picture of God we perpetuate is not designed to reflect the generosity of Jesus, but rather, to motivate people to join the church and to keep them there.

## Religionism

The significant thing about all churches, at whatever level, is that there's an inside and an outside. These organizations formalize the division between members and those who aren't. We have buildings of a peculiar style where we meet, peculiar social mores within the group, and peculiar rituals that all must learn.

We Adventists go further. A Methodist friend was surprised to hear his Adventist wife refer to "non-Adventists." *What kind of church*, he wondered, *has a word set aside for everyone who isn't one of you?*

I'm weary of the whole inside-outside dichotomy. What would happen to Christianity—to all spiritual communities—if we weren't exclusive? Maybe John Lennon was right when he said that we should imagine a world without religion: religion as it is usually practiced divides people, because it demands that you see things my way and rejects you if you don't.

How many wars have been fought in the name of some god or religion? How many restrictions of freedom have been initiated to force people to conform to their ruler's picture of what the god wants? How many people have been alienated from God entirely by divisive theologies?

There's a scene in Herman Wouk's semi-autobiographical novel *Inside Outside* where the ultra-conservative Jewish narrator is upset when he sees his sister use the blue-striped milk dishtowel for

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meat crockery, believing that “once you start to compromise, the whole thing will break down.”<sup>5</sup>

“Just ask yourself, Davey,” his more liberal friend countered, “what kind of religion is it that you can disintegrate with a dishtowel?”

Adventists must ask themselves the same thing. Is our God so fragile that a relationship with God is disintegrated by a different day of worship, a different diet, a different church organization? Our God must be bigger than that.

All preachers should engrave this line from Solomon on their hearts: “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few” (Eccl. 5:2, NIV).

## A Massive Grace

We say that God’s grace covers all sinners: the reformed gambler, the reformed adulterer, even the reformed killer. But according to some remnant churchists, it cannot cover differences such as the day on which we worship, the church that records our names, or the food we eat.


And what about a godly person who is not a Christian at all—who calls God by a different name? Can God’s grace reach that far? I have to believe that it can.

In Isak Dinesen’s short story “Babbette’s Feast,” the maid comes into a sum of money and chooses to spend it on a sumptuous meal for a group of neighbors and friends, all of whom are members of a pious religious sect that was started by the stern Lutheran father of the hostesses. In the aftermath of that meal, the elderly military general rises to give a speech.

“Man, my friends,” said the general, “is frail and foolish. We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason we tremble.... We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong.

“But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty.”<sup>6</sup>

Here is what I believe. I cannot say for certain whether it is true, for no one knows all truth but God. But it is true enough to me that I am willing to rest my hope upon it: I believe that when Jesus died on the cross, he proclaimed general amnesty. I believe that God loves everyone, wants to include all of us, and that God’s kingdom will ultimately encompass everyone who hasn’t consciously chosen to be excluded.

I may be wrong. But here I stand, and I can do no other. 

<sup>1</sup> Online at [http://www.truthorfiction.com/Methodist\\_Church\\_Letter.htm](http://www.truthorfiction.com/Methodist_Church_Letter.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2 (1860), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 573-574.

<sup>4</sup> “New Director to Lead Adventist Church’s Secular and Post-Christian Outreach,” [adventistreview.org](http://adventistreview.org) (Feb. 2, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Herman Wouk, *Inside Outside* (1985).

<sup>6</sup> Isak Dinesen, “Babbette’s Feast,” *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958).

# THE ADVENTIST BACK PORCH

*It's been my experience in Adventism that there is a "back porch" where the disaffected sometimes hang out.*

By Rich Hannon

THE CHURCH IS OFTEN METAPHORICALLY PORTRAYED AS A building, having a (hopefully) welcoming entrance for new believers who want to come in and fellowship with an affirming community. That's the "front door."

But there is an additional metaphorical "back door," which represents people leaving the church—intellectually and/or physically. To exit through that back door is to say goodbye to both involvement and commitment.

It's been my experience in Adventism that there is also, to extend the imagery, a "back porch" where the disaffected sometimes hang out. This affords proximity without (or with diminished) involvement for people who are paying attention to what happens in Adventism—perhaps purely as critics, but more often as disappointed observers.

## Leaving and Staying

I'm sure that both liberal and conservative Adventists leave because they feel alienated, but I doubt they are in equal numbers. It's my observation that unhappy liberals tend to withdraw quietly, but unhappy conservatives rarely leave. They stay, and the most extreme ones cause trouble, usually in the local church.

A few militant conservatives produce periodicals and websites, but many just engage in online commenting that stridently complains about anything viewed as drifting away from their concept of orthodoxy. So, they remain "in the building" but snipe at ideas that might undermine this entrenched worldview.

One of the reasons that unhappy traditionalists tend to stay, I surmise, comes from Ellen G. White. She asserted that the church is going through to the end, which makes Adventism an "ark of safety" that one should never leave. If you believe this, you would

surely want to hold the fort and, of course, advocate for what to allow inside.

On the other hand, if you get sufficiently discouraged about the grounding of such orthodoxies (and much more), you often just quietly leave.

This metaphorical extension of a back porch, to accommodate interested but now partially disengaged liberals, coalesced in my mind over a number of years, notably during the time I moderated the comments section for *Spectrum* magazine's website. I was on duty 24/7, mostly to ensure that opinions were expressed with civility. (Comments on both *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today* seem mellower these days. Perhaps that's due to behind-the-scenes management, or maybe trolling via comments is yesterday's venue for obnoxious behavior.)

Online commentary is an interesting reflector of a progressive-leaning back-porch Adventist—one who has mostly left the church physically, but not mentally/emotionally. Such individuals want to see what's going on in the subculture and maybe have some virtual fellowship with other online personas who are also hanging out on the porch.

## Out the Back Door

But why do people exit the building, that is, disconnect from active involvement with Adventism? While there are many reasons, some categorization seems evident:

*God hurt me.* Life contains many painful experiences and, for a theist, the question inevitably arises: Why isn't God intervening? In addition to physical and emotional pain, we suffer societal pain from injustice, which is alluded to scripturally as the souls under the altar who "called out in a loud voice, 'How long,

Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev. 6:10, NIV). More generally labeled “the problem of evil,” this is central to many faith crises, in which the believer is broken by the world and cannot understand God’s apparent non-involvement.

*Adventism hurt me.* This is where church leadership, and underlying normative theology, harms people—usually inadvertently, often at a distance. A classic example from the top is how the General Conference authorities handled women’s equality, evidenced in the transition from the 2012-2014 Theology of Ordination Study Committee report<sup>1</sup> to what was

**The people I personally relate to deeply are those who were occupying the porch with both reluctance and sadness.**

(and wasn’t) presented at the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio. But far more often, it is how Adventist theology is implemented near (or at) the local level. Most prominent, in my view, is the effect our eschatology too often has had on believers. It has produced fear and guilt, even if the basic narrative itself doesn’t necessitate such baggage.

*Church members hurt me.* We are all limited in our understanding and short on wisdom—but also broken, to various degrees. We label some of this as sin, whether firsthand or as indirect consequences. French philosopher Blaise Pascal is somewhat famously quoted as saying: “Man is neither angel nor beast, and unhappily whoever wants to act the angel, acts the beast.”<sup>2</sup> People in church are, at least nominally, God’s saints. But we can and do hurt each other. While it certainly happens in the church-employee context, most of us are laity who experience the “blows” in our local church experience. We suffer from hypocrisy, lies, and bad decisions from fellow members. We may get hurt

ourselves, or we may simply feel the collateral damage when such dysfunctionality hurts others. It all adds up, until our love and commitment is too battered to keep participating.

*We hurt ourselves.* The idea embodied in the above Pascal quote is too often, and too conveniently, applied to everyone except ourselves. What about our own mistakes, which have repercussions in a church context? Sometimes we don’t recognize and accept our need to take responsibility, so we dissemble and self-justify. It’s a core human weakness to adopt a halo effect, which cuts us slack that we may be unwilling to extend to others. If we hurt people, we make justifications. They probably deserved it, or they just didn’t understand the validity of our motivation. *Yeah, right.* This is us trying to take the high moral ground. After all, we need to live with ourselves, and we cannot always face up to the unvarnished truth.

### **Staying on the Porch**

My above list of reasons to exit Adventism is merely a stand-in for an inventory of far greater complexity. The problem of evil is real, and while not intractable in my view, it still can and does seriously undermine faith. The institutional church, like Pascal’s human, is a “coin” with two sides: angel and devil. Individuals surely injure one other, but also (likely more often) they hurt themselves.

The world church keeps statistics, albeit poorly, on how many members join Adventism, but we rarely investigate their leaving. Of course not. Where’s the upside? I’d guess that the majority of those exiting do not linger—and likely don’t even notice any kind of back porch. But I also know that many, in a church of this size, hang around at varying distances. My metaphor is trying to describe that tangential, continuing interest and occasional involvement.

So why stay, even on some proximate back porch? Again, I offer a few simplified and incomplete possibilities:

*Some Adventist beliefs may remain.* There is much in our belief constellation that can retain resonance (i.e., the Sabbath, healthy living, doctrines such as “soul sleep” and a non-eternal hell). These and others make sense and are valued, but the scars from various church wounds have, over time, marred a commitment to the organization.

*Community still holds importance.* If denominational ills are the root cause for exiting, members might still consider the local church accessible enough to attend at least occasionally, and they may also follow Adventism via virtual presences, both official and independent.

*Christians seek comfort and hope.* The link between church participation and the gospel message, however imperfectly proclaimed and nourished in Adventism, can (and should) sustain a deep connection. Even when burnt and hurt, people need hope. Christianity provides this, albeit undermined by the world's evil and sniping from religious critics.

