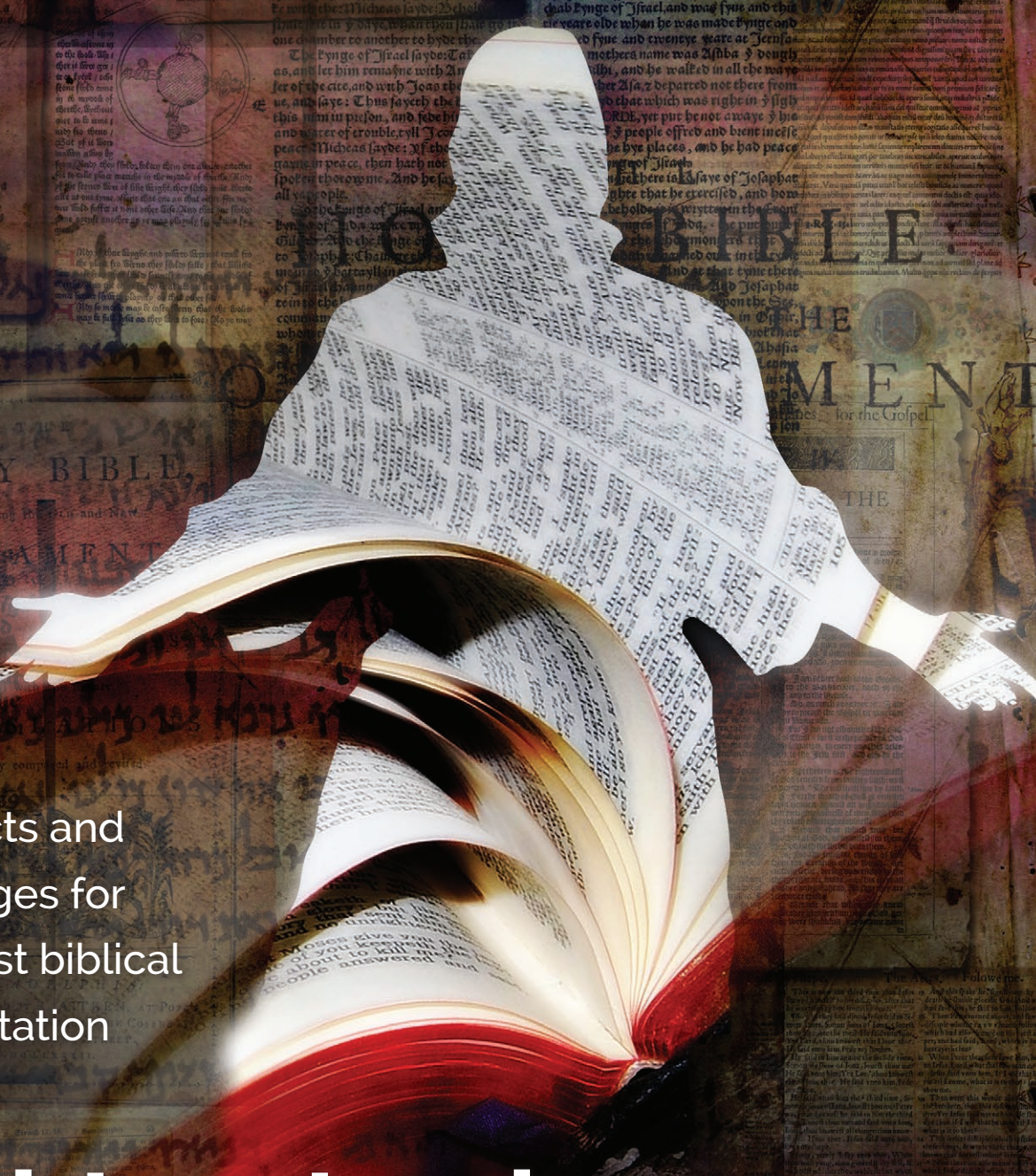


MINISTRY[®]

INTERNATIONAL

JOURNAL FOR PASTORS

DECEMBER 2012



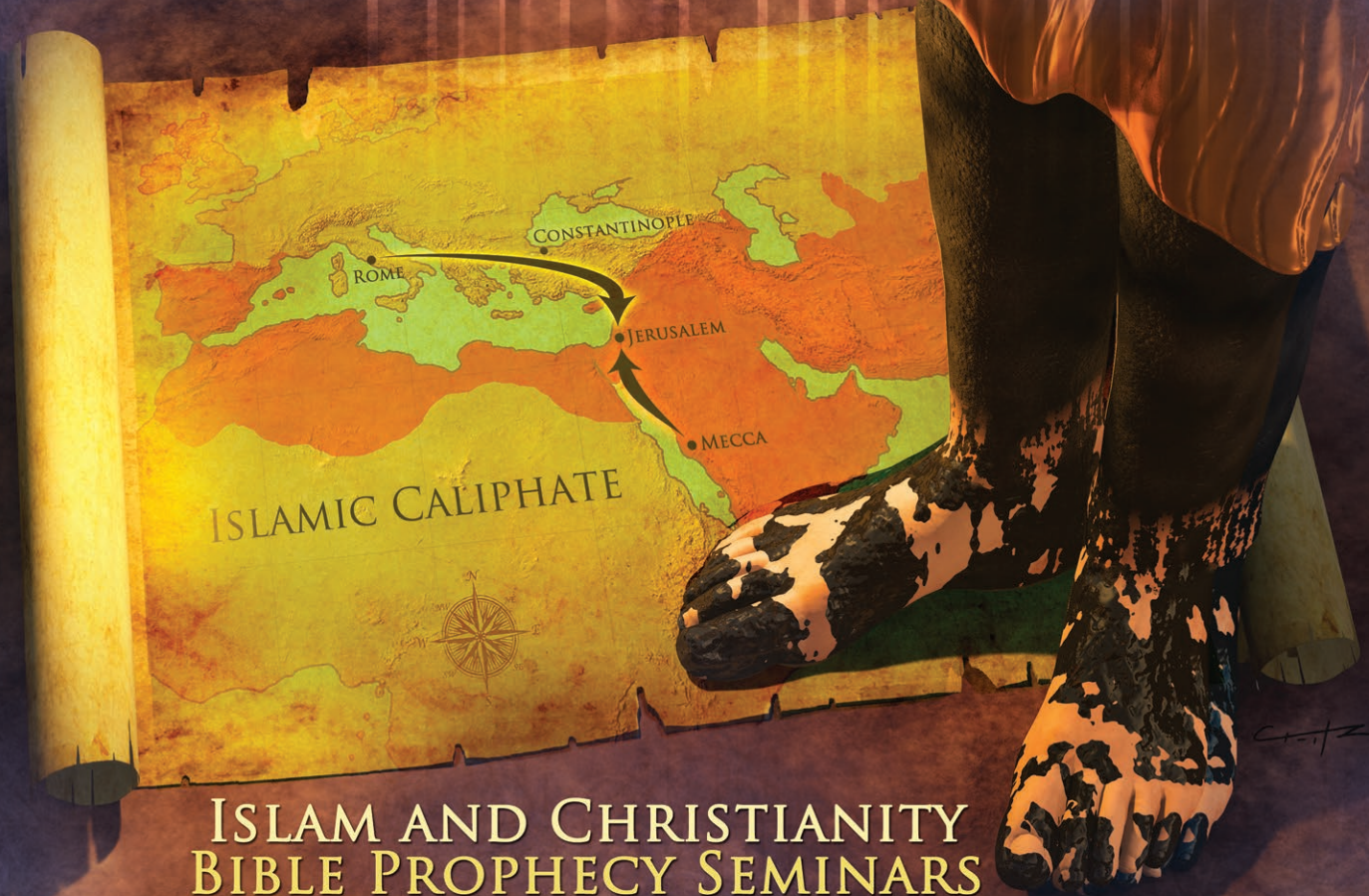
Prospects and challenges for Adventist biblical interpretation

Christ-centered hermeneutics

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International Journal for Pastors
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316 Creative

LAYOUT

316 Creative

SUBSCRIPTIONS

12 issues: United States US\$32.99;
Canada and overseas US\$47.00.
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monthly since 1928 by the *Minis-
terial Association, General Confer-
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PRINTER Pacific Press® Pub. Assn.,
1350 N. Kings Rd., Nampa, ID 83687
Standard mail postage paid at Nampa,
Idaho. (ISSN 0026-5314)

Member of Associated Church Press.
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Vol. 84 Number 12 © 2012

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



“AS WE SEEK TO FEED, GUIDE, AND PROTECT THE FLOCK, WE SHOULD STILL RELATE WITH LOVE AND HUMILITY TOWARD THESE FALSE TEACHERS.”

