

God Loves Immigrants

Was Jesus Racist?

End of the
Adventist World

FALL 2024 • VOL. 32 NO. 4

Adventist *Today*

**EXPANDING
THE CIRCLE:**

**MAKING ROOM FOR THOSE
WITH WHOM WE DIFFER**



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Website: www.atoday.org

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Adventist Today (ISSN: 1079-5499) is published quarterly by Adventist Today Foundation, 105 N. Main Street, Milton Freewater, OR 97862. Periodical postage is paid at Milton Freewater, OR, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Adventist Today, PO Box 683, Milton Freewater, OR 97862. Copyright (c) 2024 by Adventist Today Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering open dialogue in the Adventist community and beyond.



Expanding the Circle: Learning To Be Comfortable With Our Differences

By Loren Seibold

I'M USED TO SEEING *ADVENTIST TODAY* CRITICIZED—even hated—by some who think we're not orthodox Adventists. I do wish they could accept that we're not trying to hurt this church; we're only trying to help Adventism fit into our time, rather than some imagined past or glorious-but-unrealized future.

I particularly wish they didn't talk about shaking us out. Pushing people out of the church isn't a good ambition, especially when the pusher is the General Conference president. But I do understand. *Adventist Today* has set a stage for a progressive reframing of our shared faith, and that can feel threatening.

I don't consider those who disagree with us to be enemies. Just the opposite: I want more than anything for our church to draw the circle wide enough to encompass, comfortably and without scolding or retribution, a much larger variety of Adventists than feel at home here now.

The Broad Church

The phrase "broad church" traces back to Anglican churchmen who, when confronted with the difference between high church Anglo-Catholicism and low church evangelicalism (such as the Puritans), felt that what they really wanted was a church that would embrace both.

These 17th-century English clerics and theologians were labeled "latitudinarians"—that is, they allowed latitude in what constituted a Protestant Christian. They held that human reason, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible were sufficient to determine doctrine. Insofar as God cares most about the state of the individual human soul, said the latitudinarians, official doctrinal rulings—what we call fundamental beliefs—can

only interfere with the reason and freedom of the believer and, therefore, are neither helpful nor necessary. In short, we can believe and practice different things and still be members together in the body of Christ.

Pioneer Adventists held a similar view. Let me quote James White as representative of his colleagues: "I take the ground that creeds stand in a direct opposition to the gifts. Let us suppose a case: We get up a creed, stating just what we shall do in reference to this thing and that, and say that we will believe the gifts too.

"But suppose the Lord, through the gifts, should give us some new light that did not harmonize with our creed; then, if we remain true to the gifts, it knocks our creed all over at once. Making a creed is setting the stakes, and barring up the way to all future advancement. God put the gifts into the church for a good and great object; but men who have got up their churches, have shut up the way or have marked out a course for the Almighty. They say virtually that the Lord must not do anything further than what has been marked out in the creed. A creed and the gifts thus stand in direct opposition to each other."¹

Of course, the context here was that the only person appearing to exercise said "gifts" was Elder White's wife. But let us overlook possible self-interest in favor of what I consider a solid summary principle: *The Bible is our creed. We reject everything in the form of a human creed.*

The Problem With Pluralism

We're talking about pluralism, which recognizes a diversity of interests, lifestyles, and convictions in any group. The pluralist believes that such

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differences needn't be divisive. Yet, to achieve pluralism, all parties need a common epistemology. Everyone should agree that truth is *important*, *dynamic*, and *soft*.

Truth is *important* in that what we believe matters: a given belief will shape our lives, individually and corporately.

Truth is *dynamic*: it is subject to change as conditions change. The world changes, our horizons expand, and our truths evolve.

But truth is necessarily *soft*. No matter how much we discover, all human truth is partial and imperfect. As we learn, a point about which we were once certain might appear no longer true. What is true for me might not be for you. And when it concerns the immortal, infinite God, probably both of us are wrong.

We human beings have certainly fulfilled what the prophet Daniel predicted: we have run to and fro and increased our knowledge. What have we found? That the more we know, the less we know. A quote attributed to Isaac Newton comes to mind: "I

do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

The problem with pluralism is not that some will be more right or more wrong; pluralism, by its terms, demands humility. The problem with implementing pluralism is that opinionation in any part of the body of Christ threatens the whole.

And right there is where the "broad church" experiment usually fails—and why it is seldom even attempted. All it takes is for one group to say, "By definition, my religion excludes you," and then we no longer act like fellow children of God.

Adventists are unusually opinionated. Not only has our truth been revealed to us, but (and please note the importance of this) we are at the termination of the search, for Jesus is returning! We don't have time to come closer to God's will, so he must have already given us complete and perfect knowledge.

Knowing God

Isaiah remembered precisely when God appeared to him: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne” (Isa. 6:1, NIV). His response? “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (verse 5, NIV).

John the Revelator had a vision of Jesus in heaven and wrote: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17, NIV).

When Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road, “he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’” (Acts 9:4-5, NKJV).

In each of these cases, the heavenly messengers respond with reassurance. Isaiah is touched on the lips with an ember from God’s altar and told, “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (Isa. 6:7, NIV). Jesus put a hand on John and told him, “Write, therefore, what you have seen” (Rev. 1:19, NIV). Paul is told, “Now get up and go into the city” to meet Ananias (Acts 9:6, NIV).

In each case, an encounter with God humbles the person, who may be temporarily reduced to gibbering or even struck blind. Those who encounter God seem to want, more than anything, to listen and learn.

Exceptionalism

In the story of the transfiguration of Christ, I find the most striking detail to be not the appearance of Jesus as divine, not the cameos by Moses and Elijah, but the response by an eyewitness: “Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’” (Matt. 17:4, NKJV).

It’s hard to know precisely what Peter meant, but I’ll tell you what it sounds like to me: Peter is experiencing something amazing, and he’s glad he’s there so he can build some churches.

If an experience with God is a first step in faith, religion always follows close behind. Religion

organizes spiritual experience with the view to extend its influence. But it is a strategy with side effects.

First, religion structures spirituality. It creates liturgies, doctrines, clergy, institutions, music, bank accounts, and buildings. You can argue that such things are necessary, but the flip side is that they take on a life of their own and overshadow the original spiritual joy. Some Adventists make being a church member their spirituality, which to me is rather sad; what was once free exploration of God in the heavenly sun becomes a staid plod along a gloomy trail, where you are told to stay off the grass.

You can argue that Israel needed to hear, “This is the way; walk in it” (Isa. 30:21, NIV), because the nation sometimes went well off the rails. But if rules are all you have, as is true for some Adventists, that seems rather pathetic.

Second, organized religion values success. Religionists believe that growth in money, churches, members, and obedience marks God’s approval.

I remember participating in my first evangelistic crusade, watching the evangelist review and discuss “interests.” I had visited some of those individuals, and I knew they were real people with real concerns. But the only curiosity the evangelist had was whether or not they would consent to be baptized. Once that goal was achieved and a picture of the baptismal candidates sent to the union magazine (valorizing the evangelist, of course), few cared what happened to them.

The desire for success oozes through our church structure. We brag about our 22 million members, our hospitals, our colleges, our evangelism. Even our doctrines must be successful; apologetics—the sort of theology we do the most—is meant to remind us that our doctrines successfully cohere. All of this ends in the great evil of organized religion: exceptionalism. Not only is our doctrine the one *I* think is right, but mine is the *only true* religion. Ergo, you must agree with me to be on God’s side.

Here, the walls begin to close in, because apparently only *some* of us are on God’s side. In

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contradiction to our previously stated desire that the church must grow in numbers, we now deliberately exclude people from it. Only those who believe the doctrines in their most defined way—no meat, no jewelry, no alcohol, no divorce, no homosexuality—can be among the redeemed.

I'm quite sure I don't know God's mind so intimately that I can declare you to be lost, or even on shaky ground, just because you don't see things as I do—but that is a common attitude among Seventh-day Adventists.

Drawing the Circle Wider

My prayer is that we Adventists could reclaim the practice of being a broad church.

I say that while knowing intimately the quirks of our notably fussy, majoring-in-minors religion. We have leaders who periodically say that those who don't align with their views should be shaken out. We generate parasitic offshoots that condemn everyone who doesn't hew to their biblical and political opinions. We are periodically told that Ellen White's peculiarly detailed instructions are as important as—in some cases, exceeding in authority—the Bible itself.

But none of this expands the body of Christ in the biblical sense of “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6, KJV), who love and act like Jesus. A million private clubs that each believe they alone are right and everyone else wrong is not the body of Christ—per the apostle Paul: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many” (1 Cor. 12:13-14, NIV).

Please understand that I am not arguing for unity. Just the opposite. I'm arguing for a gracious and generous *disunity*. I'm arguing for believers who hold positions that are traditionally conservative, as well as those who hold positions that are traditionally liberal, to agree that the basic teachings of Jesus—loving your neighbor

as yourself, loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, forgiving those who hurt you, accepting those who differ with you, seeking peace, living the golden rule—bind us more tightly than our differences on distinctive doctrines.²

I have such friends now, good and godly people who are conservative in all matters Seventh-day Adventist, except one: they don't condemn me, or even cut me off from their companionship, for seeing the world differently than they do.

I believe that intentionally widening the circle in which we coexist as children of God cannot but do us good, and I would love to see it in my church. But how do we avoid shipwrecking on the rocks of particularity?

The Case for Congregationalism

Some Adventist communities do practice this kind of acceptance. Congregations that welcome everyone, that preach grace more than they do eschatology, that accept those with differing beliefs or lifestyles are too few, to be sure, but they exist.³ And they do it against headwinds of what the denomination chooses to call “unity.”

Years ago, one of my theology professors told our class that the church needed to bend all of its energies toward staving off a coming “heresy.” *What heresy?* we wondered. *Not acknowledging the divinity of Christ? Failing to trust in the Bible? Rejecting the resurrection? Not believing in the Sabbath?*

No, he had little concern about any of those things. His feared “heresy” was congregationalism.

I was disappointed. He had missed the point of congregations: that people should be able to create communities that work for them. If my family doesn't need to be precisely like yours, or the town I live in precisely like the one you live in, why must my congregation be precisely like yours? Why must my pastor say the same things that yours does? Why, for that matter, must our worship music be the same as yours?



Adventists generally have been proud that all pastors in our system get paid the same and are paid from the conference office. But the result is centralized control, so that if a congregation wants to march to a different drummer (or, in some cases, have drums in church at all!), it might not be allowed.