*Cultural roots run deep.* Some back-porchers don't believe the doctrines and don't attend church, but their life history is so completely wrapped up in the church that they can't break free, either. An atheist ex-Adventist who spent his professional life in the secular world believes none of the doctrines, but he can feel at home only around those who understand the Adventist culture and vocabulary, know the people he knows, and share some of his memories.

## People, Pain, and Proximity

Sorry for the alliteration, but all of these words describe the problem as it applies for me. I'm getting to be an old guy, and I've been associated with Adventism nearly my whole life. I haven't left, and don't think I will. But I keenly feel "back-porch pain"—from personal experience, but far more often in words and experiences expressed by other "porchers."

In my years of being the website comments moderator for *Spectrum*, I had to contend with so much negative verbiage. The most frustrating came from those on the extremes. Many conservative defenders too often adopted a "love it or leave it" posture. Some liberals, especially among the "left and loving it" club, exhibited snark, anger, and condescension.

But the people I personally relate to deeply are those who occupy the porch with both reluctance and sadness. I think I understand both descriptors, because I share them. I don't want the church to hurt people the way it too often does. These wounds drive people from the building. But I also share their desire to stay, hoping that someday and somehow the church might become (even incrementally) better.

## Recognition, Sure, But Remediation?

This essay has focused on trying to describe and label a situation that perhaps has been poorly recognized and/or underdefined. Progressive change seems illusory in this complex social situation, partly because the factors that cause Adventists to populate a back porch are seemingly as diverse as the individuals on it.

Nonetheless, I hesitantly offer a few thoughts on remediation:

- *Adventism retains value*, even though significant change may


be necessary to reveal and capitalize on it. Stripped of its legalism and obsession with being right, the church still has a core goodness and heavenly focus. Of course, one can say that about almost all forms of Christendom, but in my admittedly limited experience, an overwhelming percentage of Adventists have good hearts.

- *A partial exit extends the timeline, even the possibility, for Adventism to change.* However modest we might feel our presence is, to remain in community means our voices don't go silent.

- *Church is mostly local.* Denominational history, culture, and doctrinal tilt factor significantly into the Adventist experience, but the local church is composed of people who mostly want their Christianity to give purpose and comfort in an often-harsh present reality. Yes, you may choose to exit if a congregation is too toxic to stomach. But even a regressive local church culture can (and does) have genuine fellow travelers who can be "brothers and sisters" at some level of affinity. And they also need our friendship. A core Christian strength is community. This local church "baby" is worth the effort of trying to find ways to accommodate the "bathwater."

The back-porch persona I'm trying to describe could also be viewed as a "hollowed-out" Adventist. One who does not share your grandfather's assumptions, priorities, and motivations. But what has gone, and what remains? Has the gospel died with the hurt and disillusionment you've experienced? Has the desire for community diminished to the extent that you can (or want to) travel alone? A frank evaluation is healthy.

What needs do we have as Christians? What can we get from, and give to, a local church? Are the participatory options too injurious, or can two-way nurture through engagement be wholesome?

In our present subculture, when change seems barely visible on the horizon, being a back-porcher is unfulfilling and lonely. Perhaps the straddling I'm trying to describe is, sadly, your present optimality. Any dissonance we must live with will be uncomfortable. There's nothing wrong with leaving and moving to a healthier community, if that's your assessment. But remaining, even in limited proximity and involvement, does mean that you seek for a better church. The bottom line is whether or not you think the Adventism of your vision is worth working toward. 

<sup>1</sup> "About the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC)," online at <https://www.adventistarchives.org/about-tosc>

<sup>2</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, No. 329.

# Will Few or Many Be Saved?

By Reinder Bruinsma

I GREW UP IN A VILLAGE ABOUT 20 MILES NORTH OF AMSTERDAM. Most residents were church-going Christians.

One-third of them were Roman Catholics, who lived mostly at the eastern side of the village; they had their own Catholic baker and their own Catholic grocery shop. The Protestant contingent was mostly divided between the (quite liberal) Dutch Reformed and the (stricter) Christian Reformed. A small segment did not identify with any religious community, whether Christian or non-Christian. One lady had been converted to the Watchtower society.

And then there was our family. We were Seventh-day Adventists.

It was known that we belonged to a rather strange sect and that we went to meetings in a nearby town. We worshiped on Saturdays, but we were not Jews. My siblings and I attended the local Christian school, and in actual practice we were seen as a special kind of Christians not unlike the Christian Reformed. We were not persecuted or discriminated against, but our religious affiliation and specific beliefs remained a mystery to most of the villagers.

## A Comparatively Small Group

I remember being around the age of 8-10 years when I first worried about the denominational choice of my parents. Was ours really the only true church? Would only Adventists make it into the kingdom?

I am not saying that my parents believed that heaven would be populated only by Adventists, but I got the distinct impression that once people had a knowledge of “the Truth,” they would be in eternal trouble if they, at some point, turned their backs on it.

Now, seven decades later, I doubt that any Adventists live in the village of my youth. Probably some have heard about the existence of the Adventist Church, which has grown in the Netherlands and has from time to time received some publicity. Perhaps they have noted that a few prominent Dutch people are members of this little-known Protestant denomination. But it is still a very small group. Today the official membership figure stands at just over 6,000 in a population of 17 million, which is roughly one Adventist for every 3,000 people, or 0.035 percent of all the Dutch. And within this tiny minority, a majority of the 6,000 Adventists in my country have immigrant roots.

As a child, I thought that Adventism might perhaps be small in the Netherlands but that it was big in North America. I now know, however, that our church is a small and relatively unknown religious group in the United States. I was shocked when some years ago I rented a car less than 10 miles from Loma Linda University in California and found that the person behind the desk had no idea what an Adventist was! While Adventists may number more than a million (on paper) in North America, that is less than one-half percent of the population.

## Will Only Christians Be Saved?

The official view of the church has always been that, in the end, only a fairly small group will be saved. In fact, many believe there'd be reason to worry if our church were to become popular. Due to the biblical concept of a “remnant,” Adventists expect that relatively few people will persevere when, at the end of time, life gets very difficult for those who remain faithful in their keeping of the commandments and in listening to the spirit of prophecy. A shaking, many maintain, will result in a small remnant of “real” believers being ready to meet Christ when he appears.

Views regarding the identity of the remnant range from a very narrow interpretation (only the Adventists who have reached perfection) to one that is broad (all people, including non-Christians, who have lived up to the light they had).

The question of whether or not God will save only Christians has been hotly debated through the centuries. Admittedly, we read in Acts 4:12: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (NIV). These were words spoken by the apostle Peter, who is said to have been “filled with the Holy Spirit” when he addressed the Jewish spiritual leaders (Acts 4:8). Did Peter mean that only those who fully understand the role of Christ in the plan of salvation can expect to be saved?

This can hardly be the case, for it would exclude the faithful people of God in Old Testament times, and all who wanted to be included with Israel as worshippers of the true God. Even though these individuals may have had a very limited understanding of the plan of salvation, their redemption is based on what Jesus Christ did also for them.

Will this likewise be true for all of those who, in later times, lived in all sincerity according to the light they possessed—and for those who fall into that category today? People might not fully understand the process by which they are saved, but if they are saved, it is because of what Christ did for them, whether they are fully conscious of that or not. Will Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and people who adhere to other non-Christian religions be among the great multitude that no one can number?

Romans 1:18-20 seems to imply that this may well be the case. Since the beginning of this world, Paul says, “God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (verse 20, NIV).

This will undoubtedly remain a topic of much discussion, but in the minds of many Christians—and certainly of many Adventists—the thought lingers that few will be saved and many will be lost. They think of Christ’s analogy that the gateway toward the kingdom of heaven is a narrow path, while the road to the

destination of the condemned is a broad avenue (Matt. 7:13-14). We must, however, realize that other Bible passages lend vital nuance to this sobering statement by Christ.

## The 144,000

When John the Revelator saw a vision of the redeemed, he wrote: “I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9, NIV). Clothed in white robes, they declare God’s praises and serve him “day and night” (verse 15). In the same chapter, John “hears the number of those who are sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel” (verse 4).

The passages about the 144,000 have given rise to a lot of controversy. In some circles, 144,000 has been interpreted as a literal number of true believers who will be ready to receive Christ at the moment of his return. Some faith communities, which have seen themselves as sole guardians of the Truth, have identified their movement with the 144,000. In Adventism, however, this interpretation has mostly been abandoned.

A literal interpretation of the number ignores the fact that the description of this group is full of symbolic language. A literal approach would lead to the conclusion that the 144,000 are descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel (except the tribe of Dan) and are all of the male gender (14:4). Commentator G. B. Baird points out that many different descriptions of the old Israel are applied to the church and that it would be “perverse” to apply the 144,000 to the literal tribes of Israel and to ignore the general pattern of how Israel is interpreted in Revelation.<sup>1</sup>

It is generally understood that the final book of the Bible abounds with symbols and that numbers, as a rule, have a symbolic significance. Many theologians share the opinion that the number 10 denotes completeness, while the number 12 is associated with the people of God. The number 144,000 results from the multiplication of the numbers 10 and 12: 10x10x10 (points to absolute completeness) times 12x12 (includes all of God’s people). This has led many to conclude that the “great multitude” may well be identical with the 144,000 but seen from a different perspective. This makes complete sense to me.

Use of the number 10 to the third power emphasizes the unimaginably large size of the “harvest” at the end of time, while use of a compound of the number 12 refers to the fact that all of God’s people are accounted for. No one will be missing when God gathers all of his children in that decisive moment, when the believers of all ages will be resurrected and those who are faithful and are alive at that time will exchange the burden of their mortal nature for the gift of immortality.

## The Great Multitude


At the other end of the theological spectrum from those who believe that eventually only a minority will be saved are those who believe that all people of all ages will ultimately be saved. Universalists argue that the concept of a loving God cannot be reconciled with the idea that he will send some of his creatures to eternal damnation.