Biblical spirituality

The August 2012 issue of *Ministry* answered some questions I have had on the subject of spiritual formation. The excellent article by Stanley E. Patterson (“My Quest for Biblical Spirituality”) was most impressive. I wish that all conference administrators and ministerial secretaries would read and digest those wise words. If only these leaders would give pastors the space to let the Spirit work, if only pastors would be affirmed more and compared less to others, the work would advance with greater enthusiasm. Patterson’s article shows how being treated as an employee, a “hireling,” results in “transactional behavior—minimal contribution, marginal commitment, and low creativity.” I truly endorse his statement, “The pastor doesn’t work for money—the pastor is given money so he can work!”

—Gloria Josiah, St. Croix

I thank Jerry N. Page for his words of counsel to us (“Strategies for a False Teaching”—August 2012). It reminded me of how often as ministers we have handled false teachings within our congregations. Sometimes we create more mess while trying to solve the issues related to such teachings. At times, a spirit of

love and humility of our Lord towards the teachers themselves is lacking. All of the five strategies shared in this article are clear. May the Holy Spirit guide and redirect our focus on them. As we seek to feed, guide, and protect the flock, we should still relate with love and humility toward these false teachers. They, too, need salvation.

—Halerimaana Naphutali, pastor, Uganda

Mark Finley’s article (“Biblical Spirituality: Rediscovering Our Biblical Roots or Embracing the East?”—August 2012) was the best I have seen on this issue. One minor point needing clarification was: “The idea of ‘the god within’ comes directly from Eastern mysticism.” While that is true, it also comes directly from the Bible. Jesus who is God does dwell in us through the Holy Spirit. The difference is that He is in us for the purpose of working out His will through us. We do not pray to the God in us; we pray to “our Father who is in heaven” to forgive us, protect us, and empower us. We pray to Him in order to invite Him to live in us. I know that the author believes that; I just felt it should be clarified a little more. Again, great job and badly needed.

—Jac Colón, retired evangelist

Third International Bible Conference

I was quite disappointed in the article reporting the International Bible Conference that was supposedly devoted to biblical anthropology (October 2012). Contrary to the title statement about *breaking new ground*, it merely restated historic positions. The five “ground breakers” had nothing to do with the Bible or anthropology. What interested me was what the conference chose *not* to discuss, that being the role of women in the church from the aspect of biblical anthropology. At a time when our church is embroiled and potentially divided over this issue, why did this remain the elephant in the room no one wanted to address? The question might have been asked, *Does gender play a role in the effective proclamation of the gospel?*

In elementary education we have only recently come to realize that gender plays a role in learning, and if we feel it is necessary to teach boys and girls differently because they “hear” and “learn” differently, maybe evangelism would also be more effective if it were presented by both women and men, with both on equal footing. Would biblical anthropologists like to tackle this possibility?

—Carlyle Welch



The truth about Jesus

Distinguished Harvard Divinity School professor Karen King has caused quite a media stir with her comments regarding a recently translated codex fragment, which she refers to as *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife*. King has carefully examined this small fragment (12 partial lines) that includes the words "Jesus said to them, 'My wife. . .'"¹ Written in Coptic, it may date from the fourth century A.D., though some have suggested that this is a copy of an older book, perhaps written in the late second century.

Is the fragment genuine? Gary Manning Jr. from the Talbot School of Theology makes this observation: "It's too early to tell. When manuscripts are discovered, it usually takes some time of examination and scholarly vetting before forgeries are discovered. There are some concerns about *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife's* unknown provenance and history of ownership, but the initial reports make it seem likely that this is a real fourth-century Gnostic document. That doesn't mean that the document is true or has anything to do with Jesus!"² He continues, "Since Gnostics weren't around until the second century, and Gnostics are notorious for making up sayings of Jesus, this tells us absolutely nothing about the real Jesus. . . . You can bet that this important fact will be overlooked or downplayed when you see it on the cover of new magazines or watch the forthcoming Smithsonian documentary."³

People seemingly have an ongoing fascination with the latest "news" about Jesus. Did Jesus father a child with Mary Magdalene? Was Judas the real hero in the gospel story? Did Jesus succumb to His last great temptation?

This season of the year provides a unique opportunity for each one of us to share the teaching of the Scriptures regarding the life and mission of Jesus. He certainly made some startling declarations about Himself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).⁴ "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live" (John 11:25).

The apostle John was an eyewitness of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and he provided this firsthand testimony: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1–3).

John shared his testimony about Jesus for two vital reasons: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31); "And these things we write to you that your joy may be full" (1 John 1:4).


Knowing the truth about Jesus brings abundant joy and life in all its fullness. The goal is not simply longevity, even for eternity, but a joyful life both now and forever in a loving

relationship with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus declared, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

Frank Hasel reminds us in this current issue of *Ministry* that the truth about Jesus is clearly revealed in the Bible. We don't have to speculate about Jesus. Nor should we. "God has arranged to use His Holy Spirit to lead us to the Living Word (Jesus Christ) through the Written Word (Holy Scriptures). . . . The Bible is the source that tells us all

WE DON'T HAVE
TO SPECULATE
ABOUT JESUS.

about Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Scriptures we have learned to know and love Him (1 Pet. 1:8)."

In the midst of current speculations and fanciful suppositions, let's take every opportunity, especially during this Christmas season, to share the truth about Jesus. There is no better way to share the joy that comes from above. 

1 King's findings and conclusions will be published in the January 2013 issue of the *Harvard Theological Review*.

2 <http://thebookblog.com/2012/sep/19/did-jesus-have-a-wife-a-new-gnostic-fragment/>.

3 Ibid.

4 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

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Christ-centered hermeneutics:

Prospects and challenges for Adventist biblical interpretation

In recent times some theologians have proposed a Christological approach to biblical hermeneutics; where Jesus Christ, the gospel, the message of justification by faith, or some other central theme of Scripture becomes a key for interpreting the Bible.¹ This approach seems attractive for several reasons. Jesus is central for our salvation and faith. Why shouldn't Jesus be central for our understanding of Scripture as well? Isn't this commanded by Scripture itself and practiced by the Gospel writers and the apostles who present Jesus as the explanation of the Old Testament (cf. Luke 24:27, 44, 45; John 5:39ff.; Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 1:20; 3:14–16; Gal. 3:24; Col. 1:25–2:3)? Isn't Jesus the One who unites both Old and New Testaments? Doesn't Jesus have priority over the Bible because He is *the* revelation of God? Furthermore, would a Christ-centered hermeneutic not dispel any charges of being sectarian by having Christ firmly established

as the interpretative key for the understanding of Scripture?²

We cannot understand some of the issues involved in gospel-centered hermeneutics without looking first to Martin Luther, who has left us a lasting legacy with this approach.