Diversity

We know that the early Christian church was a circus of diversity.

Some points of what we now call Christian orthodoxy came about not because churches or individual believers *chose* to agree, but because church leaders under the threat of persecution *forced* them to! Is that what we want?


Some apparently do. In the last couple of years, both Elder Ted Wilson and Elder Paul Douglas, president and treasurer of the General Conference, have publicly demanded that pastors who don't strictly believe all 28 Fundamental Beliefs should leave. Reinder Bruinsma responded in an article

on the *Spectrum* website, "If every pastor who has a problem with any of 'the 28' resigned, we would face a very serious problem indeed."⁴

An unspoken, often unrecognized irony about religion is that all churches inevitably evolve, but they must sound as if they have never changed and never will. Put another way: good leaders should be able to allow an organization to change without creating a crisis. A first step would be for Silver Spring to quit telling people to either get out or they'll be shaken out.

Diversity in belief is a proud Adventist tradition: the pioneers were by definition unorthodox, or they wouldn't have started a new religious movement. (This was true of some things we now consider quite important: for example, a number of our leading preachers were proudly anti-trinitarian.) What Elder Wilson thinks is "historic" Adventism is actually 20th-century Adventism, some of it important only because he so often repeats it from his Silver Spring echo chamber.

Let us be brave enough to admit that those of us who are out here in the church-on-the-ground are different from one another. Let us quit hiding our unorthodoxies and unorthopraxies. When we are cruel and excluding, when we threaten people over our differences with them, we show that our distinctive doctrines are style without godly substance.

The New Testament gospel of grace and mercy occupies all the central ground; it is so large, so overwhelming, that Adventist distinctives are nearly pushed out of the frame. 

¹ James White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (Oct. 8, 1861).

² Popular author and speaker Tony Campolo calls himself a "red letter Christian." He started the website redletterchristians.org because "Western Christianity had lost its focus on Jesus" and he was "concerned at the growing misuse of the word 'evangelical' to identify a voting bloc."

³ I am a member of the Glendale (California) City Church because it is that kind of congregation.

⁴ Reinder Bruinsma, "Adventist Ecumenism: Theological Diversity in the Local Church," *SpectrumMagazine.org* (Nov. 27, 2023).

THE CHURCH AND IMMIGRANTS

BY RAJ ATTIKEN



I AM AN IMMIGRANT TO THE UNITED STATES. I HAVE LOTS OF immigrant family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. I am neither White nor Black. Instead, I belong to a growing, miscellaneous tribe known as “people of color.” In some classifications, I have also been affiliated with “others” and “Asians.”

My wife and I were in our mid-20s when we came to the United States. All of our earthly possessions were tightly packed into two bags and pockets full of hopes and dreams for our lives in this land of opportunity. Among the very first words that someone said to us when we arrived were “Welcome to the United States!” An immigration officer at the airport said, “Welcome!” Anxieties and fears about the immigration process were allayed for the moment. We felt safe. “Welcome.”

Shortly after we arrived in Washington, D.C., an acquaintance offered to give us a tour of the General Conference offices, which were then in Takoma Park, Maryland. As we were introduced to some of the staff, we received a few welcomes but we mostly heard, “When are you going back?”

Wishing to continue my pastoral ministry, I wrote (before email) to every conference president whose address I could find in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. I introduced myself and expressed my desire to obtain a pastoral position. I received about four responses. Two of them stated that there were no vacancies at the time. One essentially said, “Go back to where you came from.”

“Welcome” and “Go back”—these two expressions have become a lens through which I’ve come to understand the immigrant experience in the United States.

Some immigrants “burn the boat” when they arrive and try to assimilate into “mainstream” (white) culture as quickly as possible. Others bring the boat into their homes. Unless you are an immigrant, you seldom understand what immigrants are expected to change as they become American: nationality, language, culture, dress, and even food in order to conform to the dominant culture. Immigrants learn early that they often have to explain, educate, and at times defend their very existence. Immigrants, people of color, and women also learn early that to make it in America, they must do everything harder, better, faster, stronger, and smarter. Those are the rules.

Even success, or the appearance of it, has its own toxic baggage. All eyes are on you. Compliments can be laced with poison. “Good” is not good enough. You need to be exceptional, especially when you don’t have the legacy admissions or the generational wealth—and when an entire system exists to benefit one skin color and gender to the detriment of others.

In America, where only 2% of the population is indigenous, how many generations does it take for immigrants to become “us” instead of “them”? Why are children born here to immigrants still seen as foreigners? How long will immigrant neighbors be seen as invaders? Why are immigrants who have become American citizens still viewed and described as aliens?

A Sense of Belonging

Recently in the United States, we have seen strong attacks on immigrants. We have seen a resurgence of radicalized white power movements—and their fearmongering and demonization of

immigrants. In this toxic climate, for some immigrants, resistance has meant protesting. For others, resistance takes the form of simply walking out of their houses and breathing, just holding their heads up, smiling, having hope, and telling their children that America belongs to them, too. For them, survival itself is an act of resistance.

Our faith community has been disappointingly inept in its response to this national crisis. When it comes to building spaces of belonging for all people groups, many Adventist congregations

In truth, if not for the role and contributions of Adventist immigrants in North America over the last several decades, ongoing membership decline would have had a much more crippling effect on the church in this region.

display a heartbreaking tragedy. While church signs and worship bulletins announce that “All are welcome,” in reality what congregations often convey in subtle ways is “Go back to where you came from.” This is sometimes done without using words. How heads are tilted, how eyes are moved, and who is invited to participate (if invited at all) combine to effectively convey the message: “You don’t belong here.”

Trust me, immigrants get the message. Many live with the aching sense that they belong nowhere—not even in their church. Many pastors and congregations promote a narrative that would keep immigrants outside the church, describing them as recipients of Christian welfare rather than seeing them as part of the global faith community.


Bridges and Buffers

In truth, if not for the role and contributions of Adventist immigrants in North America over the last several decades, ongoing membership decline would have had a much more crippling effect on the church in this region.

The immigrant churches established in conferences throughout North America continue to make a significant contribution to the quality of the immigrant experience. They serve as a coping or adaptation mechanism for new immigrants and contribute to the resilience of their members. They stand as buffers to the hostility of racism and discrimination often experienced within America’s highly racialized society. They also embed immigrants within networks that facilitate economic mobility, social recognition, and the like. They serve as social fields that not only link immigrants and their children to their homeland and its traditions, but also help them incorporate into American life.

Religion is highly salient to many immigrants, who tend to exhibit a high level of religious intensity. Often, the uprootedness inherent in relocation and the experience of being strangers in a new land calls forth this response. We see this intensity reflected in church attendance, service, commitment to prayer, Scripture reading, etc. Adventist immigrants and their descendants in the United States stand as some of the most compelling challengers to the nationalistic and Eurocentric notions of Adventism in North America.

Congregations seeking to create a welcoming culture can take a myriad of specific actions. These include offering worship services, readings, prayers, and hymns in multiple languages; celebrating diverse cultural traditions and holidays; inviting immigrants to serve in leadership roles such as deacons, elders, committee members, or ministry leaders; offering resources such as language classes, job placement assistance, and legal aid for immigration issues; using inclusive language and messaging that reflect the diversity of the congregation; organizing social gatherings, meals, and events in which new community members can connect with other church members; providing training for church leaders and members to understand and appreciate different cultures, traditions, and experiences; engaging in advocacy efforts on issues affecting immigrants, such as immigration reform, access to education, and healthcare. By intentionally incorporating these practices, congregations can create an environment in which immigrants feel valued, respected, and fully included in every aspect of church life.

Welcoming and including immigrants would enhance the Adventist Church’s witness to the God who created, loves, and reconciles this world, and who comes to dwell among us—all of us. It would align us more closely with the God who said, “You must treat the foreigner living among you as native-born and love him as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 19:34, BSB). 

THE YEAR I FLIPPED

BY JONI BELL



I “FLIPPED” AT THE TENDER AGE OF 16.

It began innocently enough. The year was 1968, a year of change and turmoil. The Vietnam War was in full swing, the United States lost the naval intelligence ship USS Pueblo, and two proponents of peace were assassinated: Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. Race riots devastated Washington, D.C., and Congress passed the landmark Civil Rights Act.

It was also a presidential election year.

Though my conscience had been disturbed by these issues, my traditional positions didn’t change. Then, my high school history teacher thought it would be a good idea to divide our class into two sides, each side adopting the platform of our assigned presidential candidates, and engage in a debate.

Sounds like a harmless activity that would be a great learning experience, right? Instead, it was life-altering for me. A watershed moment. My conscience found expression.

I was at first distressed when assigned the candidate my family, local church, and community opposed. I was going to have to defend this person I was sure I couldn’t agree with. What a wretched position to find myself in! I wanted a good grade, so I had no choice but to study the “enemy’s” platform.

I did not go into the debate prep with an open mind. Little did I know I was embarking on the beginning of a journey—of questions and analyses and interpretations of so much more than just politics—that would continue for a lifetime.

Stirred by curiosity, I researched the proposals of the “enemy,” this candidate I was required to represent. I began to develop a deeper understanding of the issues. As I read the candidates’ biographies and analyzed their past actions, I began to rethink my prior positions. I discovered views that spoke to my conscience. My position started to change.

However, at 16 I had little life experience. I didn’t know how to navigate the complex new world I was entering. The announcement to my immediate family that my political positions were changing was met with shock and concern. What was I thinking? Who had fed me this baloney? Was I even still a Christian? This certainly wasn’t the way a Christian should think, was it?

(Lighten up, Mom—I couldn’t even vote!)

The Slippery Slope?

Historically, political beliefs have been attributed to upbringing and surroundings. Yet, recent research suggests that our political inclinations have some connection to a genetic component. Had it been written in my DNA? Was this inner struggle predetermined?

Oh, man—I had veered off onto the “slippery slope”! I wondered, *If I had been so wrong about a political party, what else might I have been wrong about?* I had discovered critical thinking and, as we know, that can be a tricky space to occupy, especially in a setting where our family/local church/community mindset is “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” Overnight I became a missionary to the poor, deluded souls who did not think the way I did.

At Thanksgiving and Christmas, I believe I may have been seated at the “children’s table” a bit longer than my cousins of a similar age, due to my mildly aggressive reasoning. But no matter: I tucked into “evangelizing” the younger ones.