Some 25 years ago, Eerdmans Publishing asked me to translate from Dutch into English a book by Jan Bonda (1918-1997), a Dutch Reformed pastor. Bonda had concluded, after decades of intense study, that the suggestion that a God of love would destine millions of people to damnation was not only unthinkable, but also unbiblical. His 300 pages of small print formed a carefully argued treatise, but as I translated his text, I found that his theory could be sustained only by an overly creative combination of biblical statements, with carefully selected wording from a wide range of different Bible translations.

Bonda was neither the first nor the last passionate defender of universalism. The great church father Origen (c. 185-c. 253) was already adamant that “the power of Christ’s cross and of his death ... is so great, that it will be sufficient for the healing and restoration not only of the present and future ages, but also for those of the past.” Origen believed that even Satan was not beyond salvation. It seems to me that the Bible does not warrant a belief in universal salvation but instead tells us—whether we like it or not—that there will be a judgment resulting in two groups of people: those who are saved and those who are lost.

I concluded, as I translated Bonda’s book—and I am still of that opinion—that we cannot expect God to grant eternal life to those who do not want it. However, I have also concluded, on the basis of my understanding of who and what God is, that it is not difficult to be saved but is much more difficult to be lost. Many questions remain, and we do well to leave these unknown matters in the hands of God.

One of my favorite hymns, first published in 1862, was written by Frederick W. Faber (1814-1863). After gradually emerging from a strict Calvinist environment, with its dark doctrine of predestination, Faber began to understand the magnitude of divine grace and then wrote these beautiful lines:

“There is a wideness in God’s mercy,  
Like the wideness of the sea;  
There’s a kindness in His justice,  
Which is more than liberty.”<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> *The Revelation of Saint John* (1966), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, No. 114 (1985).

# The Destiny of the Unevangelized

BY RAJ ATTIKEN

THE STORIES ADVENTISTS TELL VARY FROM COMMUNITY TO community and from individual to individual, but the narrative arc typically runs from sin to salvation. Sinners cannot be admitted to heaven, but mercifully, Jesus made a rescue possible.

Salvation is a central concept within Christianity. Yet, like many other biblical teachings, it is variously understood. A widely held belief among Christians is that salvation is limited only to those who profess faith in Jesus.

This belief holds no accommodation for the fact that despite vigorous missionary efforts, large populations of the world today have not been evangelized. In fact, other religions have flourished, even in the presence of intensive Christian missionary activity. Millions, throughout history, have lived and died without hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of them lived before the incarnation of Jesus. Some had mental handicaps that prevented them from reaching an understanding of the gospel. Infants died before reaching an age where they could understand and accept Jesus. Add to these groups the millions who have never heard the story told in a comprehensible way. Are these unevangelized millions destined for eternal damnation?

Because of the success of Christian mission, Christianity is now established in many parts of the world where it was not some centuries ago. Some Christian missionary efforts assumed that once the gospel was clearly proclaimed and properly lived out in an area, its superiority to other religious options would be obvious and conversion would result. Evangelists have been known to dismiss devotees of these religions as being inherently depraved or hard of heart if they didn't respond affirmatively to the invitation to accept Christ.

### Reversing a Culture?

What Christian evangelists have not always recognized is that it is nearly impossible to reverse a worldview shaped by thousands of years of traditions, rituals, practices, and beliefs with 14 nights of evangelistic lecturing on biblical themes. The Christian worldview is shaped both by the Bible and the culture of those places where historically Christianity took root.

Similarly, other religious traditions each have a worldview shaped by ancient or sacred texts and the culture of the regions where it has flourished. A worldview, which is deeply embedded in the soul of a people, is not easily abandoned. More than the different points of view held in religions on important matters, it is a question of whether they are even sharing the same reality.

What, then, of these masses? Does God reveal Godself in a way that invites all people to respond positively in saving faith? Whom is God trying to save? Christians are usually left with one of two major views regarding these questions. The exclusivist view is that salvation is limited to those who accept Jesus; the inclusivist view is that God's grace is universally sufficient. It is this latter view that I address here.

### What's at the Finish Line?

A persistent, subconscious bias regarding religions in the United States manifests in an attraction, sympathy, or at least a tolerance toward Christianity. This bias leads us to see Christians as more devout—more “religious”—than Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and others. When we listen to people of other faiths in their own voices and on their own terms, we begin to see how religion can incarnate in very different forms.

**The exclusivist view is that salvation is limited to those who accept Jesus; the inclusivist view is that God's grace is universally sufficient.**

“Salvation” is primarily a Christian concept. One is unlikely to hear the questions “Are you saved?” or “Do you have the assurance of salvation?” in any other religious community. Nearly all of the world's religions and ideologies promise their adherents some form of deliverance from the precarious plight of humanity. But the Christian notion (or something close to it) usually defined as “deliverance from the power, penalty, and ultimately the presence of sin” is not held in most religions. What the world's religions share regarding human destiny is not so much the finish line, but rather, a starting point. They begin with the simple observation that something is wrong with the world.

The meaning of the concept of salvation varies, according to the different ways the major religious traditions understand the

plight and the ultimate destiny of humans. It is beyond the scope of this brief essay to explore these in detail, but I will attempt to capture an essence.

The core concept in Hinduism is that the final goal of existence is *samsara*: escape from the endless round of birth, death, and rebirth and the ultimate dissolution of all personality into the universal spirit, Brahman. The Hindu goal is not to escape from this world to some heavenly paradise, but to escape from heaven and Earth altogether. Hindus call this *moksha*, which literally means “release” and refers to spiritual liberation—freeing the soul from bondage to *samsara*.

## The divine Word comes from heaven, but it is interpreted on Earth. That Word can be heard in languages, sensibilities, cultures, and religions not our own.

Buddhism describes the human problem as suffering. Buddhists strive to achieve *nirvana*, the escape from continual rebirth through the cessation of craving, by following a practice known as the Noble Eightfold Path.

In Islam, the problem is self-sufficiency—acting as if you can get along without God. Islam teaches the prospects of heaven and hell. The Qur’an portrays heaven in terms of worldly delights and hell as a place of torment. Salvation is attained through submission to the will of Allah.

Judaism does not emphasize the notion of individual salvation and heavenly existence. It centers on the community rather than on the individual and sees as the problem the fact that we are distant from God and from where we ought to be. The solution

is to return, to go back to God. It is the job of Jewish people to repair the world. Salvation, therefore, is available in this life through faithful observance of Torah.

In Taoist philosophy, the problem is that we let life slip away, either by not living it fully or by not living it for long. The Taoist solution is to live life to the fullest, to enjoy good health in a vital body for a long life. The goal is human flourishing.

In most religions, therefore, the views on salvation are markedly different from what Christianity teaches. Additionally, salvation or deliverance is achieved through individual effort—through right ritual—or by losing desire, by morality, by submission, by keeping the law, etc. Saving grace is a distinctly Christian concept.

### Is Christian Salvation the Only Kind?

Rather than scrutinize the reasonableness of the different religions’ views on destiny or deliverance, and the various pathways to salvation offered by these religions, I find it useful to reflect on whether the Christian concept of salvation is all-encompassing and inclusive.

Given that religions hold irreconcilable views on salvation and how it is attained, the question remains: How do all of these views on salvation fit alongside Jesus’ words: “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6, RSV)? Or Peter’s declaration: “There is no other name [besides *Jesus Christ*] under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, RSV)? Do such apparently exclusivist claims limit salvation only to those who profess faith in Jesus? Can all religions be accommodated within the Christian concept of salvation?

Besides these declarations, Scripture also offers us a more inclusive perspective. Jesus “brought light to *everyone*” (John 1:4, NLT) and “new life for *everyone*” (Rom. 5:18, NLT). He is a God who “loved the *world*” (John 3:16). “There is one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and *humanity*—the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for *everyone*” (1 Tim. 2:5-6, NLT). We enjoy peace and assurance in knowing that God’s love, as demonstrated in Jesus, is “wide and long and high and deep” (Eph. 3:18, NIV).

Such passages give credence to the notion that God makes the salvation found through Jesus Christ available to *all people everywhere*—past, present, and future—regardless of their religious affiliations or their beliefs about human destiny. God

reveals Godself to everyone, even to those in other religions. Ignorance of Christ does not, therefore, place someone beyond the reach of God's saving grace.

### Hearing "the Voice"

A literal reading of the first chapters of Genesis suggests that creation begins in sound. Out of the darkness, the God who is eternal Word breathes out a "Let there be." Before time begins, before the world is created or galaxies flung into space, God's voice is speaking existence into existence. John called it the "Word": the Voice that echoed through the formless void. Could that Voice also have been heard down through the ages?

**Living with the awareness that God exists and that a divine reality is behind all existence may be far more helpful and necessary than having a theory of salvation clearly sorted out.**


Could it be that in every corner of the world, in every culture and in every language, people have heard fragments of the Voice speaking to them in terms they can understand and experience? Could it be that just as a stream takes on the coloring of the soil over which it flows, so that Voice in its flowing through the soils of different cultural and religious outlooks has taken on coloring from them? Could it be that the longing for justice, the quest for spirituality, the hunger for relationships, and the delight in beauty are all echoes of the Voice?<sup>1</sup> If so, it would mean that each of the multiple worlds of wisdom captures something of the mystery and radiance of God and refracts it into the lives of its followers. The divine Word comes from heaven, but it is interpreted on Earth. That Word can be heard in languages, sensibilities, cultures, and religions not our own.