Martin Luther and his Christological hermeneutics

Martin Luther, while affirming the authority of Scripture and heralding the *sola scriptura* norm, also proposed another hermeneutical principle that can be termed the "Christological principle." This principle has been instrumental in bringing about a subtle, yet significant shift in the understanding of theological authority and the hermeneutics of the Bible. While affirming the divine authority of Scripture and the priority of the Bible over church tradition, Luther's theological authority was closely connected to his understanding of the gospel. For Luther, it was Christ and the gospel of justification

by faith alone, to which Scripture attests, that constituted the theological *center* of Scripture and thus ultimately its final authority.

Here Luther's famous preface to the epistle of James comes to mind where he claims that whatever does not point to Christ or draws out Christ is not apostolic, even though Peter or Paul would teach it. On the other hand, whatever "drives home" Christ is apostolic, even though it would come from Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod.³ Thus, for Luther the *content* of Scripture is Christ, and from this fact, he seems to repeatedly assign its authority. All Scripture revolves around Him as its authentic center. This "Christological concentration" can be seen as the decisive element in Luther's interpretation and use of Scripture.⁴ Thus, Luther actually contended not "for the primacy of Scripture in the strict sense, but for the primacy of the gospel to which Scripture attests and hence for the primacy of Scripture as the attestation to the

gospel.”⁵ Luther valued the Bible “because it is the cradle that holds Christ. For this reason, the gospel of justification by grace through faith served as Luther’s hermeneutical key to Scripture.”⁶ If Scripture does not refer to Christ, it must not be held to be true Scripture.⁷ Luther’s understanding of the gospel became the basis for determining the relative authority of the various canonical writings.⁸ If Scripture is queen, Christ is King—even over Scripture!⁹ This means that if a passage of Scripture seems to be in conflict with Luther’s Christ-centered interpretation, his interpretation becomes “gospel-centered criticism of Scripture.”¹⁰

Christ and Scripture can be set over against each other because Luther ultimately *ranked* the personal Word (Christ), the spoken Word (gospel), and the Written Word (Scripture). Such ranking leads to a canon within the canon, which compromises the strength of the Scripture principle, where Scripture is the sole source of its own exposition. For “if Scripture is interpreted either by a doctrinal center or by a tradition it is no longer Scripture that is interpreting itself—rather it is we who are interpreting Scripture by means of a doctrine or tradition, to which Scripture is in practice, being subjected.”¹¹ Thus, it is not surprising that Luther’s Christological method “sharpened into a tool of theological criticism”¹² where ultimately the interpreter becomes the judge and stands above Scripture. The irony of this theological criticism is that it is done in the name of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

The relationship between Christ and the Bible

Eventually, the issue in any gospel-centered hermeneutic boils down to the issue of the proper relationship between Christ and the Bible. Of course, Jesus Christ is central to our redemption. Without Him we could not and would not be saved. This we gladly acknowledge and grasp by faith. Christ Himself showed the disciples how Scripture pointed to

Him (Luke 24:25–27). Scripture testifies about Christ (John 5:39). But the decisive question is: How are we to understand the relationship between Christ and Scripture?

The living and speaking God of Scripture has chosen to reveal Himself through the Word. God has seen it fit to commit His spoken word through the biblical authors to the medium of writing, thus generating the Bible, the Written Word of God. It seems that one has to believe Scripture before one can believe the Christ of Scripture. The Word Incarnate (Jesus Christ) cannot be separated from the Word inscripturated (Holy Scripture). Jesus Himself turned to Scripture to make Himself known. When He met the disciples on the way to Emmaus, He began “with Moses and all the Prophets” and explained to them “what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27, NIV). Later that night, Jesus again pointed to Scripture when He made it clear to the disciples that everything written about Him “in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (v. 44, NIV) must be fulfilled. “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (v. 45, NIV). Without Scripture providing a reliable account of Jesus’ ministry and death, the gospel of Christ would not be known to us and be of little use.

Jesus Himself repeatedly referred to Scripture as authoritative norm for faith and practice. He asked the lawyer, “‘What is written in the Law? . . . How do you read it?’” (Luke 10:26, NIV). When the lawyer cited Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus commended him for having answered correctly (v. 28). In similar fashion, Jesus made the same point: “‘Have you never read in the Scriptures’ ”? (Matt. 21:42, NIV); “‘Haven’t you read . . . ?’ ” (Matt. 12:3, 5, NIV; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3); “‘Let the reader understand’ ” (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). Whether Jesus spoke to scribes or common people, He always assumed the full authority of all of Scripture. For Jesus,

Scripture was the sole authoritative source whereby we can discriminate between right and wrong. When Jesus said in Matthew 5:21, 22, “‘You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you . . . ’” (NIV), He did not discredit the authority of Scripture nor did He put up His word over, against, and in contradiction to the words of Scripture. He did not abolish Scripture but rather intensified what God had committed in His Written Word. In fact, He Himself abode by Scripture. Jesus quoted the Scriptures and referred to Scripture, rather than His personal word, to refute the devil during His temptation (cf. Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). Speaking about the proper faith response to Him as Messiah, He said, “‘Whoever believes in me, as *the Scripture has said*, streams of living water will flow from within him’ ” (John 7:38, NIV; emphasis added). Scripture authenticated Jesus as the Christ. When Scripture is not the context for an understanding of Jesus Christ, Jesus becomes the pretext for judging Scripture. Never do we find Jesus criticizing parts of Scripture. Neither do we find the apostles doing so. Not once do they insinuate that parts of Scripture are not trustworthy or lack divine authority. Jesus does not abrogate the Law and the Prophets; He upholds them. Can we be more Christian than Christ Himself? Can we be more apostolic than the apostles?

Symphonic theological perspectives or monophonic theological center?

We have to carefully distinguish between a central theme in Scripture and postulating a theological center that functions as a hermeneutical key whereby other portions and statements of Scripture are relegated to a secondary or inferior status. A theological center that functions as a hermeneutical key leads to a canon within the canon that does not do justice to the fullness, richness, breadth, and scope of divine truth as we find it in all of Scripture.

A monophonic center leads to a criticism of the content of Scripture. To postulate a “gospel-hermeneutic” where Jesus Christ functions as hermeneutical key for the interpretation of Scripture, is reductionistic. The biblical material is too rich and multifaceted to limit it to one theme or center. Rather than a monophonic center, the Bible presents us with a more encompassing “symphonic” theological perspective.¹³

To the perennial question as to what constitutes the central element of Scripture, we respond by posing

in Scripture, such as the plan of redemption: “The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God. From the first intimation of hope in the sentence pronounced in Eden to that last glorious promise of the Revelation, ‘They shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads’ (Revelation 22:4), the burden of every book and every passage of the Bible is the unfolding of this won-

Scripture: “The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. . . . Every part of the Bible is given by inspiration of God and is profitable. The Old Testament no less than the New should receive attention. As we study the Old Testament we

ONLY A SYMPHONIC READING OF THE WHOLE BIBLE WILL
DO JUSTICE TO THE MULTIPLEX PHENOMENA OF SCRIPTURE
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another question: “Where does one find the central point of a symphony or play? Of course there are central themes, but no single point can be taken as the center, unless it be the unity of the whole.”¹⁴ We need to allow Scripture in its entirety (*tota scriptura*), in all its multifaceted voices and genres to reveal the richness and depth of God’s wisdom to us. To insist on Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) is more than giving Scripture primacy over other sources in theology. *Sola scriptura* affirms that Scripture is the sole source of its own exposition. This makes Scripture foundational for theology. Only a symphonic reading of the whole Bible will do justice to the multiplex phenomena of Scripture under the unifying guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Ellen G. White and Christological hermeneutics