My extended family was dismayed, as well. A grandfather and aunt, whom I had no idea shared my leanings, were cited as “exhibit A” regarding the end result of such thinking. One was a cigar-smoking curmudgeon, and the other died in her late 20s

after engaging in some risky behaviors. Things had not ended well for either of them. Though I was puzzled as to why their political position had anything to do with their demise, I was not deterred.

Recent research suggests that our political inclinations have some connection to a genetic component. Had it been written in my DNA? Was this inner struggle predetermined?

But how to navigate this new terrain? I'm a "people person." It took a few years to sort it all out.

The point of my reflecting on this journey? It can be very challenging to talk to people who disagree with you politically or in areas of religious belief. Politics and religion. Those two topics really are the "biggies," aren't they? You just don't discuss either at the Thanksgiving table with family.

What about friends, co-workers, and the public in general? There is so much acrimony between political groups, not to mention between conservatives and progressives in the church. We become skeptical of each other, and misinformation spreads like wildfire. Disrespect, ridicule, and even hate develops between those who believe differently. This hostility is one of the most urgent problems of our time.

How to Disagree

Allow me to offer some tips from my experience. I will be preaching a bit here! Why? Well, I confess, my view is that we need to navigate our way to some changes.

Focusing on the humanity in the people you disagree with—including building a relationship before talking about politics/religion—is, in my opinion, the best place to start. We can't define people based only on their political/religious beliefs. That includes us. Be open to sharing stories of your own experiences. Also, and this is a tough one, try not to take comments personally. Focusing on the common humanity in your shared stories breaks down barriers.


Bonding with people over less-polarizing issues and finding common ground can be positive. Listen to the viewpoints of others and identify themes you can agree with. You can always find some shared beliefs. Engage in some activities together that align with values you have in common, such as education, community service, or advocacy work.

Active listening, honestly hearing, and understanding without immediately formulating a counterargument are all powerful. Even if you don't agree with someone's views, it's helpful to listen and to validate that person's feelings and thoughts. This practice helps to develop respectful dialogue and demonstrates that you value other viewpoints. Listening is a rare skill. It is so much more than just hearing words; it's about thoughtful, empathetic connection. Apply the 70/30 rule: listen 70% of the time and talk 30% of the time.

Most of us don't ask enough questions. Asking questions paves the way for learning all kinds of unexpected things about other people and their views, since most people love to share their stories. When we ask questions about another's experience and views, we exercise care for that person. Ask open-ended questions, the kind that need more than a simple yes or no. Asking for a story can be an interesting way to learn about someone else. Ask, "What's it like to be a chef?"—or, even better, "What's the craziest thing that has ever happened to you in the kitchen?"

It is essential to avoid confrontational language, to control your emotions. Do your research, and kindly back up your opinions with reputable sources in a calm manner. If you come across as haughty and condescending, a person is not likely to listen. If your conversation starts to escalate, humor can help to cool things down. Of course, you can always move away from the conversation, saying, "Well, you've given me something to think about."

Sometimes you just have to "agree to disagree." It's okay to accept that differences are a part of relationships. Agreeing to disagree is actually a communication skill, a process of validation, growth, and acceptance. It means you accept another person's point of view without agreeing with it. We all have a right to our opinions. In our family we've adopted a little phrase that lets everyone know that we've agreed to disagree and it's time to close the subject: "How about those Cubs?" (our favorite baseball team). Yes, it's silly, but everyone has a little chuckle, we drop the subject, and peace is preserved.

Oh, and by the way, I'm now seated at the "big people's table" for Thanksgiving. 

THE GREAT UNCOUPLING: MARRIAGE AND FAITH

BY DEBBIE HOOPER



THE CLEAN SCENT OF THE OCEAN AND THE HUM OF OVERLAPPING sermons from big-top tents filtered into the night air as my husband and I paced the sandy ring road. Then, in a moment of raw emotion, he blurted out, “I hate God!” The words shattered an illusion I had been trying to maintain for several months, revealing the depth of his struggle with faith.

Church had been a weekly ordeal, but the tipping point was a song service in the young adults’ tent at the annual Adventist camp meeting. It was led by someone who’d been known as the school bully. He was now under a warm spotlight, sharing harmonies and devotional thoughts. His monologues as he bridged to new songs were accompanied by soft chords from a keyboard. But instead of soothing and edifying my husband, they only infuriated him. His reaction to the former bully’s leadership role underscored the conflict he felt about the church’s values. How could someone who had been so heartless only a decade or so before now be elevated as a spiritual leader? How could a man be so deaf to conscience

then but hear that “still, small voice” now? It might be a story of redemption, but it felt profoundly unjust.

My reaction to my husband’s feelings was that I felt instantly nervous, peering into the dark and scanning nearby caravans and tents for anyone who might have overheard his outburst. Feeling embarrassed, I urged him away from the crowds. This speaks volumes about not only my thinking at the time, but also the culture of my church to stifle spiritual dissonance and ignore anger and grief in favor of conformity and image. The darkness revealed a lesson I could not yet articulate: that Adventists would expand the circle for some (the former bully), but not for others.

Although a few kind individuals reached out, the prevailing culture left me uncertain of my place in the spiritual community I had chosen for myself and my children.

A Long and Painful Journey

My church’s conditional acceptance had always been a source of discomfort, but the years that followed brought a different type of challenge. They tested my faith, my marriage, and the church’s capacity for inclusivity and love. The darkness of that night began to reveal a certain void of emotional, psychological, and theological support within faith communities for those grappling with internal conflict. Like Campbell’s bankruptcy in *The Sun Also Rises*, it dawned on me “gradually, then suddenly.” I felt disoriented and overwhelmed. This gave way to a dawning realization that I no longer fit—I couldn’t find peace and belonging in this part of my life anymore. And this was replaced by a sense of hopelessness.

My bridge to church would rely almost entirely on regular and laborious maintenance that I, alone, performed. An increasing load of “gradually” eventually caused a rupture—until the way back was tenuous and insecure.

Hidden Turmoil

When one spouse abandons the faith, it can feel like instant divorce to the believing partner. Two conflicting teachings collide: first, the sanctity of marriage, and second, the call to be “equally yoked” (2 Cor. 6:14). I felt pressure to choose between my husband and the church, and that tension led to intense grief, guilt, and self-doubt. I blamed myself, wondering if I could have prevented this outcome.

Taking my children to church alone meant facing discomfort from others. Although I had been the spiritual leader in my own home for some time, I faced people who were uncomfortable with my being “single” in a community that prized marriage.

I felt the weight of my family’s spiritual well-being on my shoulders. Research shows that children, especially boys like my own, tend to stay in church if their fathers are involved. This knowledge fueled my determination to try to restore him to the fold. I reached out to my church pastor, pleading for his help to engage my husband. Although he promised to get in touch, his eventual silence deepened my already-felt gap. Maybe my family members were not valued as “lost sheep,” as I had been taught as a child, because this shepherd showed no effort to bring us back to the fold.

The Brokenness of Loneliness

Social isolation in a crowded church is painfully real. Young married women with non-attending husbands, or those facing separation or divorce, lose the protective status that comes with marriage. We’re perceived as single but slightly jaded. I felt scrutinized and judged in a culture where purity is highly prized, but where more-human instincts are bubbling along underground.

To protect my reputation and the sensitivities of others, I immediately limited my interactions with men. I hid out in children’s Sabbath school and rarely attended church. Though chosen by me, these contingencies pushed me further to the margins until there was little holding me there. So, I began traveling almost two hours each way to attend church with family members, searching for a sense of safety. The time between Sabbath school and church was the most difficult. The question “Where’s your husband?” hung in the air wherever I went with my two little boys—except to the toilet stall, where I often escaped for extended periods.

As the children grew older, I returned to adult Sabbath school classes. I joined a women’s class one day, hoping to engage with the influential 30-somethings who held leadership positions

in what seemed like a forward-thinking church. But whether women realize it or not, they often take it upon themselves to uphold an unspoken standard, policing each other’s spiritual lives and protecting their own status within the church. Although a few kind individuals reached out, the prevailing culture left me uncertain of my place in the spiritual community I had chosen for myself and my children.


Insensitive Questioning

Religious abuse recovery specialist Connie A. Baker talks about divorce in religious settings. She underscores how faith communities inadvertently harm singles by asking insensitive, probing questions and by forming unhelpful judgments. Baker suggests that instead of asking, “What happened?” church members could say, “I’m so sorry. How can I help?” Forgoing the tendency to seek explanations or to form judgments creates a safe environment for vulnerable individuals to share their struggles—or keep them private, if they choose.

Baker writes: “Divorced women simply disappear in many cases and never return to their home church. They almost always lose status—most religious organizations give status to married women.” She says that if we recognized each person’s inherent worth and completeness, regardless of their circumstances, our faith communities would become havens of support and healing. This happens only when we foster an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance. We have a Biblical mandate for this in John 13:35 (NIV): “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The Next Young Couple

The journey from that night to now has been long and often lonely. I understand what happened, but that makes it no less painful. I experienced human behavior aggravated by the application of harmful religious dogma, which meant that I could no longer trust my group with matters of the heart. When that happened, I stopped going there for guidance.

As I write this, I imagine another young couple walking a familiar path, facing a crisis of faith and, perhaps, a failing marriage. That darkness could expose the shortcomings of their community or give way to acceptance and love. I hope they find understanding in a space where status doesn’t matter and encounter a group of people willing to expand their circle, love them regardless, and deliver a message that bridges the gap .

A STORM RESPONSE STRATEGY

BY CHRISTOPHER C. THOMPSON



WHEN HURRICANE HELENE MADE LANDFALL IN THE southeastern United States on Thursday, September 26, 2024, I was unprepared. On the next Sabbath morning, once I realized what was happening, I admitted to my church leaders just before divine service that I had been taken by surprise.

It turned out they hadn't been tracking the storm either. Helene had hit land as a Category 1 hurricane and ended as a catastrophic Category 4.

Whenever storms like this disrupt large regions, we see a consistent response: after the shock and grief comes collaborative

restoration. Despite our differences and diversity, we set aside our immediate needs and make rebuilding a priority. That response to our collective trauma is how we should contend with the racial divide in our country, as well.

The Raging Storm

Racism has been the bane of the American experience ever since our courts first deemed race to be a thing, after the great Bacon Rebellion in 1676. Our founding document identifies African Americans as three-fifths human, and slavery itself was based, at least in part, on the belief that enslaved people were inferior. These ideas have tormented the national psyche since 1619, when the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia.