Jonathan Sacks, an English Orthodox rabbi and theologian, observed that "the proposition at the heart of monotheism is not what it is often taken to be: one God, therefore one path to salvation. To the contrary, it is that *unity is worshipped in diversity*. The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity: the thousands of different languages spoken by mankind, the proliferation of cultures, the sheer variety of the imaginative expressions of the human spirit, in most of which, if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of wisdom telling us something we need to know."<sup>2</sup>

Sacks concluded, "The truth at the beating heart of monotheism is that God transcends the particularities of culture and the limits of human understanding. He is my God but also the God of all mankind, even of those whose customs and way of life are unlike mine."<sup>3</sup>

Living with the awareness that God exists and that a divine reality is behind all existence may be far more helpful and necessary than having a theory of salvation clearly sorted out. This experience is available to all people, of all religions and no religion. There is no such thing as a Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Jewish destiny—only human destiny. No religion secures this destiny for people; only God does. This expansive view of God has sometimes been described as the one Light being manifest through many lamps.

We can celebrate the fact that  
*"The love of God is greater far  
than tongue or pen can ever tell;  
it goes beyond the highest star,  
and reaches to the lowest hell. ...*

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
and were the skies of parchment made;  
were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill  
and ev'ryone a scribe by trade;  
to write the love of God above  
would drain the ocean dry;  
nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
though stretched from sky to sky."*<sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (2006), p. x.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), pp. 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick M. Lehman, "The Love of God" (1917).



# SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND THE REMNANT

BY WARREN C. TRENCHARD

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS UNDERSTAND THEMSELVES TO BE the “remnant church.” They see the church as the last, pure, end-time, commandment-keeping, prophet-containing stage of God’s universal body of Christian believers. Moreover, the church believes that this was biblically prophesied.

These declarations and identifications are found in various official church documents. The most important, perhaps, is Fundamental Belief 13, The Remnant and Its Mission, which states: “The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. This remnant announces the arrival of the judgment hour, proclaims salvation through Christ, and heralds the approach of His second advent. This proclamation is symbolized by the three angels of Revelation 14; it coincides with the work of judgment in heaven and results in a work of repentance and reform on earth. Every believer is called to have a personal part in this worldwide witness. (Dan. 7:9-14; Isa. 1:9; 11:11; Jer. 23:3; Mic. 2:12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Peter 1:16-19; 4:17; 2 Peter 3:10-14; Jude 3, 14; Rev. 12:17; 14:6-12; 18:1-4.)”<sup>1</sup>

This statement first appeared in 1980 when voted by a General Conference Session. Except for adjustments to the list of supporting Bible texts, the statement remained unchanged in its 2005 and 2015 versions.<sup>2</sup> Earlier belief statements in 1854,<sup>3</sup> 1872,<sup>4</sup> 1889,<sup>5</sup> and 1931<sup>6</sup> did not specifically refer to the “remnant,” but the concept appeared frequently in Adventist publications. We will now consider this cardinal Adventist doctrine of the remnant by examining its cited biblical support.

### “Supporting” Bible Texts

The scriptures listed at the end of each faith statement are intended to provide biblical support for them. Historically, some supporting texts were added, some were deleted. Most were put in order of their appearance in the Bible. Strangely, this current list starts with a citation from the book of Daniel.

While the Fundamental Belief cites Daniel 7:9-14, these verses contain no mention of remnant. The closest is a reference to “the rest of the beasts” (NRSV and KJV), a nontheological expression pertaining only to something that remains.

The term “remnant” appears in Isaiah 1:9 as “a very small remnant” (only in the KJV). Appropriately translated by the NRSV, this simply refers to “a few survivors” of the Israelites, not to a theologically defined or privileged group. The LXX uses *spërma* (literally “seed”) in the sense of “offspring.”

Isaiah 11:11 refers to groups of surviving Israelites who remain in various places. Although the NRSV and KJV use the word remnant, this text implies nothing about a “remnant” of people in any theological sense. The LXX reads “a remnant [or remaining part] of the people.”

Jeremiah 23:3, which conveys a sentiment similar to Isaiah 11:11, is Yahweh’s promise to “gather the remnant” (in both NRSV and KJV) of his flock scattered in various places and return them to their ancestral home. It has nothing to do with a theologically defined or privileged group. The LXX renders it as “those remaining of my people.”

## None of the Bible texts cited in the statement of Fundamental Beliefs use the term “remnant” or its equivalents with any theological meaning.

Micah 2:12 echoes the sentiment of the two previous texts. In each of them, Yahweh promises to gather the survivors (KJV has “remnant”) of Israel; this has nothing to do with a theologically defined group. The LXX uses a phrase similar to the previous text, especially the use of the adjective “those remaining of Israel.”

In the NRSV and KJV, 2 Corinthians 5:10 is a general statement about the judgment. It contains no words related to “remnant” (*loipos*)—past, present, or future (including the end time)—or its compounds, or any words conveying the idea of “remaining.”

Like the previous text, 1 Peter 1:16-19 is simply a general statement about the expected judgment and how to live in anticipation of its appearance. No mention of a “remnant” is made in either the NRSV or KJV.

Concerning the judgment, 1 Peter 4:17 states that it begins with “the household of God” and notes the implications. It does not mention “remnant” or any related words. Presumably, it is

intended to support the investigative judgment, despite not using that language, implying that this judgment has begun or is about to begin.

In 2 Peter 3:10-14, God's people are called to lead "lives of holiness and godliness" in anticipation of the sudden arrival of divine judgment and the destruction and replacement of the earth and "the heavens." It does not mention a "remnant" or any related terms.

## Although Adventists understand themselves to constitute the end-time "remnant" as a unique, pure embodiment of God's universal church, no biblical evidence—cited or otherwise—supports that contention.

Jude 3 seems to be cited in Fundamental Belief 13 for its familiar language: "contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (KJV), but it contains no reference to a "remnant" or to the "end time."

Jude 14 contains an incomplete quotation from 1 Enoch 1:9, referring generally to the coming of the Lord "with ten thousands of His holy ones." Neither this nor the rest of the Enoch quote mentions a "remnant" or related words. Ironically, the uncited

material in the rest of the quotation in verse 15, like several texts noted above, refers to judgment.

Revelation 12:17 seems the most important alleged biblical support for the Adventist concept of the remnant, but this works only in the King James Version: "And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." This "proof text" is the origin of the Adventist notion of the remnant. Here, the dragon (identified in verse 9 as "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan") was angry with the woman (unidentified in Revelation) "and went to make war with the remnant of her seed." Her "seed" (*spermato*s) metaphorically refers to the woman's offspring. This woman—pregnant at the start of the chapter—gave birth to a son (verses 5, 13), also unidentified. Because the boy was taken by God to his throne, the referenced "offspring" was not her son. The text acknowledges this by referring to the "remnant of her seed."

The relative rarity of the English word "remnant" and its current anachronistic use have no doubt contributed to its exotic and theologically loaded meaning in Adventist theology. However, not only is the expression "remnant church" missing in this text or its immediate context, but it is not found anywhere in the Bible (KJV or NRSV). Indeed, the term "remnant" here is an inappropriate translation. The Greek word translated "remnant" by the KJV is the plural of the common adjective *loipos*, which means simply "[the] rest, other, remaining, or surviving"—as it did in 1611, when the KJV was translated. This is how the KJV translates the word in Revelation 2:24; 3:2; 8:13; 9:20; 20:5. The NRSV properly renders this expression "to make war on the rest of her children." This text gives no theologically loaded meaning to the word "remnant" and provides no biblical support for the concept of a "remnant church."

Of course, Adventists also focus on this text because the "remnant" is said to "keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." These are mutually reinforcing and circular notions (i.e., the "remnant" is identified as those who keep God's commandments and testify to Jesus, and those who keep God's commandments and testify to Jesus are the "remnant"). However, nothing is unique about these qualities or tied specifically to the end time. Christians from all ages, as well as Jews, have supported the keeping of God's law. Such

Christians, including Messianic Jews, have also, by definition, borne testimony to Jesus as the Christ.

Revelation 14:6-12, containing the proclamations of three angels, is central to Adventist theology. Some of its material is reflected in Fundamental Belief 13: for example, keeping “the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” and the judgment. This text is also specifically referenced in the remnant’s “proclamation” of Jesus’ “second advent ... symbolized by the three angels of Revelation 14.” However, this text has nothing to do with Seventh-day Adventists, specifically, and contains no references or allusions to the “remnant” or related language.

Revelation 18:1-4 describes the fall of “Babylon” and calls for God’s people to leave it. Only by implication can “Babylon” be understood as a religious entity and the call for people to leave it a religious act. Whatever the meaning, these people are not called the “remnant.” The text contains no remnant-related language.

## An Odd Selection


None of the Old Testament texts cited in the statement of Fundamental Beliefs use the term “remnant” or its equivalents with any theological meaning. Most refer simply to the survivors of Israel or to particular groups of Israelites in various locations. One text refers to “the rest of the beasts” (Dan. 7:12).

No cited text from the New Testament uses the word “remnant” or its equivalents with any theological meaning. Several refer to the future, or to the beginning judgment (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:16-19; 4:17; 2 Pet. 3:10-14), or to the return of the Lord (Jude 14). Most (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:16-19; 4:17; 2 Pet. 3:10-14; Jude 3, 14; Rev. 14:6-12; 18:1-4) do not include the word “remnant” or related language. Only Revelation 12:17 refers to the “remnant,” and then only from the KJV—a mistranslation for the more linguistically and contextually appropriate word “remaining.”

Most remarkable about these citations is what is not included. The only New Testament uses of the Greek nouns for “remnant” are in the letter to the Romans. In Romans 9:27, Paul loosely reflects the LXX’s translation of Isaiah 10:22 by referring to “the remnant of Israel (*hypoleimma*), and in Romans 9:29 he quotes Isaiah 9:1 from the LXX “[except the Lord of hosts] left us survivors” (*enkatelipen hēmin sperma*). In Romans 11:5, he states, “So too at the present time there is a remnant [*leimma*], chosen by grace” (NRSV), and the context (11:1-4, 7) indicates that this refers to Israel.