Does Ellen White advocate a Christological hermeneutic? A close reading of her writings reveals that she acknowledges central themes

drous theme, — man’s uplifting, — the power of God, ‘which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’ ” (1 Cor. 15:57).¹⁵

Similarly she writes: “The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. I present before you the great, grand monument of mercy and regeneration, salvation and redemption—the Son of God uplifted on the cross. This is to be the foundation of every discourse given by our ministers.”¹⁶

A careful reading of Ellen White’s literature reveals, however, that central themes are never used by her as a hermeneutical key whereby she criticizes Scripture and relegates some parts of the Bible as more inspired than others. Notice how she mentions a great central theme and in one breath also affirms that all Scripture is inspired and that Scripture should be compared with

shall find living springs bubbling up where the careless reader discerns only a desert.”¹⁷


Ellen White did not mean to separate Christ from the Scriptures.¹⁸ When she wrote: “the sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster,”¹⁹ she was not proposing a theological center that would function as a tool for theological criticism, a canon within the canon, whereby important statements of Scripture can be distinguished from allegedly less important passages or even wrong teachings. Rather “every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, is to be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary.”²⁰ And even where she describes “Christ as the living center”²¹ who unites the biblical doctrines, she at once affirms “the truth for this time is broad in its outlines, far reaching, embracing many doctrines.”²² While Christ certainly remains central to Ellen White and her religious thought,²³ she never ceases to emphasize that all of Scripture is to be followed

and that no part of Scripture is to be neglected. In this sense, Ellen White can affirm the centrality of certain biblical themes without denigrating other parts of Scripture as unimportant. According to her, no one has the right to judge Scripture by selecting those passages that are deemed more important than others. She writes: "Do not let any living man come to you and begin to dissect God's Word, telling what is revelation, what is inspiration and what is not, without a rebuke. . . . We want no one to say, 'This I will reject, and this will I receive,' but *we want to have implicit faith in the Bible as a whole and as it is.*"²⁴ To use Ellen White in support of a Christological hermeneutic, where Christ or the gospel functions as a hermeneutical key, is to misuse her and to distort her numerous clear statements to the contrary.

Conclusion

God has arranged to use His Holy Spirit to lead us to the Living Word (Jesus Christ) through the Written Word (Holy Scriptures). This shows how God in His wisdom has chosen to make His revelation universally available. Scripture is central to our faith and devotion to God because there is no other witness to Jesus Christ than the Written Word of God. We have no other Christ than the One the biblical writers present to us. Submitting to Jesus Christ, the living Lord entails our faithful submission to the Written Word of God. This is what Jesus did. Individually as well as corporately, we stand under the authority of Scripture because Jesus is known authoritatively only by Scripture. We do not worship paper and ink or idolize a book, but simply acknowledge that the Bible is the source that tells us all about Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Scriptures we have learned to know and love Him (1 Pet. 1:8).

To say so is not bibliolatry but Christianity in its most authentic form. The Spirit of Christ who

indwells Christians never leads them to doubt, criticize, go beyond, or fall short of Bible teaching. The Holy Spirit never draws us away from the Written Word, any more than from the Living Word. Instead, He keeps us in constant, conscious, and willing submission to both together. *Sola scriptura* without Christ is empty, but Christ without Scripture, whose Son is He? Without Scripture we would not know Jesus as the Messianic Christ and He could not be our Savior. Thus, our loyalty to the Bible is part of our loyalty to Christ. We do not need our human criticism of Scripture—not even in the name of Christ!—but the critical examination of ourselves, the church, and all other areas by Scripture, for which the biblical text alone is divinely fitted. 

- 1 See Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); Siegfried Zimmer, *Schadet die Bibelwissenschaft dem Glauben? Klärung eines Konflikts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Rolf J. Pöhler, "Die Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben als hermeneutisches Prinzip: Christologische Schriftauslegung und adventistische Theologie," *Spes Christiana* 11 (2000): 46–60 and idem., "Does Adventist Theology Have, or Need, a Unifying Center?" in *Christ, Salvation, and the Eschaton: Essays in Honor of Hans K. LaRondelle*, eds. Daniel Heinz, Jiri Moskala, and Peter M. van Bemmelen (Berrien Springs, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2009), 205–220. See also Frank M. Hasel, "Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 27–46, esp. 40–43 for a brief critical engagement with gospel-centered hermeneutics.
- 2 It seems as if Norman Gulley favored a Christological arrangement of biblical faith for this very reason (see Norman R. Gulley, "Toward a Christ-Centered Expression of Faith," *Ministry* 70, no. 3 (1997), 24–27).
- 3 *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), vol. 35, 396 (hereinafter *LW*); and *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Deutsche Bibel* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1906), vol. 7, 385 (hereinafter *WADB*).
- 4 Cf. Frank M. Hasel, *Scripture in the Theologies of W. Pannenberg and D. G. Bloesch: An Investigation and Assessment of Its Origin, Nature and Use*, European University Studies, Series XXIII Theology, vol. 555 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 44–46.
- 5 Grenz, 57, 58.
- 6 Grenz, 58.
- 7 Cf. *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883–1983), vol. 18, 607 (hereinafter *WA*); *LW* 34:112 (*Theses Concerning Faith and Law*).
- 8 Luther called the book of James "an epistle of straw," meaning it is an empty, useless, worthless epistle, because he could not find Christ and the gospel of justification by faith alone in the book of James with his emphasis on the importance of works. Cf. Martin Luther, "Preface to the New

- Testament" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 117.
- 9 In his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*, while replying to opponents who adduce biblical passages stressing works and merits, Luther emphasized the following point: "You are stressing the servant, that is Scripture—and not all of it at that or even its most powerful part, but only a few passages concerning works. I leave this servant to you. I for my part stress the Lord, who is the King of Scripture" (*LW* 26, 295; *WA* 40, 1, 459, 14–16). In the same year, Luther again underscored Scripture's servant status relative to Christ when he wrote: "Briefly, Christ is Lord, not the servant, the Lord of the Sabbath, of law, and of all things. The Scriptures must be understood in favour of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures. . . . Therefore, if the adversaries press the Scriptures against Christ, we urge Christ against the Scriptures. We have the Lord, they have the servants; we have the Head, they the feet or members, over which the head necessarily dominates and takes precedence. If one of them had to be parted with, Christ or the law, the law would have to be let go, not Christ. For if we have Christ, we can easily establish laws and we shall judge all things rightly. Indeed, we would make new decalogues, as Paul does in all the epistles, and Peter, but above all Christ in the gospel" (*LW* 34, 112, 40–53).
 - 10 Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 81.
 - 11 Brian Gaybba, *The Tradition: An Ecumenical Breakthrough?* (Rome: Herder, 1971), 221.
 - 12 Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 24.
 - 13 Cf. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987).
 - 14 William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 19.
 - 15 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1952), 125, 126.
 - 16 White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1948), 315.
 - 17 White, *Education*, 190, 191.
 - 18 "Her emphasis on the fact that Christ is the Author and culmination of divine revelation does not lead Ellen White to deny or downplay the crucial role of the Holy Scriptures as a revelation from God." Peter van Bemmelen, "Revelation and Inspiration," in Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 55.
 - 19 White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), 190.
 - 20 *Ibid.*; emphasis added.
 - 21 White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), vol. 2, 87 (hereinafter *SM*).
 - 22 *Ibid.*; emphasis added.
 - 23 Cf. her statement that "of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world" (*Evangelism*, 188). See also the valuable study by Peter van Bemmelen, "The Matchless Charms of Christ": Theological Significance of This Phrase in Ellen White's Writings," in Daniel Heinz et al., eds., *Christ, Salvation, and the Eschaton: Essays in Honor of Hans K. LaRondelle*, 231–240.
 - 24 White, Manuscript 13, 1888, as quoted in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1980), 7:919; emphasis added; similarly she writes: "Many professed ministers of the gospel do not accept the whole Bible as the inspired word. One wise man rejects one portion; another questions another part. They set up their judgement as superior to the word; and the Scripture which they do teach, rests upon their own authority. Its divine authenticity is destroyed." White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941), 39; cf. also idem., *SM*, 1:17, 42, 245; and idem., *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1946), 5:700, 701; 8:319.