The historical record is teeming with evidence that diversity is what has delivered such tremendous industry and innovation and has made our nation great. Yet, it feels as if racial issues have reached a fever pitch in the last 20 years. We have seen a sharp increase in the deaths of unarmed African Americans, often at the hands of police or vigilante citizens. The immigrant crisis continues to manifest the disparate and putrid ideals of xenophobia and nationalism over diversity and cosmopolitanism. These matters have once again taken center stage in a hotly contested election season. We simply can't seem to get this right.

Christ-Centered Corrective

Those who fear a lack of resources often seek to stifle diverse voices, which is why we need strategies for transformative and systematic change.

We are well aware of Paul's proclamation in Galatians 3:28 (KJV), which says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." It is a great principle, but it doesn't contain a corrective strategy.

Lately, my mind has been arrested by the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2. We usually focus on verses 6-11, the grand poem that raises Christ to his exalted state as our sacrifice and our example. But what precedes it is equally—or maybe more—profound, because it contains the corrective strategy that Galatians 3:28 lacks.

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being

one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:1-5, NIV).

This is obviously an exhaustive list. The one that gets me every single time says: “*In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others*” (verses 3-4, emphasis mine).

We must learn how to see and hear the pains and problems of others, then find a path forward together. Otherwise, things will never change.

I think we can break this passage down into three directives, or principles, that are transformational and could help us rebuild despite the raging storm.

Listen

One thing we Adventists do poorly is this: we are terrible listeners. We are so busy “proclaiming the message” that we rarely consider that someone might have a message for us. Not only are we collectively bad at listening, but we are poor listeners individually. Our brains are our own personal echo chambers, where we constantly rewind, replay, and rehearse whatever cherished idea we have formulated, whether it’s true or not. We listen to respond rather than to understand.

If we would learn instead to listen to *understand*, we’d open ourselves up to new stories that are completely diverse and distant from our own. That is where we would find opportunities for engagement.

Relate

Franklin Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* taught us to “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

Here’s what I believe: When we truly understand each other, what we find is that everyone’s fears, challenges, hopes, and dreams are—at their core, in some way, shape, or form—interconnected and similar. We are all striving for the same things. Deep down, we all have the same needs—think Maslow’s hierarchy. What we end up doing is stifling those we consider to be “other” in order to ensure the vitality of our own tribes.

Collaborate


When we prioritize our private tribes over the human collective, we all suffer. We are seeing this in Gaza right now. Instead of a two-state solution where everyone wins, the entire region is being destroyed. We must learn how to see and hear the pains and problems of others, then find a path forward together. Otherwise, things will never change.

Let’s identify what it is we want to fix. *What do we need to repair in our relationships with people who are different from us?* Then, let’s devise an action plan to make necessary changes.

Once we locate our shared challenges and interests, then we can focus our energies on finding a solution to ensure that the collective can move forward. As a case in point, I can assure you that no one in Asheville, North Carolina, is arguing over who gets to use the roads first. All of the city’s resources are marshaled toward rebuilding the roads that were damaged by Hurricane Helene.

In western North Carolina, I’ve been watching people I care about pick up the pieces of their damaged homes and property. Even here in the Lowcountry, where the storm didn’t hit as hard, we’ve had to pull together to help families who didn’t have power after the storm. Some lost all of their refrigerated food. In rural areas where water pump systems are electric, people couldn’t get water out of their well. There’s no air conditioning in the stifling heat, either.

Life can get very complicated and uncomfortable very quickly. But I’ve seen people pulling together to help one another get their lives back on track, and it’s beautiful to watch. I saw a group of white guys shut down their business for several days to pull together water donations. Then, I saw a black guy shut down his trucking business so that he could use his truck to deliver the donated water.

This is the kind of society we could be, and not just when there is a crisis. We want to live like this for eternity. Why not start today? 

THE SILENT OUTSIDERS: HOW WE CAN MAKE CHURCH WORK FOR NEURODIVERGENT PEOPLE

BY LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER



I'VE ALWAYS FELT OUT OF STEP WITH PEOPLE AROUND ME. AND while I'm mysteriously quite good at many things without having to try very hard at all, I'm also mysteriously bad at some things that practically everyone in the whole world seems to be able to do without even thinking about it.

I have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Let me tell you a little about what ADHD is—and what it isn't, because most people have some wrong ideas about it.

Having ADHD means having a brain that is wired differently from other people's brains. I like to think of it as having different operating systems, such as Microsoft and Apple. Most programs on Apple and Microsoft operating systems run the same or similarly; however, some Microsoft programs have glitches when they run on Apple computers, and vice versa. Some programs can't run at all on the other operating system. That's my brain compared to a non-ADHD brain.

Brains that are different from what we consider typical are called "neurodivergent," or ND for short. That includes ADHD, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), mental health or personality disorders, and giftedness. Brains that are what we consider typical in our society are called "neurotypical," or NT for short. But for the purposes of this article, we will focus on ADHD.

Those of us with oversensitive ADHD brains are so sensitive to the pain in the world around us that it hurts us. Because of that extreme sensitivity, we have an extreme emotional response to feeling rejected, whether real or perceived, which is called Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD). This often makes us people pleasers.

We are creative and artistic. We are often funny, life-of-the-party types. We are spontaneous and often joyful. We are out-of-the-box thinkers. We have problems regulating our attention span. But it's not just a short attention span; we also become overattentive and hyperfixated. When I was a young adult, I would often become so absorbed in a book that I would forget to eat, reading for six to eight hours at a time.

Those of us with neurodivergent brains act impulsively, have memory problems, are disorganized, and constantly lose things. We have a dopamine imbalance, meaning that our brains crave dopamine constantly. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter our bodies produce when we are having a good time. That means my brain is giving me overpowering signals to do fun, exciting things (and, likewise, overpowering signals not to do things that are boring, tedious, or difficult). Every time I do the dishes, I must consciously fight against the messaging in my brain. It takes so much effort to force myself to do things I don't want to do that it exhausts me. This is an example of what is called executive dysfunction. It describes why it is so hard for me to do my chores or to work at a task I find tedious.

People whose brains are neurotypical love those of us with ADHD because we bring the fun, inviting our friends out and proposing new ideas. We love to laugh and have a good time. But we also drive NT people crazy because we forget their birthdays, borrow their stuff and forget to bring it back, are constantly late, lose stuff, are messy, etc.

All children with ADHD get the very strong message from the world around them that they are shallow, lazy, inconsiderate, frustrating slobs. But here's the kicker: they can't

As I think of outsiders, I think of my childhood in the church and the amount of shame I felt as a result of feedback from the people around me.

help it. It's not laziness; it's brain wiring. When I forget your birthday, it isn't because I don't love you. It's because I don't get to decide what I remember. I'm not the decider. My brain remembers what it remembers, and it forgets what it forgets. I'm not involved in the process.

Negative, shaming messages are painful for kids with ADHD, and it is actually worse inside the church than outside of it. The church has a habit of attaching virtues to behaviors. I can't keep my house clean, so I'm messy. But if you attach moral value to it, then I am not a virtuous Proverbs 31 woman. I will feel shame for something over which I have no control.

The theme of this edition is expanding the circle to include "outsiders." As I think of outsiders, I think of my childhood in the church and the amount of shame I felt as a result of feedback from the people around me.

I want to be clear. I don't believe that any of the people in my family or my church realized that they were shaming me for something I can't control. They were trying to raise me to succeed in the world. They were trying to protect me from the judgment of others and also help me improve my character. These are noble


goals, and they came from a place of love. My adult caregivers didn't know that while I can use strategies to improve some of my inherent problems, I can't get rid of them altogether. They are an integrated part of who I am. If you love me for my empathy, sensitivity, creativity, exuberance, advocacy, and passion, then you also need to love me for my disorganization, memory problems, lateness, forgetfulness, and messiness.

If there is anything I would ask that the church do to better support people with ADHD, it's to just give us a break. You don't have to scold little Ben for not being able to sit still in Sabbath school. Let him pace in the back, or bounce on something, or give him something to do with his hands. Teachers, you don't have to scold third-grade Susie for daydreaming instead of listening. Just gently refocus her attention when you see her lose her focus. When your adult ADHD friend Meg overreacts to perceived rejection and does or says something she regrets, just tell her that you still love her, even when she's irrational every so often. When your adult ADHD friend Dan borrows your coffee mug, just tell him he can keep it—or, better yet, put his coffee into a disposable mug. If your coworker Julie keeps forgetting to write down the number of the contact you gave her, even though you already gave it to her three times, email it to her or put it on a sticky note on her desk, so she can look it up next time. Or, graciously remind her to enter it into her phone while you wait. If someone sincerely wants to help and isn't shaming me, I actually like getting this type of help. I appreciate it when the accepting people in my life remind me to do things I often forget.

Try to reframe traits such as disorganization, messiness, forgetfulness, and executive dysfunction. Instead of thinking of those issues as moral failures (as in "cleanliness is next to godliness"), think of them as neutral. They don't represent failure; they just are the way they are.

And that's the crux of it. Those of us with ADHD want you to know that we just are the way we are. We try hard to improve those traits, because we know they drive you crazy. Trust me, they drive us crazy, too.

The church can embrace their ADHD members. Appreciate and acknowledge their strengths. Remember: ADHD people are also creative, spontaneous, conversational, impulsively sweet, generous, funny, knowledgeable on topics they are interested in, energetic, and empathetic.

We just want to be included and accepted for exactly who we are, flaws and all. 

HOW I BECAME PART OF THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

BY RANDI ROBERTSON



I GREW UP IN AN ADVENTIST GHETTO, SURROUNDED BY CHURCH members and a family of church workers. It was a richly and deeply kind community, where I knew I was loved and where I learned core values that I still live by today.

For all of that, it was a bubble. We were in so many ways isolated from different cultures, even ones with values similar to our own. I ended up with some biases and beliefs that I have spent a lifetime working through. God would eventually challenge me in ways I didn't expect, including introducing me to a part of the church community that I didn't know: LGBTQI+ people.

Life Journey

I met Mayra at Andrews University, and we married the day we graduated. Like me, she was a product of a family of church workers. After three career starts in about four years, I landed in the United States Air Force, where I stayed for 22 years.