## An Incredible Claim

For 170 years Seventh-day Adventists have been building a narrative in which they are both the central characters and those uniquely qualified to deliver the gospel to the world. Since the Great Disappointment in 1844, Adventists have tried to use Scripture to rationalize the church’s existence and to justify its distinctive doctrines.

Although Adventists understand themselves to constitute the end-time “remnant” as a unique, pure embodiment of God’s universal church, no biblical evidence—cited or otherwise—supports that contention. This pertains to cited texts in Revelation, especially Revelation 12:17. To be credible, Adventist leaders and teachers must examine the Bible linguistically and contextually to find proof that justifies their positions—or admit that they cannot. 

<sup>1</sup> Fundamental Belief 18, The Gift of Prophecy, contains the only other mention of “remnant” among the faith statements and includes the only reference to “remnant church.” The gift of prophecy “is an identifying mark of the remnant church and we believe it was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White.” See also “Mission Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church” (15 Oct 2018), online at [www.adventist.org/official-statements/](http://www.adventist.org/official-statements/).

<sup>2</sup> This very different list of texts—none from the Old Testament—was appended to the 1980 version: (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:18-20; 24:14; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 12:17; 14:6-12; 18:1-4; Eph. 5:22-27; Rev. 21:1-14.)

<sup>3</sup> “Leading Doctrines Taught by the Review,” *Review and Herald*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Aug. 15, 1854), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Republished as “Fundamental Principles,” *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (June 4, 1874), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> “Fundamental Principles of Seventh-day Adventists,” *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1889), pp. 147-151.

<sup>6</sup> “Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists,” *Yearbook of the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination* (1931), pp. 377-380.

## Inspired Heathens? Ellen White and the Apocryphal Sibylline Oracles

By Matthew J. Korpman



A number of Christians today carry the assumption that they, as followers of Jesus, have an exclusive claim on the “truth” or, more specifically, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13, NRSV). Yet, is this presumption of Christian supremacy accurate?

Ellen White doesn’t appear always to have thought so. In fact, she argued that the Holy Spirit was actively at work in other religions—not in some way that was *inferior* to its process within Judaism and Christianity, but in the exact *same* process.

Strangely, White’s comments on this topic, found predominantly in her 1898 book *The Desire of Ages*, have not received the attention they deserve. Moreover, it appears that the original inspiration for her statement was related to a piece of apocryphal literature, which she drew upon and utilized in her written works.

In this brief article, we will look at what she said and what it can potentially teach us about her view of other religions and the way God operated amongst them. We will also gain new insights into how she utilized and valued apocryphal literature outside of her Bible.

### Inspiration Isn’t Exclusive

When Ellen White reflected upon the story in Matthew 2 of the Magi’s visit to the young Jesus, she took time to reflect on the question of who these foreigners were and how they had known about Jesus. Rather than suggesting that secretly they had been Jews or positing the possibility that they might have been simply curious astrologers noting a strange sign in the sky, White argued that they had been following pagan prophecies.

While mentioning that they had access to “the Hebrew Scriptures,” she placed the emphasis on the fact that “in their own land were treasured prophetic writings that predicted the coming of a divine teacher.”<sup>1</sup> These “prophetic writings” are not biblical and are unrelated to the Old Testament prophets for whom we have named books. As an example of this activity, she mentioned Balaam, who was a magician and a prophet. She noted that Balaam’s “prophecies had been handed down by tradition from century to century” and that “in the Old Testament the Saviour’s advent was more clearly revealed” than it had been in these pagan writings, which had included material not found in the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

From that description, one might presume that the only written pagan prophecies considered “prophetic” were the echoes of Balaam’s ancient predictions, partly mentioned in the Bible already (see Num. 24:17). Yet, this would be not quite correct. Dozens of pages earlier, White had clarified: “Outside of the Jewish nation there were men who foretold the appearance of a divine instructor. These men were seeking for truth, and to them the Spirit of Inspiration was imparted. One after another, like stars in the darkened heavens, such teachers had arisen. Their words of prophecy had kindled hope in the hearts of thousands of the Gentile world.”<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, White did not presume that Balaam and his prophecies were unique. A long line of various prophetic voices had arisen among the non-Jewish populations continually over the centuries before Jesus. These peoples, who were not believers in the God of Israel and weren’t necessarily even monotheistic, spoke generically

of “a divine instructor.” Like Paul, who suggested that God was the truth behind the mystery that the men of Athens had ambiguously honored as “the unknown god” (Acts 17:22-23, ESV), Ellen White affirmed that the nations around Israel had been imparted with the “Spirit of Inspiration.”

Fascinatingly, White used this specific wording elsewhere to apply to the inspired Scriptures, the inspiration biblical prophets experienced, and to her own visionary experiences as a prophet. As such, she appears to liken the pagan prophets and their writings as equally inspired to our own Bible, to the biblical prophets themselves, and to her own ministry.

Significantly, White noted that these prophecies were given in ways that were less clear than the Scriptures in Judaism. In reference to pagan nations, she wrote that “through nature, through types and symbols, through patriarchs and prophets, God had spoken to the world. Lessons must be given to humanity in the language of humanity.”<sup>4</sup> In short, despite the fact that these prophecies were not well-preserved, were not clear, and were delivered by pagan prophets who did not worship the God of Israel, she could still affirm that they and their writings were imparted with “the Spirit of Inspiration”—the very one that animated Scripture and, in her own mind, herself.

One might imagine that she would argue for a hierarchy of authority and value, suggesting that these other prophets and their writings, like herself, were *lesser lights* when compared to the *greater light* of Scripture. Yet, while that might technically be true, White suggested that at times these pagan prophets, even with

their ambiguous messages, could shed better light on the meaning of the Jewish Scripture.

She wrote that the Hebrew Scripture “had been translated into the Greek language” and that the Jewish “expectation of the Messiah’s coming was to some extent shared by the Gentiles.” She argued that some of “those whom the Jews styled heathen were men who had a better understanding of the Scripture prophecies concerning the Messiah than had the teachers in Israel.” In other

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words, those with less clarity on some religious issues could still provide greater clarity on other important issues. Among these individuals, White mentioned “philosophers,” a likely reference to the famous Greek scholars, such as Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato.

A bit later, she noted again that “even among the heathen there were men through whom Christ was working to uplift the people from their sin and degradation. But these men were despised and hated. Many of them suffered a violent death.”<sup>5</sup> This would appear to have been a veiled allusion to the Greek philosopher Socrates, who was ultimately sentenced to death as a result of his questions about the gods of the Greek pantheon. White

elsewhere explicitly mentioned the story of Socrates when discussing Paul.<sup>6</sup> The allusion to Socrates helps us to situate her comments within the Greco-Roman world surrounding Jesus. Who, then, were these many individuals who “one after another” were imparted with “the Spirit of Inspiration”? And could they have included women?

### **The Sibylline Prophecies**

Among the most legendary figures of antiquity were the Sibylline prophetesses, a group of pagan female prophets (now largely forgotten) who had been relied upon by Greek rulers, generals, and entire cities to deliver oracles directly from the gods. Their utterances, like those of the still-infamous French astrologer Nostradamus, were famously cryptic and hard to decipher. They were also written down in scrolls and preserved in Rome before being destroyed in a fire “when the temple of Jupiter was burned down in 83 B.C.E.”<sup>7</sup> As a result of the various official efforts by Romans to collect any remaining fragments of these oracles that had been preserved, it appears that some began to invent new ones.

Many wondered, What had these prophecies said? As a result, Hellenistic Jews went to great effort to create new *pseudepigraphic* prophecies that *claimed* to have been written much earlier and been spoken by the Sibyl prophetesses. Both Jews and then, later, Christians started composing these pseudepigraphic oracles, which ultimately grew to a collection of 12 books that scholars now call the *Sibylline Oracles*. They recount and comment on stories of the Bible and Greek mythology, and they expound upon apocalyptic prophecies in

a way that sounds similar to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature.

These books experienced large popularity and belief among the early Christians and were assumed for centuries to be authentic records. Even the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus cited the *Sibylline Oracles* and appears to have accepted them as authentic.

**If Ellen White recognized that these pagan prophecies were incomplete and even prone to error, yet she was able to uphold them as a guide leading to the light of God's truth, then surely this can impact how Adventists think about both our study of other religious texts and our appreciation of those who call these texts their scriptures.**

At least one 18th-century English translation (c. 1713) of these oracles by John Floyer<sup>8</sup> was available for Ellen White to read, along with a re-editing of that translation by William Whiston in 1715 and a new translation by Milton Terry released in 1890, a few years prior to publication of *The Desire of Ages*.<sup>9</sup> While we do not know if White read these translations, she would have been aware of the oracles and their legend, as they are mentioned by early Adventists.<sup>10</sup>

Many scholars in her time noted that these were likely pseudepigraphic, but many others in that era continued to believe them to be accurate records of

pagan prophecies that predicted Jesus and spoke to the power of the Holy Spirit. As John Lundy noted in 1876, these oracles have “been the subject of much discussion and criticism, some scholars holding them all to be utter forgeries; others maintaining their substantial genuineness; and still others considering them as interpolated.”<sup>11</sup>

Whiston argued in 1715 that the Sibylline oracles destroyed in Rome were idolatrous and “spurious” and that the prophecies we now have were “genuine” and “deriv’d from Divine Inspiration,” despite some parts of the collection being Jewish and Christian forgeries.<sup>12</sup>

Thomas Stackhouse in 1869 expressed his belief that the oracles no doubt stemmed from “God, ... who forced Balaam, contrary to his will, to bless the Israelites, and to prophecy.” He based his view partly on the fact that “the contents of the sibylline oracles, those I mean that are genuine, are everywhere agreeable to the scriptures” and that they demonstrate that God “might not wholly confine divine inspiration to that nation [Israel], but might support ... the right worship of himself, as the one true God, among the heathens likewise, by the help of these oracles, until ‘the day dawned,’ that is, a more perfect revelation came.”<sup>13</sup>

Although Ellen White never mentioned *female* prophets in her statements from *The Desire of Ages*, it is commonly acknowledged by the White Estate that “in her time, words such as ‘he,’ ‘man,’ ‘men,’ and ‘mankind’ were accepted as generic terms that included both men and women.”<sup>14</sup> As such, the Sibylline prophetesses cannot be ignored, since they were the single most well-known example in White’s lifetime of those “through whom Christ was working.”