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Getting **Straight Bs**

I recall the year our son started the second grade. As parents, we were beaming with pride as he brought home straight *As* every week. He told me, “Daddy, I don’t want to get anything below an *A*.” My wife and I told him how happy we were that he wanted to do his best and get all *As*, but we also said that as long as he does his best, we will be happy—even if he brings home a scary *B*.

All this discussion on grades made me think about what a church needs to be healthy and grow for Jesus Christ. An elder at my previous church taught me that a church needs to bring home straight *Bs*. For a church to reflect Jesus to the world, it needs three *Bs* in the right order: *belong*, *believe*, and *behave*.

Consider Jesus interacting with two people in the Bible and how He emphasized the correct order of the three *Bs*. This gives us a model of how we should interact with people, whether strangers or friends.

John 4: The woman at the well

Belong. A Samaritan woman came to a well for water near noon-time. She noticed Jesus resting by the well and He startled her when He asked her for a drink (John 4:10). Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman even though He was a Jew. By this interaction, He showed her that she belonged, even though many thought Samaritans were to be shunned.

Believe. Jesus revealed to the Samaritan woman that He cared about her even though she was not a Jew. He also revealed to her that He knew about all her past relationships. Even though her moral and spiritual record was far from satisfactory, and indeed she was living a sinful life, Jesus offered her salvation by inviting her to believe in Him as the Christ (vv. 21–26).

Behave. The woman’s behavior changed, and she began to tell others about Jesus. This woman, who came to the well at midday to avoid being noticed by others, now talked to everyone she met in town. She invited the whole town to come and meet this Man that she believed could be the Christ (vv. 28–30). From hiding in the noon-day sun, she went out to bring others to meet God’s Son. John does not tell us what exactly happened in her future relationships, but we can see a change in her behavior to others immediately after Jesus helped her know that she belonged and she believed in Him (v. 39).

Luke 19: Zacchaeus the tax collector

Belong. Crowds of people followed Jesus as He walked through Jericho, then suddenly Jesus noticed a short fellow up on a tree. Jesus not only told Zacchaeus to come down, but He invited Himself to his home for a visit (Luke 19:5). Jesus chose to associate with

someone who, like the Samaritan woman, was largely rejected by the Jewish community. Jesus showed Zacchaeus that he belonged by going to the tax collector’s home. Zacchaeus belonged even before he changed his behavior (v. 8).

Believe. Luke does not share with us the conversation at Zacchaeus’s house. But it becomes obvious to the reader that Zacchaeus had accepted Jesus and His teaching. He believed in Jesus’ message, and Christ said that the tax collector, Zacchaeus, became a saved son of Abraham (vv. 9, 10).

Behave. Zacchaeus promised to change his way of dealing with people and money (v. 8). He planned on giving half of his possessions to the poor and to give back quadruple money to anyone he had cheated. This 180-degree turnaround for the crooked tax collector did not happen until Jesus called Zacchaeus down from the tree, out of the crowd, and showed Zacchaeus that he belonged by choosing to go to his house.

Believing and behaving: The link

Believing and behaving are closely linked in the newcomer as can be seen in the stories of the woman at the well and Zacchaeus. The problem comes when the church and its members force or expect new folks to believe a certain set of beliefs and behave a certain way before helping them feel like they belong.

This idea of belonging is not about church membership. Membership should come later. This is about helping new people who are seemingly different from us and desperate for connection, to feel and know that they can belong even the first time they come to our church.

I have seen some people baptized into the church, and yet they do not feel like they belong among the community of members. They stand off to the side at church events. They may sit in the back pew of the church. They are waiting for someone in the church to include them, to help them know that they belong. Even newly baptized believers, who accepted the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit to change their lives, end up leaving the church if they do not feel a sense of connection with members.

How does my church get the Bs in the right order?

Model. Begin with the pastor. Members need to see the pastor being warm and welcoming to all newcomers. The pastor must make it a priority at church to visit with the new folks who come. The members must also see their pastor making connections with the community outside the church. The pastor can present the idea of belonging from the pulpit, in bulletin correspondence, committee meetings, and casual conversation. Members must learn that Jesus used this method to approach people.

It only takes a few. In Revelation 4 and 5, the choir keeps growing. First, the four living creatures start to praise God (4:8). Then the 24 elders sing (4:9–11). Suddenly, all the angels join in (5:11, 12). Finally, the whole creation praises God (5:13).

This pattern will help a church change its thinking and practice regarding new faces in the church. The pastor has to help the elders and church board capture the vision of belonging the first time a newcomer visits the church. From there the greeters need to be trained in helping new people feel like they just came home from a long trip the first time

they walk through the church doors. Slowly, the whole congregation will witness the idea in action and eventually will accept it. Finally, a church that “gets it” can share the idea with other churches.

Work patiently. From the time I understood the gospel message to the day of my baptism took nearly four years. The Lord had a lot of work to do with me, and this took time. Churches need to remember that the Lord continues to work with new people. Lasting changes in one’s behavior oftentimes happen gradually. Drastic, sudden changes usually do not last and people fall back into their old ways. Jesus is patient with us, so we should be patient with others as well (2 Pet. 3:9).

What should a pastor do if someone in the church resists and wants to continue to use the backwards model of Behave, Believe, and then Belong? The pastor should work with them. Ignoring those in opposition works about as well in a church as ignoring cancer does in a body. As difficult as it may be, the pastor should sit down and listen to the opposition’s complaints. The pastor can then share victory stories of how people have joined the faith because of the method of helping people belong first. The point? Address those who disagree with the plan. Do not ignore.

Practical ideas to implement the model

When good things happen in the church unintentionally, we consider this a great event. Sometimes a church will get this idea of belonging first and make it happen without a real plan of action. But those churches are rare. If pastors want their churches to be safe places for newcomers to feel they belong, then a plan becomes necessary. Every church is different, but here are some practical ideas that have worked in churches in the past.

Organize shepherd groups. These are small groups intended to work with a member, with a shepherd overseeing the group. Each shepherd has no more than ten family units in

his or her “flock.” The shepherd must stay in contact with the members by phone, email, cards, and face-to-face visits. This builds connections among members, and newcomers can be placed in shepherd groups that have already learned how to help people feel connected.

Community outreach events are crucial to the Belong, Believe, and Behave model. The days of “doing” church and hoping people will show up are over, if they ever truly existed. Relying solely on a five-week evangelistic campaign to make connections in the community is also not as effective without community outreach. Events throughout the year give newcomers a chance to come to church and see if they belong.

My church has tried several different events in the community to invite people to attend. Each church and community is different, and great success in outreach events usually comes after trial and error, failure and success. My church started having a Halloween alternative on October 31 for our community. Every Sabbath School room and even the hallways were decorated as Bible stories. As the children went around collecting treats, they also learned about the truths of the Bible by hearing stories and doing fun activities. They threw beanbags at a giant cutout of Goliath, crawled through a whalelike Jonah, and knocked over the Tower of Babel. One key to the event was that everything was free: the rides, the treats, and even the food were all free (donations were accepted). The members who helped were trained to make sure everyone had fun and felt like they belonged. We have had hundreds of people from the community attend this event every year and they walk away knowing that, at our church, everyone belongs.