In all of the Adventist churches in the places where we lived, I was an active participant: Sabbath school teacher, deacon, school board chair, community services director, chair of the nominating committee, and even head elder in a couple of churches. Mayra and I were blessed with two children: a girl, and then a boy.

In career, family, and church, my goal was always to create community and connection. I like fostering teams and communities that serve others with integrity, care, and generosity. I tried to stretch the circle of inclusion in the churches we've been part of, and I believe that those around me would say I mostly succeeded.

The Secret

When I retired from the Air Force, Mayra urged me to seek counseling for a secret that only we knew: that I am transgender.

In the Air Force back then, the rule was "Don't ask, don't tell." Those who were LGBTQI+ had to be deeply closeted. It was not appropriate to ask service members about their orientation, nor was it their obligation to tell. Those I knew, I respected and admired. Though they served with honor and integrity—and some made it into high leadership positions—they did not have the privilege of merging their family with their work.

What came next in my life I didn't expect. I'd hoped in retirement to take a role with a consultancy or go into a civil service position, but neither the consulting community nor civil service was hiring in areas of my expertise. As it turned out, Andrews University needed a professor for its aviation department, and I was more than qualified. If we went there, we could keep our two children in Adventist schools.

So, after nearly 25 years living *outside* the Adventist bubble, I was back *in* one. And we liked it! It was the warm and receptive community I'd known while growing up, with kind and supportive people, some of whom I remembered from childhood.

We found a community in the Andrews faculty, too. We met people who took inclusive positions about many things that were still contested within the church. We found a worship community there, too: One Place Fellowship, a church that was trying to draw people into that bigger circle.

In my second year, I connected with another faculty member who was working with the LGBTQI+ students on campus. This colleague, a mental health professional and the parent of an LGBTQI+ child, was engaging with the administration to help LGBTQI+ students. That fall, an "officially unofficial" student

group of LGBTQI+ students called AULL4One was allowed to create an organization.

Over the next three years, our home hosted these amazing young people, who were seeking an education, seeking God, and seeking acceptance in a place that was in many ways hostile to their very existence. At least one Friday evening a month, 25 to 50 LGBTQI+ students and allies filled our house to worship, share experiences, and enjoy food. It was a safe place, a shelter.

In career, family, and church, my goal was always to create community and connection. I like fostering teams and communities that serve others with integrity, care, and generosity.

These young people and affirming faculty members expanded our church community—and upheld our faithfulness to God. It created a hope that my spouse and I and our children might find community within the church and that, when the time came, I would “transition.” No one outside my immediate family knew that I, too, was part of the LGBTQI+ community.

I left my teaching position at Andrews when I realized that I could no longer conceal that I was transgender. I needed to live my full truth as one of God’s people. And when I did that, the institutional structures of the church would not have allowed us to stay.

Finding Community

Our years at Andrews University taught us some valuable lessons.

The first is that church is really about community, about face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder connection. It is about living life with those at hand. A local congregation should ideally help to make one’s faith meaningful.

Groups get to define how big a circle they will draw, of course: how high a wall they want to build. But even when they don’t

build walls with intent and focus, they in some way define who is in and who isn’t. We hope they will decide to create a more diverse gathering.

The second is that far too often those young people who found community, safety, and acceptance in our AULL4One home gatherings were pushed out of church, and even out of Christianity, by the harsh reality of the church “out there.”

Afterward

After leaving Michigan and after I transitioned, we were unsure if we would find a Seventh-day Adventist community that would accept us. We did: we are part of a rainbow of people that make up a diverse, amazing, wonderful congregation, one with at least four languages and music representative of the mix. We have a healthy LGBTQI+ community, too. Of all the churches I have been a part of in my life, this is the closest to what I think heaven will be like.

I should add that this gathering isn’t a happy accident: it has been cultivated for decades by lay leaders and pastors to be a place of inclusion for all of God’s people.


I do not hold out much hope that the General Conference Executive Committee will, any time soon, become fully inclusive of LGBTQI+ folks, but here are two things that give me hope.

First, the fact that we found a safe and affirming place makes me believe that more local churches can draw a bigger circle of inclusion. We do not have to wait for a pronouncement from the General Conference to be a safe place for LGBTQI+ people.

Unfortunately, our dear church is 70 miles from us, so we don’t get there every week. Imagine being in a place where there isn’t an affirming, accepting congregation within a thousand miles—which is the case for many LGBTQI+ people! (We content ourselves with attending the online Adventist Today Sabbath Seminar when we can’t go to a real church.)

The second source of hope for the future of Adventism is that Kinship International has created a safe place for people like us, as well as our families and allies in the LGBTQI+ community. I endorse the ministry of Kinship; it has saved lives and saved people’s faith.

How big is your circle? The truth is that almost everyone has a family member who is LGBTQI+, and most churches, even small ones, include someone who is LGBTQI+. The question is: Will they find a safe harbor and full inclusion within your family and your church community?

It’s up to us, isn’t it? 

WAS JESUS RACIST? A CANAANITE WOMAN'S ARGUMENT WITH GOD

BY MATTHEW J. KORPMAN

WHEN CHRISTIANS FIGHT AGAINST RACISM, XENOPHOBIA, AND bigotry, the image of the crucified Christ is usually one that inspires them in their ministry and efforts. This has been true for Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as for modern antiracists. If Jesus is God made flesh, as Christians affirm, and if God made all people as his children, then God and Jesus are both against racism and division amongst those children. Jemar Tisby remarks, “From beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, God has planned for a racially and ethnically diverse church.... Diversity is God’s ‘plan A’ for the church.”¹ Furthermore, the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross to bring humanity into a united community as the body of Christ does not match the divisive nature of prejudice. As Jim Wallis noted in his book on the topic, “When racism is tolerated, the reconciling work of Christ on the cross is contradicted.”²

And yet, despite these points, many have noted that the Jesus of first-century history appears to have expressed prejudice against other ethnic groups, or in our modern terms: Jesus looks a bit racist in two of our four canonical Gospels. In the accounts of Mark and Matthew, we find a story about a woman who wasn’t Jewish but sought Jesus’ help to heal her daughter. In Mark 7:24-30, she is called Syrophoenician, a *Gentile* woman living in the region of Tyre. When Matthew edited Mark’s account around 10 years later, in the 80s CE, he heightened her ethnic “otherness” by transforming her into a “Canaanite” woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15:21-28). By calling her a “Canaanite,” Matthew emphasizes that she was not only a Gentile, but historically an *enemy* of God, a foreigner that God commanded should be eradicated and killed with no mercy (Deut. 7:1-2; 20:16-18).

According to Mark’s account, Jesus is hiding in a house to escape the crowds. Suddenly, this “Syrophoenician” woman comes and somehow makes her way inside the home. She “bowed down at his feet” (7:25) and “begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter” (verse 26).³ But instead of helping her, Jesus replies: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the

children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (verse 27, NRSV). And with that statement, where Jesus refuses to help her because she is a Gentile and calls her a “dog,” we find ourselves in an exegetical and cultural crisis.

A Racist Jesus?

A number of modern Christian interpreters have recognized the problematic nature of this story, describing it as “one of the most unsettling passages in the New Testament.”⁴ In light of our modern consciousness about xenophobia and prejudice, a growing number of Christian commentators have been calling this out, noting that “Jesus’ statement was full of prejudice and ethnocentrism.”⁵

R. T. France, for example, recognizes in his commentary that the Markan and Matthean story contains “racist” language.” For those who accept that the words Jesus used adequately reflected his true beliefs at the time, “This story calls us to confront Jesus’ humanity.”⁶

Clemson University history professor Austin Steelman writes: “Being human means being embedded in a culture. It means growing up with a certain worldview. It means inheriting traditions and language and bias that can be wrongheaded, hurtful, and alienating. An example of such bias is the exclusion of Gentiles from the community of faith and the circle of those deserving compassion.”⁷

The term “dog” is clearly a racially charged epithet in first-century Judaism that implies dirty and dangerous characteristics in non-Jewish people. Jews considered dogs not as appropriate pets, but as wild animals that were to be avoided. Jesus’ use of the term mirrors his society’s prejudices and probably those of his disciples.⁸ As France notes, “To refer to a human being as a ‘dog’ is deliberately offensive or dismissive (cf. 2 Sa. 16:9; Ps. 22:16; Phil. 3:2); Jews typically referred to Gentiles as dogs. ... It is the sort of language a Gentile might expect from a Jew, but to find it in a saying of Jesus is shocking.”⁹

For commentators who believe that these words reflect Jesus’ actual beliefs about Gentiles at the time, what makes the story so powerful is that Jesus doesn’t hold onto his prejudices but changes them, giving an example of how people can also grow out of them.¹⁰ As progressive pastor Brandon Robertson noted in a now-famous TikTok video: “Jesus repents of his racism and extends healing to this woman’s daughter. I love this story, because it’s a reminder that Jesus is human. He had prejudices and bias. And when confronted with it, he was willing to do his work. And this woman was willing to stand up and speak truth.”¹¹

For them, this is a “teachable moment” for Jesus.¹² Donald Hagner in his celebrated commentary argues, “If Jesus was perhaps about to send the woman away without answering her request, her renewed approach, recorded in the next verse, persuaded him otherwise.”¹³ As Steelman puts it, “In Mark’s narration, this is arguably Jesus’ first face-to-face encounter with a Gentile, and it shakes him. It changes him. It changes the way he sees those who don’t share his ethnicity. Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry is one of ever-expanding inclusiveness.”¹⁴

Steelman notes, as do many, that after the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus increasingly begins to help Gentiles, suggesting a turning point in his ministry. “Jesus also teaches us an important lesson here by modeling graciousness in a broken culture. Jesus had prejudices from his community

How does Jesus respond to this Gentile woman’s pushback, in which she rhetorically takes the upper hand? He celebrates her!

that were magnified by his insulation from those who could challenge his views, but he listens when those views are challenged. He concedes his erroneous ethnocentrism and turns divine compassion toward all people everywhere.” In the end, “Jesus shows us in this story that inheriting bias is inevitable, but holding onto it is a choice.”¹⁵

Was It All a Ruse?