White’s comments appear to imitate aspects of the out-of-print translation by Floyer, who argued that the *Sibylline Oracles* derived “from a divine Inspiration”<sup>15</sup> and argued that “it pleas’d God to deliver Prophecies to the *Gentiles* more plainly than to the *Jews*; as appears by the *Magi*, who found out the Time and Place of Christ’s Birth, they being directed by some Prophecy to follow the Star that would lead them to Christ. And this Prophecy the *Jews* were ignorant of...”<sup>16</sup> Floyer also notes elsewhere, like White, that “the *Magi* had no notice of Christ’s Birth from the *Jews*, but from *Balaam*, a *Gentile*, who was inspired,” and he remarked that the role of the Sibyl was similar to that of Balaam: giving prophecies concerning kingdoms never mentioned by the Jewish prophets.<sup>17</sup> He notes that “*Balaam* was a *Gentile*, and spake plainly of Christ; and the *Magi*, by their Star, found Christ more certainly than the *Jews* could by their Prophecies,” concluding that “God does sometimes inspire wicked Men with clear Prophecies.”<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Floyer here uses “men” as a designation not only for Balaam and the Magi, but also for the female Sibyls, just as White apparently did.

The parallels between Floyer’s translational notes and White’s descriptions are of such a similar nature that it is possible she either read Floyer’s translation directly at some point or else read someone influenced by Floyer, who had repeated his ideas. One might argue, though, that nowhere does White actually mention the Sibyls. While this is *technically* true, it is not the whole story, for she had in fact utilized one of the Sibylline prophecies within her book *Spiritual Gifts* (and the later editions of that early work, including her 1890 book *Patriarchs and Prophets*).

When describing the story of Genesis 11:1-9 and the dispersion of languages at the Tower of Babel, White remarked in 1864 that “lightning from heaven as a token of God’s wrath broke off the top of their tower, casting it to the ground.”<sup>19</sup> What many do not realize is that this was taken by her from *Sibylline Oracles* (3.117-129). We can be certain not only that White took this from a Sibylline prophecy, but also that she knew this was its source. White owned<sup>20</sup> and borrowed<sup>21</sup> copies of Josephus’ books, which she admittedly utilized in her own writings. At the beginning of the very translation of *The Antiquities of the Jews* that she owned, Josephus states: “The Sibyl also makes mention of this tower, and of the confusion of the language, when she says thus: - ‘When all men were of one language, some of them built a high tower, as if they would thereby ascend up to heaven; but the gods sent storms of wind and overthrew the tower’” (*Ant.* 1.118).<sup>22</sup>

What appears likely, then, is that White relied upon the Sibyl’s account, potentially receiving it secondhand by Josephus, and transformed “storms of wind” in the Sibyl’s description to “lightning,” which occurs during violent storms.

While we do not know at the present time whether Ellen White owned a specific translation of the *Sibylline Oracles* (such as by Floyer or Terry), we can know that her language and descriptions about inspired heathens was plausibly influenced by her knowledge of the legends of the Sibylline prophetesses (and those who promoted their apocryphal collection) and that she was willing to utilize (at


least once) their “pagan” prophecies within her own writing, though perhaps only by secondhand knowledge owed to Josephus.

### What It Means Today

What is perhaps more fascinating is that she prefaces some of her comments in *The Desire of Ages* by noting generally that “the light of God is ever shining amid the darkness of heathenism.” This comment ensures that whatever she described about God’s activity before and during the time of Christ is understood to be representative of what God continued to do within other world religions in her own time.

White’s willingness to read, utilize, and describe the *Sibylline Oracles* (and their prophetesses) as having been inspired by the same “Spirit of Inspiration” that constructed the biblical writings has relevance for an expanded Adventist approach to studying other religions. If she recognized that these pagan prophecies were incomplete and even prone to error, yet still she was able to uphold them as a guide leading to the light of God’s truth, then surely this can impact how Adventists think about both our study of other religious texts and our appreciation of those who call these texts their scriptures. Regardless of the fact that the *Sibylline Oracles* are pseudepigrapha and do not owe themselves to the pagan prophetesses they were named after, their influence on White remains instructive.

She famously said that we have much to unlearn, and among those assumptions we need to let go of are perhaps our ill-conceived ideas about God’s activity outside of Christianity

and Judaism. Instead of fearing visionaries from other faiths, maybe we should welcome their insights into and contributions to our own faith. As Ellen White said, those outside the Jewish faith had a better understanding of certain aspects of that faith than those within it had at the time of Jesus. According to White, if those ancient Jews had been willing to listen and share in ecumenical study with these other religions, they could have made their own religious convictions stronger as a result. 

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 59.

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

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34.

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

<sup>6</sup> White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 3 (1878), p. 398.

<sup>7</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (1998), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> John Floyer, *The Sibylline Oracles: Translated from the Best Greek Copies and Compared with the Sacred Prophecies* (1713).

<sup>9</sup> Milton S. Terry, *The Sibylline Oracles: Translated from the Greek into English* (1890).

<sup>10</sup> See M. E. Cornell, “Interesting Extracts. No. 1,” *Review and Herald*, Vol. 24, No. 5 (1864), p. 35; L. L. Caviness, “Babylon in the New Testament,” *Review and Herald*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (Jan. 17, 1918), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> John P. Lundy, *Monumental Christianity or the Art and Symbolism of the Primitive Church* (1876), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> William Whiston, *A Vindication of the Sibylline Oracles* (1715), pp. 35, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Stackhouse, *A History of the Holy Bible*, Vol. 2 (1869), p. 820.

<sup>14</sup> White, *Christ Triumphant* (1999), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Floyer, p. 249.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>19</sup> White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 3 (1864), p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Warren H. Johns, Tim Poirier, and Ron Graybill, “A Bibliography of Ellen G. White’s Private and Office Libraries,” Ellen G. White Estate, Third Revised Edition (April 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Ellen White to Brother and Sister Bourdeau, Letter 40 (April 4, 1886).

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (1849 edition), p. 30.

## The Call to Be “in Christ”

By Olive J. Hemmings



A thousand generations of patriarchy-induced trauma have issued from the misuse and abuse of texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:3-12; Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 to perpetuate what many now call “headship theology.” The misuse of these texts perpetuates a male headship ideology, the hostile takeover of Paul’s voice to perpetuate a false gospel, which Paul calls “a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6).

There is only one gospel. Indeed, as Paul observes in his letter to the believers in Galatia, some use their “authority” to confuse the church and thereby pervert the gospel of Christ (verse 7). Headship theology is antithetical to Pauline Christology and inconsistent with his ministerial practice. A close reading of these falsely assumed “headship” texts under the floodlight of the Messianic vision of the early church reveals in them a message that actually subverts headship theology by a call to be “in Christ.”

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner argues that patriarchy developed some two and a half millennia ago as the seedbed of class and race differentials. The commodification of women represents the first accumulation of private property and tangible marker of wealth and status. Examining the phenomenon through Judeo-Christian lenses, Rosemary Radford Reuther depicts it as a pernicious system justified by the order of creation and the will of God. Such sanctification of the patriarchal consciousness manifests itself in all kinds of “dominating and exploitive”

relationships. As such, perpetuation of this socio-economic system through headship theology is anti-Christ.

Long before Lerner and Reuther, Paul lumped patriarchal entrenchment with other grievous systems of domination: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NRSVA). This conclusive statement stands in stark antithesis to a Talmudic morning thanksgiving that emerged from Paul’s own tradition, Judaism: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a Gentile. Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a slave. Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman.” In Galatians, the main issue was religious/ethnic domination, symbolized by circumcision, which defines the issue as inherently androcentric.

The “in Christ” statement of Galatians 3:28 contraindicates headship theology and its hideous spawns. Through this Messianic vision, the early church asserted a radical egalitarianism that was alien to the Greco-Roman Empire in general and to the synagogue in particular.

### Liberation and Justice

In the biblical prophetic narrative, Christ (*Messiah*) is an agent of liberation: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1, NRSVA). Additionally, in the prophetic discourse of Paul, *Messiah* encompasses and transcends the historical persona of Jesus of Nazareth. The term signifies the radical spirituality by which the church overcomes society’s divisive fixation on

gender, race, class, rituals, traditions, and dogmas. Paul summarizes this spirituality as *agape*: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6, NRSVA). “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8, NRSVA). Love outlasts the temporalities of this life: “Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end” (1 Cor. 13:8, NRSVA).

The term “Christ” (*Messiah*) literally means “anointed one.” In ancient Israel, the king was a *Mashiah* because he was anointed to reign in justice over Israel, according to the covenant. In Hebrew prophecy, *Mashiah* is no ordinary anointing. Rather, it is an anointing toward radical liberation (Isa. 61:1-4). The early church invokes this prophetic interpretation wherein Paul articulates it as a spiritual state of being, an anointing of the Spirit. Jesus of Nazareth received this anointing and authority at his Jordan River baptism (Mark 1:9-12). According to Luke, he passed it on to the entire church, which is to call the world into this experience of liberation (Acts 2:1-3).