Inviting community people to events for which they have no interest amounts to a lot of work for little return. When choosing outreach events, the church must find a felt need that already exists and fill that need. Community people begin to think about God and religion during

Christmas and Easter each year. Those are excellent times to invite people to free events where they can learn about Jesus and feel like they belong.

December can be cold, but newcomers, at a Nativity display, can sip hot chocolate while we visit with them and show that they belong. During the Easter week, many people go to church Wednesday night, Thursday night, Friday night, and Sunday morning. This seems like a perfect opportunity to offer an outreach event like a mini-Passion play on the Saturday of Easter weekend. If your community has parades over the Fourth of July, enter a float in the parade. Make the float about Jesus and make it fun. The float can even advertise the biblical truth that with Jesus everyone belongs (maybe build the scene of Zacchaeus on the tree). Have members walk alongside the float and invite parade onlookers to a pancake breakfast, health seminar, or family fun day in the park.

The ideas and opportunities are endless. Step one includes training

the members to help newcomers feel like they belong. Step two is creating opportunities for members to meet new people. When presented with Bible truth, God will convict newcomers' hearts, and they will believe. Behavior will then change in time, but the first step is helping people find a connection and know they belong.

Conclusion

When I first headed down the road of becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, He did not meet me at the start of the journey with a list of beliefs. The Lord did not give me a lecture about the mess I had made of my life and scold me about behaviors that needed changing (and there were many). First, Jesus helped me realize that I belonged. I belonged to Him. In time I learned to believe in His love and plan to save me. That belief eventually helped me to sense that a change was needed in my life. Then I allowed the Holy Spirit to change my behavior.

I believed the message before I had ever met a member of a church because I was watching sermons on videotape. I finally decided I should try going to church. Everyone noticed me as I strolled into the foyer with my long hair and leather coat. I did not blend in with the crowd. However, that small church in the Midwest loved me into the church. They made me feel like I belonged, even with my unusual look and behavior. They encouraged me to come back and meet their pastor. The pastor contacted me, and we began studying. There were many things in my life that needed changing, but the pastor did not focus on them. He befriended me and taught me about Jesus, and I learned that I belonged to Christ.

God is still working with me. He is still teaching me what to believe. He is still changing my behavior to be more like Christ. I am a pastor today because I believed the message and God changed my behavior, but it all started with God and His people helping me to know that I belong. ❧

Additional church growth resources

1. *Becoming a Contagious Christian* by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Willow Creek Resources, 1994).

This book provides ideas about how to make a difference in the world around us. It begins by going through the reasoning why Christians should reach out to others. The authors give practical strategies for how to move conversations toward spiritual matters and how to connect with people who are unchurched.

2. *Christ's Method Alone—Christ's Way of Relational Witnessing* by Philip G. Samaan (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2012).

Dr. Samaan builds off the Ellen White quote that Jesus Christ's

method of connecting with people is the best way to make a difference in someone's life. Jesus did not shun people. He mixed with the masses. He reached across cultural and societal barriers to help people know they belonged first. Jesus met their needs and showed compassion, then asked people to follow Him. Dr. Samaan's book illustrates that Jesus believed in the three *Bs*—Belong, Believe, and Behave.

3. *Christ's Way of Reaching People* by Philip G. Samaan (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1990).

This book also emphasizes that if we want to reach people and share the good news with them, we must use Jesus' method. We must rub shoulders with new people and help them connect first before trying to change them. Like Christ, we

must care about the needs of others before we call them to change and follow Jesus as their Master.

4. *The Chosen* by Dwight Nelson (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2011), 132–149, 193–212.

In this book, Dwight Nelson shares the principles about how God's chosen people need to care for others both in and outside the church. He shares how a church is supposed to be like an emergency room and give opportunities for members to build a "Front Porch" to their community. Pastor Nelson shows that the early church was most successful when they met together, prayed together, and ate together. People flocked to the early church because it was a place they could belong, and they were called to believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

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Creating a climate for the **discovery of truth:** A perspective on doctrinal development

As part of my daily morning routine, I check the *official* Adventist Web sites—national and international—to see what is happening in my church. For balance, and out of curiosity, I then look at the *independent* Adventist news sources on the Web. More recently, I have wondered whether I should change this habit as I am more and more irritated by what I read, especially on the independent sites, both left and right. This irritation is accompanied by a growing uneasiness about my church. What is happening? Where does this increasing combative atmosphere come from? How should we deal with issues that concern us? Where will this ultimately lead?

The current debate

I am specifically referring to the discussion about origins. As I understand it, the main issue the church finds itself confronted with when dealing with this topic is at least twofold: the question of origins in general and the specific debate about the possible rewording of fundamental belief number 6.¹ This

has, I think, a number of distinct elements that play a significant direct or indirect role.

1. First of all, there is the ongoing discussion about the relationship between science and religion in general. This has long been a topic of debate, even controversy, among Christians. The question of how to view evolution in particular has been answered differently in different denominations.
2. We recognize this topic of Creation as an important issue in the Adventist Church, which has traditionally defended a literal understanding of the Genesis account. At times, however, some have expressed reservations about a literal six-day Creation, and proposed a form of theistic evolution as a more satisfactory way of reconciling biblical and scientific data.
3. In view of the questions that some have raised regarding a literal interpretation of the Genesis Creation account, an initiative has been proposed² to close any possible “loopholes” that

deal with creation by rewording fundamental belief number 6. This will include such language as “recent” and “six literal” days of 24 hours, which were “contiguous”—thus precluding any kind of “gap theory,” or interpretation of the “six days” as longer periods.

4. The debate has received further fuel as a result of reports that, in Adventist universities, some professors teaching biology may not have been as “Adventist” as might be expected.

This matter has serious implications. First of all, there exists the danger of a further escalation of the difficulties within the Adventist educational system. It concerns such fundamental questions as the responsible use of academic freedom, denominational control over the curriculum in our schools, our procedures for dealing with conflict, the need for balance, linked with total transparency, and—most of all—the question of how to adequately define what the church considers as sound teaching. In other words: *one of the*

basic underlying issues is our individual and collective pursuit of Truth.

Two questions

As soon as we touch on the topic of our pursuit of Truth, numerous questions arise—general questions and some that pertain directly to the topic of origins. I would like to focus on two specific aspects: (1) How essential is it to refine doctrinal statements even further? (2) How necessary is it for the church to arrive at a position on every important issue and, in particular, on the correct understanding of the details of the Creation story?

The corpus of Adventist theology has developed over time. Starting from a strong suspicion towards any detailed description of doctrine, we have gradually arrived at a rather comprehensive statement of our doctrine. The present Statement of 28 Fundamental Beliefs was adopted in 1980 (as 27 Fundamental Beliefs), with the addition of a twenty-eighth in 2005.

Although officially the church maintains that it has no creed,³ it is difficult to deny that, in fact, the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs now functions as such, considering the authority that came to be attached to this document and all the steps necessary to change even a few words. This seems to confirm a pertinent statement once made by George Lindbeck, a Lutheran scholar, who taught at Yale University before his retirement, the “creedless Christianity” professed by various denominations “is not genuinely creedless. When creedlessness is insisted on as a mark of group identity, it becomes by definition operationally creedal.”⁴

There is no doubt that the church needs doctrines that must be defined carefully and clearly. Although faith is more than doctrine, faith requires doctrines to clarify what the community of faith believes in and considers to be the main implications of that faith. Doctrinal statements may be human products, but they enable us

to give structure to how we think and talk about our faith.⁵

There is also no doubt that it is important to give doctrinal structure to our thinking about the relationship between God and man, and Adventists will want to underline that the relationship between God and us is rooted in the fact that He created us, as the Bible tells us. Thus, there can be no doubt about the legitimacy of having a statement such as found in fundamental belief number 6.