This perspective is by no means a marginal view. I have heard a number of Adventist professors express openness to this idea across the denomination’s various schools, to say nothing of other non-Adventist mainstream biblical scholars and theologians. Although this viewpoint is shocking to many sensibilities because it affirms Jesus’ full humanity to a degree many are uncomfortable with, the idea is certainly within the realm of orthodoxy. Rachel

Held Evans noted her belief on Twitter: “It’s fear of Jesus’ humanity, I think, that keeps us from interpreting the story of the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman as a story about a man who changes his mind about his racial bias when confronted with the humanity (and chutzpah!) of another person.”¹⁶

Yet, it is also true that the majority of commentators have not embraced this view for other reasons. As Ian Paul at Fuller Theological Seminary has noted: “Knowing that Jesus lived *within* a particular time and culture need not imply that Jesus was *trapped* in that time and culture.”¹⁷

For many, the passage has been understood instead to be “a test or prompt of some kind designed to draw out the woman into further discussion.”¹⁸ France observed, “He appears like a wise teacher who allows, and indeed incites, his pupil to mount a victorious argument against the foil of his own reluctance. He functions as what in a different context might be called a ‘devil’s advocate’ and is not ‘disappointed’ to be defeated in argument.”¹⁹

While there is no doubt that Jesus is employing racially or ethnically charged language when he talks about the woman as a dog, a certain question mark hovers over the accusation of Jesus’ inherited prejudice. Did he actually believe what he was saying to the woman? Most arguments that Jesus was acting out of prejudice rely on Mark’s account because of its brevity, but the revised and expanded account in Matthew complicates such a simplistic portrait. In fact, it suggests heavily that Jesus was provoking the woman.

In Matthew’s version of the story, Jesus was not hiding in a house but presumably walking outside with his disciples. It says that a woman suddenly came out and asked him to help heal her daughter. “But he did not answer her at all” (Matt. 15:23). In response, “she keeps shouting” after Jesus and the disciples. Apparently, Jesus continues to ignore her until his disciples annoyingly complain that they can’t take the shouting anymore and that he should “Send her away.” The implication is that they are frustrated by the fact that Jesus has neither rejected her nor embraced her. In the end, they simply want her to shut up, one way or another.

Matthew’s account also diverges from Mark’s by offering a new teaching: “He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’” (verse 24). This is clearly a rejection of her desires; the Canaanite woman is not part of the house of Israel in any formal way, so she should not seek his help.

Yet, she ignores Jesus’ rebuff and goes down on her knees to beg for compassion. He answers, “It is not fair to take the

children's food and throw it to the dogs" (verse 26). Jesus once again adopts language that reveals the prevailing cultural prejudice to tell the woman: you are not a child, but a dog, so you shouldn't expect anything. The fact that "dog" was a demeaning term referring to her non-Jewish ethnicity only compounded the point. As before, the woman rejects what Jesus says, but this time she does so not simply by sheer will, but by logic. Jesus had offered what was a zero-sum argument: either he gives the food (miracles) to the children or he gives it to the dogs. She argues that this is *illogical*: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (verse 27).

How does Jesus respond to this Gentile woman's pushback, in which she rhetorically takes the upper hand? He celebrates her! "Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith!'" (verse 28). In Mark's account, Jesus links the healing of her daughter to her courage "for saying that" (Mark 7:29). In short, Jesus praises the woman's logical prowess and describes her defiance of his words as faith.

This invites us to reflect: was Jesus *actually* ignorant and then so quickly pleased that this woman had pointed it out? Or had Jesus been intentionally provoking her to see to what extent she would remain persistent?

It appears that at least for the Gospel of Matthew, the latter is more likely. Since Matthew is editing Mark's account, the changes he makes are intentional to reshape the way we read the episode. Matthew's decision to portray Jesus as ignoring the woman for so long, without even rejecting her claims, suggests something *unusual*. Even the disciples find Jesus' behavior strange and implore him to do *something*. Likewise, the fact that Jesus praises the woman for her faith suggests that Matthew sees this woman as the *exemplar* of faith. In fact, what many don't notice is that Jesus' words to the woman had been given first to the disciples.

Five chapters earlier, Matthew reported that Jesus had instructed his disciples: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5-6). Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman (unique to Matthew's account) that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24) clearly references this teaching. Matthew is invoking a bit of irony here: the disciples would have assumed that this Canaanite (an enemy of Israel) would have zero faith, whereas they were faithful disciples of Israel's Messiah. When Jesus rejected the woman, according to the teaching that he had given them in chapter 10, the disciples gave their consent. Yet, the paradox revealed in Matthew's version is

that the disciples who accepted and obeyed Jesus' words lacked the correct faith, whereas the Canaanite woman resisted the prejudice and thereby proved she had true faith.

Inclusion Matters

It is possible that this teaching about the lost sheep of Israel was spreading independently among some Christian communities in the oral tradition. Like early Adventists who embraced the Shut Door theory, some early Jewish Christians may have presumed that Jesus prioritized Israel. His teaching to "not give what is holy to dogs or throw your pearls before pigs" (Matt. 7:6, TLV) may also stem from this background.²⁰ The later *Pseudo-Clementine* text appears to still preserve a Christian Jewish reading of the Syrophenician woman's story that holds onto the prejudicial teachings (Ps.-Clem. *Homilies* 19).

For Mark and certainly Matthew, the true example of faith was not to embrace these teachings, but to recognize their incongruity with the mission and message of Christ. The Canaanite mother had to set aside the *words* of Jesus and appeal to the principle of his teachings and mission. Jesus celebrates her, because her faith is not shallow. It's deeper than words (in our case, Bible verses).

This echoes the experience of early Seventh-day Adventists as they wrestled with the issue of slavery during the Civil War. Ellen White wrote to one Adventist who was a vocal supporter of slavery, reprimanding him for his views. She told the man that no matter what arguments (biblical or otherwise) he may come up with, no matter what verses he could appeal to, it was clear and beyond argument that "Your views of slavery, and the sacred, important truths for this time, cannot harmonize."²¹

Like many abolitionists, early Adventists had to put aside the words of the Bible that endorsed slavery (e.g., Lev. 25:39-46) in order to pursue and promote the principles that undergirded the God of love (1 John 4:8). True faith for Adventists was seen, as with the Canaanite woman, by finding logical contradictions. Slavery was antithetical to God's character of love, and so even with teachings that appeared to show his support for it, the issue demanded that Adventists and other Christians raise their voices and object.

The True Israelite

In the end, I can sympathize with those who like the idea that Jesus was entrenched in the racial prejudices of his culture. It provides us an example of how all humans are prejudiced and how each of

us can overcome this when we open ourselves to others. Jesus was tested in all things, and his example would have profound and perhaps inspiring implications. Yet, I find the other view far more enriching and exegetically sound. Jesus, who knew the prejudices of his audience, both empowered the woman and privately rebuked his own disciples. In this “teachable moment,” the disciples learned a hard lesson: that a Canaanite woman had greater faith than they did.

Jesus had also made it clear that true faith is knowing God well enough to reject the idea that he is illogical. True faith is knowing you can reason and argue with God. True faith is never giving up until the circle of inclusion is expanded. In truth, the determined Canaanite mother was simply imitating the faithfulness expressed by Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Gen. 32:24-32), which means “those who fight with God.” In that sense, this woman was indeed one of the lost sheep of Israel, and Jesus had indeed come to help her. She proved it by embracing the meaning of Israel’s name and was rewarded when Jesus responded, “Woman, great is your faith!”

In fact, this was the view that Ellen White put forward in 1898. Although she acknowledged that Jesus acted with “indifference” toward the woman in a “cold and heartless manner,” and despite admitting that his actions and speech toward her were “in accordance with the prejudices of the Jews,” she ultimately argued that Jesus had “tested her faith in Him” as a “lesson to the disciples.”²²

She wrote: “In faith the woman of Phoenicia flung herself against the barriers that had been piled up between Jew and Gentile. Against discouragement, regardless of appearances that might have led her to doubt, she trusted the Saviour’s love.”²³ And in another book, White concluded, “It was Christ Himself who put into that mother’s heart the persistence which would not be repulsed.”²⁴

Although Jesus imitated “the unfeeling prejudice of the Jews,” White argued that his desire was that by doing so he would “lead them from their Jewish exclusiveness.”²⁵ She presumed that the disciples “supposed that the prejudice of the Jews against the Canaanites was pleasing to Him,” yet the shock came later when he granted her everything and praised her faith.²⁶ In other words, Jesus acted in a racist manner to vividly illustrate why it was wrong: “it was an implied rebuke to the disciples” that they accepted his treatment of her.²⁷ For White, Jesus was indeed sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,

and “in His work for the Canaanite woman He was fulfilling His commission” because she “was one of the lost sheep that Israel should have rescued.”²⁸

The lesson from her story reverberates for us today. White argued: “We need the earnest desire of the importunate widow and the Syrophenician woman—a determination that will not be repulsed... Peace and rest can be secured only by conflict. ... Jacob wrestled all night with God before he gained the victory.”²⁹

¹ Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice* (2021), p. 26.

² Jim Wallis, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (2016), p. 125.

³ All biblical quotations are from NRSV translation, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Austin Steelman, “Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman: A Lesson on Refugees and Law School Seals,” *The Harvard Ichthus* (Jan. 25, 2016).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (2002), p. 296.

⁷ Steelman, op. cit.

⁸ See, among many commentators, Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33B (1995), p. 442.

⁹ France, p. 298.

¹⁰ Surekha Nelavala, “Smart Syrophenician Woman: A Dalit Feminist Reading of Mark 7:24-31,” *The Expository Times*, Vol. 118, No. 2 (2006), pp. 64-69.

¹¹ Transcript taken from Ken Ham, “Was Jesus a Racist? Homosexual ‘Pastor’ Says So,” *AnswersInGenesis.com* (March 18, 2021).

¹² Raymond Pickett et al., “Jesus and the Christian Gospels,” in *The New Testament*, ed. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sánchez (2014), p. 153.

¹³ Hagner, p. 442.

¹⁴ Steelman, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rachel Held Evans on Twitter (Nov. 19, 2018).

¹⁷ Ian Paul, “Did the Syrophenician Woman in Mark 7 Teach Jesus Not to Be Racist?” *Psephizo.com* (Aug. 31, 2021).

¹⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 22 (1992), p. 243.

¹⁹ France, p. 296.

²⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, ed. Helmut Koester, rev. ed. (2007), p. 355.

²¹ Ellen G. White to Alexander Ross, Letter 24 (1862).

²² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), pp. 400-401.

²³ Ibid., p. 403.

²⁴ White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (1900), p. 175.

²⁵ White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 401-402.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 400.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 402.

²⁹ White, “The Violent Take It by Force,” *Youth’s Instructor* (May 24, 1900), in *From the Heart* (2010), p. 372.