In the teaching of Paul, the formula “in Christ” finds expression in other ways: “in Spirit” (Gal. 3:3) or “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:11). The context in which these Messianic terms appear suggests that they encompass the personal identity of Jesus of Nazareth, the consummate Messianic manifestation. The terms signify a way of being that transcends fleshly existence, characterized by the egoistic identities of gender, ethnicity, and class. In *Messiah*,

*en Christo*, the body of Christ (*soma Christou*)—that is, the spiritual body—overcomes the limitations imposed by fleshly existence.

“In Christ” indicates the dissolution of ego, the “I.” It comes from *egō* in Koiné Greek, the first personal pronoun “I.” The ego has two interdependent manifestations: the individual ego (individual self-interest) and the collective ego (group interest). A particular group with a common self-interest, with set boundaries against another group, is a collective ego. The individual self is necessarily part of a group (or several groups), which in turn belong to a wider social context.

The dissolution of this ego, I argue, is the fundamental project of Pauline didactics. In Galatians, the ego is an integral part of Paul’s conceptual framework for the “works of law,” which *Messiah* overcomes: “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:19-20, NRSVA). Here, Paul substantiates a fundamental ethic of messianic liberation: denial of self and dissolution of ego. The ego of Jewish maleness marks off boundaries that messianic liberation confronts and dissolves, for as Paul asserts, “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything” (Gal. 5:6, NASB). His argument is that all have access to God’s grace, both those who are circumcised and those who aren’t (Gentiles, females, and all others who do not conform to Jewish maleness). This

is the Pentecost experience described by the messianic proclamation of Joel: “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters ..., your old men ..., and your young men.... Even on the male and female slaves, ... I will pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28-29, NRSVUE; cf., Acts 2:17-18). Paul attempts to reconstruct an ethno/androcentric consciousness that historically gave circumcised males exclusive access to God’s presence.

## Spirit Versus Flesh

The early church’s egalitarianism emerges not from political or dogmatic/ideological advocacy, but from spiritual re-formation, as Paul articulates it: “For freedom Christ has set us free.... do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1, NRSVA). It is a quest for true liberation, in which there is no partiality. In Galatians he asks: “Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3, NRSVA). Paul made this statement in opposition to patriarchal religious/ethnic domination, which asserts that only those who are circumcised (males) can directly access the Abrahamic promise. Paul calls this “circumcision of the flesh,” as opposed to “circumcision of the heart.”

Paul’s full-throated argument in Galatians is that fixation on the flesh enslaves a community to egoistic boundary-inducing identities of ethnicity, religion, gender, and class. In this sense he argues against the “works of law,” which the Reformation labels as Judaic legalism.

“Works of law” in Paul’s conversations is the same as “works of flesh.” He employs the term toward wholesome self-identity, which is beyond the egoistic identity. This wholesome identity is spiritual identity, which he describes as messianic (“in Christ”). Only in this sphere of awareness can one fully embrace the notion that “you are all one” (Gal. 3:28, NASB). This is a call beyond egoistic self-identity toward an understanding of the true spiritual

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nature of humanity, which transcends these historical identities. A community immersed in the Christ Spirit recognizes headship theology as an alien spirit.

### **In Christ—Contra Headship**

Two major Pauline texts are used to justify male domination: 1 Corinthians 11:3-12 and Ephesians 5:22-33. A close reading of the “in Christ” ideal, in the context of the early church’s hermeneutic of liberation,

reveals that these passages actually highlight the culture of domination in order to subvert and repudiate it. Whatever one might read about gender in Paul, it must stand under the floodlight of the “in Messiah” hermeneutic of liberation, the dissolution of ego toward oneness in Messiah. “In Christ” signals the call to spiritual liberation that generates a just community.

*1 Corinthians 11:3-12* – Two things establish the context of 1 Corinthians 11. The first is Paul’s warning to the Corinthians from Israel’s history regarding the pernicious nature of idolatry (1 Cor. 10:7, 14, 19-22, 28). The second is a collective ethic in which Paul challenges Corinthian notions of freedom that trivialize the struggle some within the Christian community have with idolatry. True “freedom” (*eleutheria*), Paul intimates, always tempers the hierarchy of “self” for the collective good of others (see 1 Cor. 10:29, 33; Gal. 5:13). In that context, Paul says, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Thus, chapter 11 starts with an allusion to the Christo-centric standard that ought to shape the community’s view of one another.

Verse 3 seems to assert an ontological hierarchy as the reason for maintaining the tradition of head coverings for women. Head coverings signify that a woman’s personhood is assigned to and subsumed under a male agent, father, or husband. Interestingly, in verse 7 the text justifies this hierarchy by a distorted account of the Genesis account of Creation: “a man is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man.” This is contrary

to the Genesis account: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27, NRSV). The distortion may be based on an ideological interpretation of the second creation account in Genesis 2 and 3, in which God creates the woman from a rib of Adam. This latter creation account also informs the play on the Greek word *kephalē*, which may mean “source” as well as “head,” and subtly affirms that man is head of the woman because the woman was taken from his rib (Gen. 2:21-22).

Juxtaposed to this headship ideology is the antithesis in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12: nevertheless, in the Lord “woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God” (NRSV). This single statement by Paul is pregnant with multiple assertions. He applies a hermeneutic of suspicion to the idea of man as source/head of woman, noting that it cannot stand on its own in biological reality (man comes through woman). This is ontologically disruptive for headship ideologues. This disruption is the basis on which Paul affirms the full personhood and agency of women, who are no more dependent upon men than men are dependent upon women. Such a statement is culturally disruptive to hierarchy, highlighting the ethic of communal interconnectedness that elsewhere so explicitly reflects the “in Christ” ethic—e.g., “There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NASB). In summary, Paul argues that in the biosphere, God is the only source and therefore the only head.

This contravention of hierarchy and its “order of creation” in verses 11 and 12 is Paul’s rhetorical calculation to lay bare two opposing dispensations: “works of flesh” and the dispensation of spirit. This close contextual analysis so far indicates that headship is not Paul’s argument. Verse 3 reflects the “works of the flesh” dispensation (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1) that grants spiritual agency only to males and compels females to maintain the sign of their subjugation, namely, head coverings. Verses 7 to 9 lay bare their futile and unbiblical justification. In the hermeneutic of liberation “in Christ,” God’s headship stands uncontested; human agency, dignity, and wholeness in both male and female are restored.

*Ephesians 5:21-6:9* – This passage draws upon Roman household codes that reflect Aristotle’s advocacy for the natural order of fathers’ rule over wives, children, and slaves. These household codes became part of the stringent social system of Roman society. But as Margaret Mowczko argues, such codes “were not primarily about gender roles or even gender. They were about power.” She further argues: “Household codes by pagan authors, such as Aristotle and Xenophon, were written in order to uphold the rights of the powerful and to keep the less powerful in their place. The power differential between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves was thought to be necessary for social stability. The purpose of Paul’s codes in the New Testament, however, was somewhat different ... to mitigate and minimize any harsh treatment by the people with greater power in Greco-Roman households—husbands, parents, and male and female slave owners—toward people with less power.”

The Ephesian text subverts the codes at the onset based on the “in Christ” spirituality: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21), (NRSV). This sets the stage for a code-by-code rebuttal throughout the passage. Not only do wives submit, but so do husbands. Not only do children honor their parents, but parents (specifically, fathers) must refrain from dishonoring children through provocation (Eph. 6:1-4). Not only do slaves obey and respect their masters, but masters must “do the same to them” (verse 9, ESV). The reference to Christ as head in relation to husband as head is not an affirmation of headship ideology; rather, it is a mitigation and subversion of it. To be head, the husband must submit (Eph. 5:21) and give himself as Christ gave himself (verse 25). This is a subtle way of neutralizing the code of male headship without creating a social upstir.

The passage recognizes Roman household codes but, at the same time, applies the “in Christ” hermeneutic of liberation to shift the code from its vertical axis of domination (and inevitable abuse) to a horizontal axis of mutuality and love: Be subject to one another in reverence of Christ (verse 21). The absence of a definite article before “reverence” (*phobē*) and before “Christ” (*Christou*) indicates not the historical personality of Jesus of Nazareth, but the spirituality of Jesus the Christ, faithful and just. It emphasizes walking by the Spirit against walking by flesh/works of law, whether Judaic or Roman. Thus, the community finds liberation and justice in an imperial culture defined by a lack of freedom and justice.

## Paul’s Egalitarian Ministry

The difficulty that arises today regarding gender equality as it emerges from Christian communities does not originate with the apostle Paul. Rather, those difficulties arise from communities of resistance to Pauline egalitarianism. While Paul has been rejected by many as misogynistic, he owes that reputation principally to his interpreters. Romans 16 gives us a glimpse into the egalitarian nature of Paul’s ministry.

## The entire framework of Paul’s theology—namely, his Christology and soteriology—is set up against domination.

At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul greets a long list of colleagues in ministry. Two of the most famous among them are Priscilla and Junia, both part of a husband-and-wife team. Significantly, Priscilla’s name precedes that of her husband, Aquila. Garry Wills argues that “this prior listing” has to do with higher dignity on some ground or other within the “status-conscious” Roman world.

Junia is not only a prominent apostle according to the text, but she was “in Christ” before Paul, and along with her husband, Andronicus, she was with Paul in prison (Rom. 16:7). John Chrysostom’s commentary on the text states: “Indeed, how

great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.” Paul demonstrates his indebtedness to his female colleagues, both by greeting them by name and title and by offering kudos for their outstanding presence within the church. Romans 16 stands as a testimony against the toxic arguments for headship theology.