Doctrinal development

But does the current statement on Creation need to be reworded? Some claim that our entire doctrinal edifice will be undermined if we leave doubt about a literal reading of the first chapters of Genesis. The slightest opening given to the adoption of some form of theistic evolution, it is asserted, will also shake other truths, such as the worldwide Flood, and the entrance of sin and death.

Flexibility on the Creation doctrine may have far-reaching repercussions.

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This fact would tend to favor urgent measures to change the wording of the fundamental belief on Creation. This would seem the normal route to take and to be in line with the historical fact that any formulation or reformulation of doctrinal statements usually occurred in the context of doctrinal controversy. This occurred when it was not just deemed necessary to better define truth, but also to expose erroneous thinking and put up a defense against apostasy. Should we therefore take steps to do just that and revisit the current statement? I would like to list a few considerations which, in my view, would tend to suggest that this not be done in haste.

Firstly, we might ask: Is it possible and desirable to ensure that doctrinal statements are without any ambiguity, and that they can be redefined to the point where no questions remain and all conceivable erroneous conclusions can be pre-empted? Take a look at the wording of all 28 fundamental beliefs and you may well conclude that in the case of each one of these statements, questions remain and ample opportunity exists for “wrong” conclusions. Should we try to remedy this situation?

Secondly: What could a more elaborate statement on Creation possibly achieve? Certainly, it would please those who are pleading for the adoption of the kind of language that will more clearly stress that any nonliteral reading of Genesis is unacceptable. On the other hand, there will be great disappointment—in some cases even despair—on the part of others that the church is not willing to allow for a greater degree of independent thinking that may deviate in some respects from the traditional Adventist viewpoints.

For many, a push for the rewording of statement number 6 is not just about our understanding of Genesis 1. This statement is also widely regarded as an example of how the Adventist ecclesial system tries to prescribe exactly what members (including teachers and other scholars) should believe if they want to be viewed as true Adventists.

Thirdly, there are several much broader issues to consider, because the concerns that surround the Creation statement are part of a much bigger picture. Questions about inspiration and biblical hermeneutics continue to occupy many minds in spite of recent publications by the Biblical Research Committee.⁶ It may, therefore, not be so wise to deal with the Creation issue as if this is a stand-alone problem that needs to be handled decisively. The discussion about hermeneutics has not ended and the church must provide space for a continued attention for this basic theme.

Also, the search for more satisfying answers regarding the relationship between science and biblical revelation will continue, and the questions that arise when the data of the biblical record and the book of nature seem to conflict will continue to be asked. Many Adventist scholars sincerely struggle with these issues and one cannot but wonder how helpful it might be, at this point in time, to tell these scientists: “Listen, there is only one way of looking at this, and this you must accept to be counted as a faithful Adventist.”

Fourthly, let us realize that the development of doctrine comprises a complex phenomenon.⁷ This applies in general, but most emphatically, also to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Adventist doctrine has not been static but has seen considerable development and change in the relatively short history of our church.⁸ It is naïve to suggest that we simply need a re-reading of our Bibles to get all our answers. Nobody reads Scripture in a vacuum; this reading always happens in a particular historical and cultural context. We find it important that we try to determine what a particular teaching means for today and how we can limit the danger that faulty teachings arise or can be advocated without any attempt at correction. But it is also essential that we do not let ourselves be unduly pushed by pressures of the moment. Many things do take time, and we recognize doctrinal development as one.

If the history of doctrine can teach us anything, it is that doctrines are usually the outcome of a lengthy process. The doctrinal developments in the early centuries, when the doctrines of the nature of Christ and the Trinity and other fundamental Christian teachings were formulated, spanned centuries. Our own church history reveals that the development of certain Adventist teachings took several decades, or more.

It may be important to arrive at clear positions regarding important matters, and the church must make pronouncements that are relevant to the times in which we live. But due care should be taken lest further controversy is stimulated and arguments are used that may not stand the test of time.

This, fifthly, leads to another concern: the Adventist Church has, rightly, always been critical of other religious communities that have allowed the traditions of the past to guide present thinking, and even more so, of systems that rely on a *magisterium* to make final pronouncements. Are we in danger of doing the same? Again, a need for balance must be maintained. The church must most certainly guide and protect doctrinal developments, but at the same time the church needs to take care not to institutionalize the development of the thinking of its thought leaders and not to bureaucratically try to restrict the search for truth. The discovery of truth is, I believe, not primarily through committees, institutions, and other administrative processes. Spiritual convictions do not result only from majority votes in annual councils and General Conference sessions. Such things eventually have their place, but we must recognize the importance of enough time and space reserved for dialogue and discovery, for convictions to emerge as the Holy Spirit moves on a faith community that listens to His voice while reviewing its teachings and continuously studies and restudies the Bible as open-mindedly as possible. Maybe our leaders should feel less pressured to intervene expeditiously and force the

process along, and be more patient and expect more from the working of the Holy Spirit.

Patience

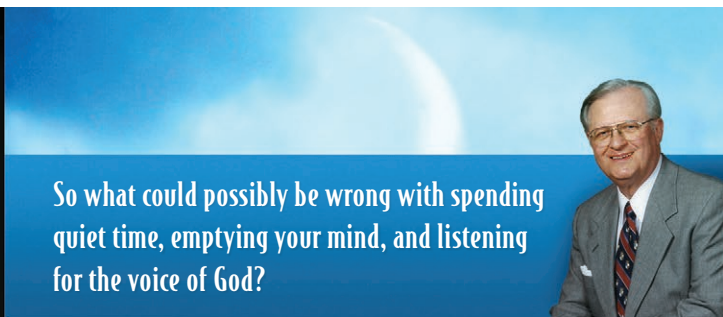
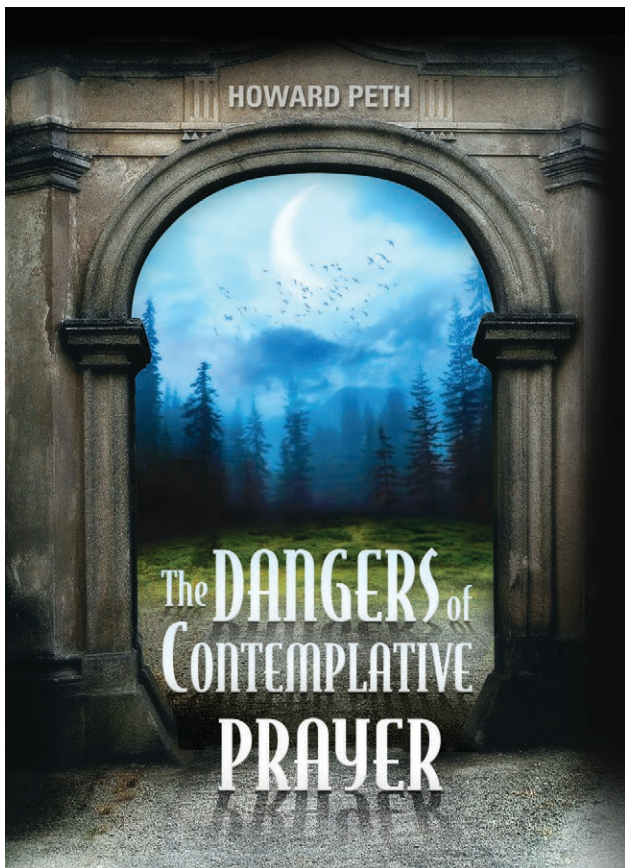
Patience is not a sign of weakness but is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Effective leadership does not require that, at all times, firm positions are taken and defended. We should not think it necessary to quickly have a final position on every important issue. Issuing position papers or pushing for pronouncements by the world body may be premature and stimulate polarization and controversy rather than provide the kind of nurture and direction that is beneficial for the body of believers as a whole. Strong leadership may perhaps demonstrate itself above everything else in intentional and systematic attempts to create the atmosphere in which genuine dialogue and spiritual growth can

take place, in which the people will actually listen to each other and will, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, move together, maybe slowly yet surely, towards a deeper understanding of particular truths. Eventually, this may or may not cause the institutional church to decide to move toward a formal ratification of what has come to be understood as the best wording for a given conviction.