2025 GC SESSION

ST. LOUIS 2025 *and the End of the Adventist World*

BY ADMIRAL NCUBE

The 62nd General Conference Session is less than 12 months away. This meeting is often regarded as a global spiritual gathering and a constitutionally required business session whose purpose includes voting on global leadership, setting the direction of the world church for the next five years, and voting changes to its constitution, fundamental beliefs, and Church Manual.

Church leaders and GC Session delegates who have an ear to the ground will not be content with excitement over leadership elections, cosmetic changes to policy, and routine Church Manual updates. Bigger things are at stake.

The session comes after years of leaders placing emphasis on functional compactness, administrative growth, and homogeneity, fueled by centralization of power at the General Conference (GC) level. The same church leaders continue to call for a renewed commitment to mission

and spiritual rededication, laced with militant language and catchy labels.

But conditions around us necessitate a change in approach and focus. The celebratory aspects of the GC Session have their place, but without candid discussion about the future of the church, our leadership will have succeeded in the wrong things.

I'm reminded of an African proverb: "When the drummers change their beats, the dancers must also change their steps."

Adventist Assumptions

Adventism has traditionally taken pride in being out of step with the rest of society. As sociologist Ronald Lawson puts it, we inherited from our pioneers a markedly different lifestyle characterized by the observance of Saturday as the Sabbath in a society where a six-day workweek was almost universal; dietary prohibitions related to meat, coffee, tea, alcohol, and spices; rejection of the pagan elements of Christmas and Easter; criticism of much of popular culture; a solid commitment to a plain dress code with no jewelry and cosmetics; and a commitment to a "natural" diet based on fruit, vegetables, grains, and nuts. Such a lifestyle set us apart and made it difficult for us to associate with others.

Adventism demanded total allegiance from us and controlled our lives, making it justifiable for us to be wary about participating in civic affairs and to separate from the rest of society in terms of lifestyle, friendship networks, and jobs. Most of us were products of extraction evangelism, an approach to mission that removed us from a relationship with our families and cultures to foster new ties almost exclusively within the church.

Rather than being disciplined within our families or communities, we adopted a new culture and looked at our old community ties with suspicion. And yet, Adventism claimed a supposedly universal message that is valid and relevant everywhere.

Hanz Gutierrez, chair of the Italian Adventist Theological Faculty of Villa Aurora, argues that the historic Adventist message came with assumptions of being socio-culturally neutral and "pure," based on where it originated and was being preached. This meant that if someone did not understand our message, it was not Adventism's problem, but rather, the listener's problem. Being a message-centered church led to more emphasis on theological repetition and less on theological exploration. Consequently, Adventism did not—and does not want to—confront the struggle to enculturate, translate itself, and settle naturally into a territory.

Children of the Church

New generations are now questioning the arrogance of claiming to be a separated remnant and having perfect doctrines. Fewer believe that Adventists have a monopoly on truth or that we ought to stay separate from society. A generation that once firmly believed in the grand story of Adventism as God's "remnant church," with its worldwide mission mandate, is no longer so sure of itself.

The expectation of persecution has faded, and even the tradition of non-involvement in local politics is changing. While energy was once drawn from a sectarian belief that we alone have a special relationship with God, many now want to be in the world as "the salt of the earth," sharing in the good things of their

culture and confronting the injustices around them.

Many now seem exhausted who had the privilege of knowing about God from a young age, listening to prophecy seminars, learning all about church history and

The 2025 General Conference Session comes at a pivotal moment. Adventism's claims of being universal, neutral, timeless, and unequivocal are being challenged—even by Adventists themselves.

Jesus, reciting stories from the Bible, and being actively involved in mission. They embraced a conservative texture of Adventism and saw the world church as an institution deserving of undivided loyalty because it was the church of God. But the commitment they once possessed has gradually waned. They may have been motivated by the shortness of time, but now they are visibly disoriented and increasingly disengaged. As they go through the motions, they see the

denomination's hypocrisy, intolerance, and covered-up scandals, its leaders more obsessed with retaining office than souls. All of this adds further to their disillusionment. They don't intrinsically hate God or our doctrines, but they hold significant questions. Whether we call it deconstruction, pervasive postmodern influence, or regression into worldliness, the fact is that more Adventists are openly expressing their dissatisfaction with the organized church and are openly divided over how to interpret the Bible they love. How will Adventism respond to this growing crisis of confidence?

Missional Paralysis

During a press conference announcing Nokia's acquisition by Microsoft, the Nokia CEO ended his emotional speech with a statement that left the room in silence. He said, "We didn't do anything wrong, but somehow, we lost."

Despite the widespread belief that large organizations die only because they do something wrong, companies such as Nokia and Kodak died simply because they did what they had always done. Kodak's stubborn continuation with consumables and films after digital photography became popular was suicidal. Even though someone at Kodak had invented the digital camera in 1975, the company had insisted it was in the film business, not the photo business. Kodak was being Kodak, but digital photography made it clear that what most people wanted was to easily capture their memories.

The 2025 General Conference Session comes at a pivotal moment. Adventism's claims of being universal, neutral, timeless, and unequivocal are being challenged—even by Adventists

themselves. Our perennial theological and eschatological enemies are not paying attention to our argumentative doctrinal discourses and how we challenge them publicly. Our evangelistic meetings have lost traction; attendance has plummeted even among our members.

Sadly, for a church with a militant approach to mission, we face the stark reality of missional paralysis in many places. We still publish reports of choreographed megabaptisms in some areas, but the truth is that Adventism is now a hard sell, especially in affluent and urbanized contexts. Our love for method has become the mission, making us congratulate ourselves for doing exceptionally well in what we have always done before.

But blaming contemporary culture for a declined interest in the church is like blaming the weather. As growth has plateaued in so many regions, the pressing question is: How can we adapt our methods and messages to speak to 21st-century anxieties?

Pastors in Peril

The younger generations no longer turn to pastors for answers to the questions plaguing them. Adventism's traditional Bible studies merely validate what we already know—or, at best, they creatively rework an established position.

Although younger church members grew up well-schooled in the church's doctrinal positions, today they yearn for relevance and meaning. Those who prefer a self-directed spirituality now find role models outside the church. And Google has their backs. If their local church fails them, they can find support in their social networks and online classes and get answers from internet theologians.

Thus, we should not be surprised that so many no longer regard Adventism as the one and only true church. Although believers in God and the Bible may still identify as Adventists, they increasingly find themselves relying on a no-frills, self-directed spirituality rather than one that is institutionally manipulated.

With an increasing mistrust of institutions, titles, and authority, how does the pastor genuinely dialogue without being labeled a church propagandist? Should it surprise anyone that pastors no longer recognize their place in either congregation or culture, and end up discouraged and adrift?

Leadership or “Lidship”?

As the world has become more connected, power and loyalty have shifted from institutions to networks. Having traditionally enjoyed so much trust from members, church leaders no longer hold the influence they did in previous generations. Gone are the days when they could hide behind compromised, manipulated governance processes to insulate themselves from accountability.

Unsurprisingly, then, giving patterns are changing. People prefer giving to causes rather than institutions. They want to see impact plus evidence of change as a result of their giving, rather than paying for opaque operational overheads to sustain a bloated and inefficient bureaucracy. No matter how much emphasis is placed on stewardship, leaders’ evasion of accountability fuels more suspicion and apathy.

Shall leaders continue to act like lids, ignoring calls for accountability and efficiency while covering an attitude of entitlement and self-interest that hides behind the work of God?

The White Problems

Over 70% of Adventist members reside in the Global South; however, church governance, theological priorities, and decisions remain shockingly entrenched in the Global North. Increasingly, Adventism’s claim of being politically, theologically, and eschatologically neutral or universal is being contested.

Adventism carries the frailties of its birthplace: it is American in liturgy, governance, theology, and eschatology. But in a world where the membership is demographically more southern than northern, insistence on white supremacy and Euro-American hegemony generates dissatisfaction. While leaders in Silver Spring continue to praise the apparent compliance of the “mission fields,” in fact, the silencing of other cultures in the name of homogeneity and protecting Adventist identity is repulsive.

Will the church make accommodations so that Adventism’s scholarship, governance, theological agenda, and direction more fully represent the diversity of the worldwide church?

Another, related white problem is Ellen. For over a century, she has been regarded as an end-time prophet and her writings treated as eternal and universal. There is sensitivity around opening a candid dialogue to better contextualize her in a world glaringly different from when she wrote. The problem is not Ellen White per se. Our struggle lies in being one-sided, superficial, and lacking common sense.

White is recognized as a visionary who offered new paths and perspectives that propelled the church of her time; however, as Hanz Gutierrez suggests, we have taken a reductive, preservationist approach to her legacy, using her writings only to


manage, guard, and protect Adventist dogma rather than allowing her body of work to enrich Adventism. Will we be content with using her to merely push the church backward, not forward, and to hinder creativity or experimentation?

What Next?

The 62nd General Conference Session should not be business as usual—if our leaders have been listening. Church leaders and GC Session delegates who have an ear to the ground will not be content with excitement over leadership elections, cosmetic changes to policy, and routine Church Manual updates. Bigger things are at stake.

The world that gave birth to the Adventist Church no longer exists. The denomination’s hold on her children is loosening. Adventists are more exposed to and connected with the world they had been taught to avoid. The questions we used to avoid are now returning with more nuance, dismantling our assumptions.

Theology, which we thought was rigid, neutral, and objective, is turning fluid and subjective. What was traditionally kept behind closed doors in ecclesiastical councils is now online, challenging the control that leaders once had over doctrine and their flocks. Because we are a movement that explains its genesis from the Bible, it has been easy to deem our traditions, ways, attitudes, and even policies to be the best expressions of what is biblical.

But that is not true any longer. Our danger lies in celebrating a consistency that, when looked at closely, has instead become unfaithfulness in a world that has changed. 

A SPIRIT OF LYING

BY FREDRICK A. RUSSELL

In M. Scott Peck's riveting book *People of the Lie*, he places front and center a disturbing reality: there is evil in this world. The target audience for his book was not particularly religious, although the notion of organic evil is biblical. And yet, I suspect that even the most impious would concede, if only in the abstract, that evil is present among us—and perhaps even be able to identify examples of evil littered across the annals of history.