### The Anomalous Texts

The author of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 seems to tell female teachers in Ephesus to stop teaching and exerting authority over men, to go home, get married, and bear children, because women were the originators of sin. This

**Headship theology belongs to an old dispensation in which men play God.**

stands in stark contrast to 1 Corinthians, which recommends the practice of celibacy for both men and women as a convenient way for the spread of the gospel. Chapter 7 affirms the sanctifying power of wives over their unbelieving husbands as the same influence husbands have over their unbelieving wives. In chapter 11, Paul defends women prophets who asserted their spiritual agency by relinquishing head coverings, a sign of their subjugation and silence.

In another passage that appears to go against the affirmation of female voice and agency, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 reflects the sentiment of 1 Timothy 2:11-15. It is important to underscore that in both texts, women are already

teaching or speaking up. The grammatical construction indicates that the texts ask them to discontinue a practice. It's as if these passages seek a return to how things were without the light of the gospel. Both texts run contrary to the revolutionary practice of the early apostolic generation, which sought a solution to gender conflict in Messianic egalitarianism (see 1 Corinthians 11:3-12 and Ephesians 5:21-6:9). Are we seeing a schizophrenic Paul? Or are we observing a regressive community's distortion of Paul's voice?


In light of its contraindication to Paul's ministry and teachings, many have interpreted 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as referring to a specific situation in the church, not as a general mandate. The texts of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 at best reflect an attitude toward women that opposes Paul's own teaching and ministry. They remain outliers, therefore, and must submit to the preponderant evidence of Pauline egalitarianism.

### Healing From Headship

Gender is one issue in the ages-long human quest for domination defined as patriarchy and sustained in Christendom through headship theology. The gospel preached by the apostle Paul and the early church is the gospel of liberation that frees the faith community from an obsession with the identity that Paul describes as “works of flesh.” It subdues the egoistic identity—male versus female, Jew versus Gentile, and slave versus free person by the urgent call to be “in Christ.” This spiritual vocation reunites humanity with God and with one another, as in the beginning.

The entire framework of Paul's theology—namely, his Christology and soteriology—is set up against domination. He demonstrates his convictions by egalitarian collaboration, not only with

slaves and Gentiles, but also with fellow female apostles and teachers such as Junia and Priscilla. The so-called headship texts are patriarchal, not from Paul's voice but from the voice of interpreters. Texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:3-12 and Ephesians 5:21-6:9, which have been interpreted to support male headship ideology, are actually subversive texts that oppose male headship and concomitant hegemonic power relations of the Greco-Roman Empire. Explicitly misogynistic texts such as 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 do not comport with Paul's teaching and ministry and, thus, cannot be the standard bearers of early church practice or be allowed to cast a shadow on the brilliant, courageous, counter-cultural egalitarianism of Paul and the early church.

Headship theology belongs to an old dispensation in which men play God. It ironically erodes human worth and dignity; to diminish one-half of humanity is to diminish the other half. We have seen the violence to female personhood and space in cultures of male entitlement. We have seen it in the one-sided, androcentric pastorate and priesthood of a Christendom populated mainly by women, forcing many of them to ignore God's call upon their lives. We have seen this violence in the shaded spectacles of women in suburban American church pews and on the bodies and in the souls of women and girls forced to cover up clergy abuse in churches under the grip of headship theology. It is time to listen again to the real gospel as it comes from the primitive church, through the voice of apostle Paul. Headship theology is about flesh, narcissism, and self-exaltation. Let us heed the call to be “in Christ.” Let us take the spiritual path—the only path to abundant life. 

# 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.



**REINDER BRUINSMA** lives in the Netherlands with his wife, Aafje. He has served the Adventist Church in publishing, education, and church

administration on three continents, his last post as president of the Netherlands Union. His latest books are *In All Humility: Saying "No" to Last Generation Theology* and *I Have a Future: Christ's Resurrection and Mine*.



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



**OLIVE J. HEMMINGS** is a professor of religion and ethics at Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland.



**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*.



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

*Today Sabbath Seminar*.



**WARREN C. TRENCHARD**, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and director of graduate

programs in the HMS Richards Divinity School of La Sierra University in Riverside, California.



## 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.

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## NEWS BRIEFS

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

### Keto Enthusiast Shuns High-Carb Communion

Doug Atkins, an avid keto enthusiast and devout Adventist, took a pass on communion last Sabbath, citing his commitment to the low-carb lifestyle.

"I just couldn't do it," confessed Atkins, a longtime member of the Pleasantville Seventh-day Adventist Church. "I mean, I'm game for the foot washing, but those communion wafers and grape juice? That's just too many carbs for my diet."

Atkins, who has been on the ketogenic diet for over a year now, has been vigilant about his carb intake, eschewing bread, pasta, and anything remotely starchy

in favor of proteins and fats. While he's seen remarkable results in terms of weight loss and increased energy, his dedication to the keto lifestyle sometimes puts him at odds with certain Adventist traditions. He's long since given up on potluck meals and just brings his own food to the fellowship hall.

"I've had to make some sacrifices, for sure," Atkins admitted. "But it's all about priorities, you know? And right now, keeping my body in ketosis is at the top of the list."

Atkins speculates that maybe one day they'll start offering keto-friendly options at communion. "Who knows?" he said. "Until then, I'll just stick to my bulletproof Roma."

### 10 Reactions You Get if You Say You're SDA

1. The Cult Crusader: "Wait, Seventh-day Adventist? Isn't that a cult?" They immediately start scanning the room for the nearest exit, fearing you might try to indoctrinate them into your secret society of door-knocking, vegetable-worshipping heathens.

2. The Mormon Mixup: "Oh, like the Mormons?" No, Karen, we're not the ones with the 18-year-old elders and Joseph Smith. We're the ones who are led entirely by the elderly (if the General Conference headquarters is anything to go by).

3. The Door-to-Door Dilemma: "Aren't you the ones who come knocking on doors?" No, that's the Jehovah's Witnesses. We're the ones who hide behind closed curtains when someone knocks, pretending we're not home.

4. The Vegetarian Verdict: "So, you don't eat meat, right?" Well, some of us do, but we also believe in the healing power of kale smoothies and quinoa bowls.

It's a delicate balance.

5. The Secret Scripture Search: "Do you have, like, another book besides the Bible?" No, we don't have any secret scrolls or hidden holy texts. But we do have a bajillion books written by someone known as the Lesser Light.

6. The Nervous Nelly: This person will start fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, and sweating profusely, as if you've just revealed that you're secretly an assassin. Relax, we're just regular people who enjoy a good potluck and a rousing Bible Bowl.

7. The Salvation Snafu: "But do you believe in salvation by faith alone?" Of course, we do! We just also believe in keeping the Ten Commandments, eating a plant-based diet, and abstaining from swimming on Sabbath.

8. The Apocalypse Alarmist: "So, when do you think the world is going to end?" Well, some of our founders were brutally disappointed in the 19th century, so we'll refrain from weighing in on that, but we're sure it's soon.

9. The Sabbath Surprise:  
“You don’t work on Saturdays?” Nope, we take that day off to rest, recharge, and catch up on all the napping we didn’t do during the week because we were too busy meal-prepping for the next potluck.

10. The Bewildered Bystander: This person will just stare at you with a blank expression, utterly confused and unable to process this new information. Don’t worry, we’re used to it. We’ll just smile politely and offer you a copy of *Steps to Christ* to help you understand.

### **Biblical Pickup Lines Fail on Modern Ladies**

Despite his best efforts, seminarian Ethan Thompson is bewildered by the fact that employing pickup lines straight out of the Song of Solomon has led to a series of romantic misfires on the campus of Andrews University.

“I think I’m on to something profound,” Thompson insists. “I mean, if it worked for Solomon, why not me?”

However, the pastoral hopeful admits that lines such as “Your eyes are like doves” and “Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Gilead” have not exactly been setting hearts aflutter.

“I thought comparing her hair to a flock of goats was poetic,” Thompson said, scratching his head. “Turns out, not all people find that endearing.”

Thompson’s attempts at wooing his classmates have left him without a date for the upcoming banquet, despite his fervent prayers and extensive memorization of romantic verses.

“I even tried the whole ‘you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes’ line,” Thompson admitted. “But apparently, that just comes off as creepy.”

Thompson’s friends say they have tried to intervene, suggesting more contemporary approaches to dating, but Thompson remains undeterred.

“I’m convinced that if Solomon could’ve had Instagram, he would have DM’d the Shulamite woman with those exact lines,” Thompson said confidently.

### **Husband Must Submit His Purchasing Whims**

Elias Uprighteous, the self-proclaimed guardian of biblical orthodoxy, found himself embroiled in a marital showdown when his wife, Rebecca, dared to question his divine authority to purchase a state-of-the-art satellite system for what he deemed “evangelical outreach.”

With a smug air of spiritual superiority, Elias wielded Ephesians 5:22 like a holy cudgel, reminding Rebecca of her duty to submit to her husband’s whims. But Rebecca, armed with a well-thumbed Bible and a steely resolve, wasn’t about to be outquoted. With a raised eyebrow and a pointed finger, she deftly countered Elias’s selective scripture-slinging with the inconvenient truth of Ephesians 5:25—the part where husbands are called to love their wives sacrificially, not just splurge on flashy gadgets under the guise of spreading the good news.

As Elias’s righteous bluster deflated like a punctured sermon balloon, Rebecca laid down the law with the finesse of a seasoned preacher. With a mixture of amusement and exasperation, she sentenced Elias to a night of solitary reflection in the backyard tent, where he could commune with nature, his conscience, and perhaps even the Almighty—if he could hear the still, small voice over the rustle of nylon and the soothing sounds of nighttime insects.

With a sigh and a heavy heart, Elias begrudgingly traded his sanctimonious soapbox for a sleeping bag and a packet of stale soda crackers, resigned to spend the night pondering the true cost of his spiritual superiority complex, one verse at a time.

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BJÖRN KARLMAN

Executive Director of *Adventist Today*

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