Evil finds its origins in heaven. “Ground zero” was the heart of an angel who, ironically, stood closest to Power and Purity. Lucifer served at the very throne of God—the seat of power. And from that lofty perch, he would go on to be the archdeceiver of the world. It is incontrovertible that the closer people are to power, the more convincing their deceptions.

Out of what might be billions of angels, Lucifer was able to deceive one-third of his colleagues, who were symbolized as stars in Revelation 12:3-4. He galvanized them around a lie about God. The deceptions they swallowed were easily disprovable.

Over time (who knows how long), Lucifer seems to have had free reign in heaven to spread untruths about God's character. These untruths were not unlike

his deceitfulness in the Garden of Eden, when he suggested to Adam and Eve that God was lying to them and blocking their ability for greatness. In contravention of God's explicit command, both Eve and Adam decided to eat of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:4-5).

No doubt, Lucifer's newest lies were repeated and passed among the heavenly host. As a result, significant numbers of angels bought into the fallacies. How could this happen in a perfect environment?

A Farnam Street article titled “The Illusory Truth Effect: Why We Believe Fake News, Conspiracy Theories and Propaganda” explains: “We all have a tendency to believe something is true after being exposed to it multiple times. The more times we've heard something, the truer it seems. The effect is so powerful that repetition can persuade us to believe information we know is false in the first place.” Could this effect be what happened in heaven?

The illusory truth effect is so chaotic that the very notion of truth is at odds with itself. Notably, this is reflected in the current cultural tone in the United States. Deception by repetition has been so skillfully woven into the fabric of the national consciousness that lying has become embraced as truth, and truth is scandalized as a lie.

God was aware of Lucifer's increasing arrogance, as well as his delusional beliefs: that he could lead heaven and the universe. Lucifer's stump speech was that he could make heaven great again. How did Lucifer put it? “I will ascend to heaven and set my throne above God's stars. ... I will climb to the highest heavens and be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:13-14, NLT).

Jehovah went public. In his perfect timing, He exposed Lucifer and his fiendish plans by ousting him and his

confederates from heaven, thus forestalling that big lie from contaminating everything (Rev. 12:9). We see here that the original insurrection took place in heaven. Michael and Lucifer were the main combatants.

America is grappling with this same contamination, driven by lying and deceit. During these times of rising division and tension, it has even manifested in insurrection. Of course, there is a clear-cut difference in scale between the heavenly and January 6 insurrections, but both were grounded and driven by a lie.

Scripture does not hold back. With a clear, unmistakable declaration, God laid the blame at the feet of one creature: Satan (verses 9-10). Likewise, satanic powers are driving the lying, deception, and false accusations in the current culture. There is a consistency in how the enemy works.

The most disturbing outcome of inordinate deception is that it can cross over into demon possession. It raises the specter that what we are dealing with in our culture, and especially the political arena, is not some psychosis from would-be leaders (as some have tried to suggest), but perhaps something more sinister.

When the Bible speaks of a lying spirit (1 Kings 22:22, NKJV), it refers to a demon or spiritual being that promotes falsehood and leads people astray from truth. This is different from the temptation to lie. This is inordinate lying. It's no longer under personal discretion, but subject to the control of dark, supernatural forces. With a lying spirit upon a person, the ability to deceive not only maximizes, but metastasizes.

How can any of us become that deceived? To be sure, the explanation transcends the illusory truth effect. Scripture says that because they didn't love truth, they will be sent strong delusions

and they will believe a lie (2 Thess. 2:9-11). And there it is: to be overcome by deception requires a deliberate choice to no longer love and value truth. By default, one is no longer able to resist lies and deception. This can happen even to those who claim to be believers. The Living Bible explains it this way: "God will allow them to believe lies with all their hearts" (verse 11).

At some point, after listening to and even cheering on lies without censure, our natural defenses break down. At that point, lies are not only willingly believed, but advanced.

recognize if we view things solely through a political lens and not a spiritual one. Assessing what we see and hear from a political perspective can skew—and even cause us to deny—what is happening right before our very eyes. Spiritual things are truly spiritually discerned.

So, what are we to do with all of this? The apostle Paul provides sound counsel: "I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and


DECEPTION BY REPETITION HAS BEEN SO SKILLFULLY WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF THE NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS THAT LYING HAS BECOME EMBRACED AS TRUTH, AND TRUTH IS SCANDALIZED AS A LIE.

When leaders—those closest to the seat of power—lie with no remorse, the deception deepens and darkens. Scripture characterizes it as "spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12, KJV).

The Bible defines demonic possession as someone under the control of the father of lies. "You are the offspring of your father, the devil, and you serve your father very well, passionately carrying out his desires. He's been a murderer right from the start! He never stood with the truth, for he's full of nothing but lies—lying is his native tongue. He is master of deception and the father of lies" (John 8:44, TPT).

It's uncomfortable for any of us to consider that people we may know, and even admire, can have a spirit of lying upon them. And it is more difficult to

dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4, NLT).

Our world is entering a time of deepening darkness. The only things that will preserve us through Earth's difficult hours are a relationship with Jesus and a steady diet of his Word. David declared: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psa. 119:105, KJV). 



NEWS BRIEFS

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

Portland Embraces "Keep Adventism Weird"

PORTLAND, Ore. — Inspired by the wildly popular "Keep Portland Weird" slogan that has done wonders for the city's tourism, Portland-based Adventists have decided to promote Adventism's quirks as its best features.

"Listen, we are called to be a people set apart, so why not play up the peculiar?" said Shawn Bluntt, Keep Adventism Weird creative director. "Weird is the new wonderful!"

"This isn't exactly going to be music to the ears of our more ecumenical-minded members, but they can just take a chill pill," said General Conference President Ted Wilson, who volunteered to

chair the Keep Adventism Weird board of directors. "I tell ya, this whole 'fitting in' thing is a slippery slope. If we don't watch it, we are going to completely lose the concept of the pre-sundown Sabbath bath on Friday. I talk to Adventist academy kids about it, and most of them look at me like I'm crazy."

General Conference support has added momentum to the Keep Adventism Weird campaign, which is drawing larger and larger crowds at its weekly events.

"Who else can say that they invented cornflakes?" Bluntt hollered into a megaphone at a Saturday night rally. "Who else ignores college-level professional sports? Who else has come up with vegetarian or non-alcoholic versions of the most popular ingestibles? Who does a worse job of

celebrating Easter? Who's got bigger libraries of red books? Who else can boast such a huge network of schools in the least interesting backwaters of so many countries? Who can beat us at noncompetitive Capture the Flag?"

"NOBODY!" yelled a crowd of excited young Portlanders, dressed as if it were 1876. As Bluntt whipped the crowd into a frenzy, a huge "Keep Adventism Weird" banner unfurled from the ceiling to massive applause.

"This is the proudest night of my life," said 23-year-old Max Davis, sipping Roma at the rally's after-party. "Never again will I hide my light under a bushel. It's time for the world to see that I rock at Rook!"

Man Does Sabbath Prep in a Record 2.5 Minutes

MONTREAL — In a display of pre-Sabbath gymnastics that would make even Ellen White raise an eyebrow, local Adventist Jacque Martin has set a new personal record by showering, shaving, and changing in just 2.5 minutes before sundown last Friday.

Witnesses report that Martin, caught in a time

crunch after an urgent potluck planning meeting, moved with the speed of 40 Olympians on Red Bull. "One moment he was in his work clothes, the next he was Sabbath-ready," marveled his wife, Jane. "It was like watching a miracle unfold, if miracles smell vaguely of Old Spice and desperation."

Martin attributes his success to years of practice and a deep commitment to honoring the Sabbath. "Preparation is key," he said while frantically combing his hair, "but sometimes life throws you a curveball. Or, in this case, a fastball straight to the face."

Picking bits of shaving cream from his ear, Martin said with a chuckle that he hoped to never repeat the experience. "I'd rather not cut it that close again. However, it's good to know I can rise to the occasion, if needed."

As the sun set on another Sabbath, he settled in for a well-deserved rest, blissfully unaware that he'd put his shirt on backward and was wearing mismatched socks.

Contributors



RAJ ATTIKEN is a retired president of the Ohio Conference, now an adjunct professor at Kettering College. He and his wife,

Chandra, live near Dayton, Ohio.



JONI BELL is a contented wife and homemaker with a dodgy past as a psychiatric nurse. She divides her time between Maine and Tennessee.



DEBBIE HOOPER writes from Palm Beach in Queensland, Australia.



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

University and currently completing his PhD in New Testament at the University of Birmingham. His published works include the book *Saying No to God: A Radical Approach to Reading the Bible Faithfully* and a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha*. His website is www.theoeducation.com.



ADMIRAL NCUBE, Ph.D., is from Zimbabwe and works as a development analyst based in Botswana. He is a father of three and husband

to Margret.



LINDSEY ABSTON PAINTER is an *Adventist Today* writer and editor. She lives in northern California, where she

is the director of social

services at a skilled nursing facility.



RANDI ROBERTSON is an aerospace leader, educator, and consultant who currently works at JetBlue Airlines as an academic instructor and

first officer. Her experience includes 22 years as a United States Air Force officer and pilot, plus over eight years in civil aviation.



FREDRICK A. RUSSELL, a former pastor and conference president, is currently the founder and principal of the True North Leadership

Group, LLC, in Atlanta.



LOREN SEIBOLD is the executive editor of *Adventist Today*.



CHRISTOPHER C. THOMPSON is a pastor and author living in Beaufort, South Carolina.

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In a significant move this fall, the General Conference enacted a policy item that prohibits church employees from sharing information with independent Adventist media outlets. This restriction means that dedicated workers—from pastors to administrators—risk their positions if they communicate with publications such as *Adventist Today* about church developments.

Why This Matters

At a time when open dialogue about our faith community is essential, this policy creates a concerning barrier between church happenings and members' awareness. Our commitment to providing accessible, independent journalism has never been more critical.

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For decades, we've served as your trusted source for open and thoughtful coverage of Adventist news and perspectives. Our approach emphasizes candid, direct reporting and commentary that builds trust through honest communication. Our global reach now extends to diverse communities worldwide, with our popular Aunt Sevvy column drawing half of its questions from the Global South.

A Note of Gratitude

Your support fuels our determination to pursue truth, especially when powerful institutions attempt to limit the flow of information. In these challenging times, your trust and engagement empower us to maintain our independent voice. Together, we prove that honest journalism and open dialogue remain vital forces in our faith community.

BJÖRN KARLMAN
Executive Director of *Adventist Today*

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