Does this entail some risks? Will it mean that some will remain unsatisfied and make sure others know about their feelings? Of course. Therefore, I am not pleading that this approach be followed without any parameters or a strategy to provide the membership with the resources needed for a meaningful dialogue and deeper study in God’s Word. But in the end, it is more risky to rely on hasty administrative processes that result in winners and losers, than to exercise patience and rely on the workings of the Spirit. ❑

- 1 For specific wording of this fundamental belief, please see *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2005), 79–89.
- 2 For the background of this, see, *Adventist Review*, June 29, 2010, “Actions and Proceedings, Tenth Business Meeting.” Available at: <http://www.adventistreview.org/article.php?id=3604>.
- 3 Alister E. McGrath defines a “creed” as “a concise, formal, and universally accepted and authorized statement of the main points of the Christian faith.” See his book *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 30.
- 4 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 74.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 79–84.
- 6 George W. Reid, ed., *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute / General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), and Gerhard Pfandl, ed., *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute/ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010).
- 7 For an excellent survey of the various factors that play a significant role in doctrinal developments, see Rolf J. Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 1999), 44, 45.
- 8 See Rolf J. Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 2000, adapted from the 1999 ed.) and George R. Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000).

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The mission of Adventism: The significance of the three angels' messages for today

Was the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in the middle of the nineteenth century, justifiable? Protestantism was already split into many denominations. What makes the rise of Adventism unique, defensible, and stand out from other denominations? Does the appearance of another Christian denomination create further confusion in the minds of people?

The question of identity must confront each Seventh-day Adventist. Why am I an Adventist? What is our mission? What is the difference between our mission and that of other Christian denominations? The answers to these questions depend on the understanding of our origin and history.

This article will try to probe these issues in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14. We will show the significance of this message in preaching the everlasting gospel in the last days of earth's history. We believe that the proclamation of this message before Christ's second coming is one of the most important and exclusive features of the Adventist Church. This message

directs the undertakings and is part of the mission of the church.

The Adventist Church emerged from fragments of a religious movement led by William Miller (1782–1849). The driving ideological idea of that movement was setting a definite date for Christ's second coming to earth. The date was based on the interpretation of the prophecy of Daniel 8:14: " 'It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated' " (NIV).

Nothing extraordinary happened on the date set by Miller's followers, and many of them experienced a great disappointment. While in a state of hopelessness and praying for guidance from above, a most important biblical truth was revealed, which determined the theological position of the future Adventist Church. This revelation and further study led to the conclusion that "the sanctuary" in Daniel 8:14 did not refer to the earth, which, according to Miller, needed cleansing by fire during the Second Coming, but rather to an event in the heavenly sanctuary.

The prophetic period of 2,300 evenings and mornings of Daniel

8:14 ended with the beginning of the final phase in Christ's ministry as High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary. Using the analogy of the earthly sanctuary, in which the second section, known as the "Holy of Holies," was cleansed once a year (Lev. 16:29–34), Christ as the High Priest began cleansing the true sanctuary in heaven into which He entered by His own blood (Heb. 9:11, 12). This day was the antitype of the earthly "Yom Kippur," the annual great Day of Atonement, literally meaning "day of covering." Therefore, the pioneers of the future Adventist Church linked the first angel's message " 'the hour of his judgment has come' " (Rev. 14:7, NIV) to the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel 8:14—namely, the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary.

The context of the three angels' messages

A second important point that the Adventist pioneers paid attention to was the context of the three angels' messages in the book of Revelation. Right after this message follows the description of the Second Coming with the great heavenly reaper taking His sickle to reap the

greatest harvest on earth (vv. 14–16). John described the reaper “seated on the cloud” as “the son of man,” as Christ, who is ready to come in all glory to this world for the final judgment. The Adventist pioneers paid attention to the fact that the angel, flying in midair, had “the eternal gospel.” The powerful language of the three angels’ messages presents the eternal gospel—the good news directed at humanity just before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

But why do the three angels’ messages use such unusual language? Why do these messages have disturbing images? The reason is found in the fact that the period before Christ’s coming to earth was in need of this kind of language, addressing the specifics of a historic situation emerging before the Second Coming.

The main characteristics of this historic flow may be summarized as:

Rationalism. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment launched the making of the modern human, proclaiming the independence and capacity of the mind to probe and understand matters relating to ultimacy and reality, renegading, in the process, the supremacy of faith in the life of humankind. The process eventually led to the establishment of the so-called positive knowledge (science) in the place of negative knowledge (religion).

Secularism. Ever since the nineteenth century, society has become more and more secular. The role of God in human life has been increasingly questioned. Indeed, people were led to think that they have grown out of their condition of dependency on God and that they do not need Him anymore.

Materialism. With God and the call for spirituality minimized or eliminated, humanity was increasingly dominated by forces of materialism. With this swing toward materialism dominating the consciousness of humanity, and with the elimination of God’s critical role in life, society saw the development of a new era, marked by antitheistic

values, a materialistic future, and class struggles, leading to a new development in social-economic forces.

Communism. The middle and second half of the nineteenth century signify the flourishing of socialistic ideas within which projects for the formation of a just society were developed through revolutionary reforms. Society in many parts of the world moved to the power of social progress leading to a communist “paradise,” without any reference to God or the spiritual dimension of life.

Liberalization of Protestantism. Leading Protestant churches were accepting liberal theology, which undermined faith in a God-inspired Bible and exposed many doctrines of the Christian faith to rational criticism. As a result, Jesus Christ has become just a historical figure with nothing in common with the Jesus Christ of the Gospels.

Darwinism. Perhaps the most daunting challenge to biblical faith and values, undermining the very core of Christian proclamation, occurred in the mid-nineteenth century when science proclaimed the origin of species by natural selection. The biblical foundation of earth’s creation was at stake, and the theory of evolution emerged not only as a critical challenge but also as a viable alternative.

These are only a few markers of the new era, which have become a real challenge to Christian faith. Almost all of them are reflected in the backdrop against which the three angels’ messages were to be proclaimed. The eternal gospel of Revelation 14 thus calls us to return to the core values of the biblical message proclaimed from the beginning to the end of human history. The proclamation takes on a new force in these last days.

Thus, a brief analysis of the historical situation during the mid-nineteenth century helps us understand why the pioneers of the Adventist Church recognized the meaning of their earthly mission in the three angels’ messages. The preaching of these messages

defined the face of future Adventism. In preaching the three angels’ messages, Adventists found the explanation of their emergence in the arena of history. Seventh-day Adventism does not live as just another confession, formed as a result of a schism in an already-existing church. The Adventist Church emerged during the prophesied historical period in order to proclaim the greatest message of all before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The first angel’s message

Against this overview, the message of the first angel assumes special emphasis. First of all, attention is drawn to the appeal of the first angel to “fear God and give Him glory.”

Fear is one of the characteristics that defines human existence. Also interesting to note is that the so-called scientific religious studies, which developed in the nineteenth century as a main factor in the emergence of religion, emphasized fear. Fear, so argued the so-called scientists, gave rise to the religious feeling of dependence on higher powers. But when we examine the phrase “fear God” in its context in Revelation 14, the meaning becomes clearer. The phrase calling for fear is followed by the invitation, “give Him glory.” To fear God means to give Him glory. We find it interesting to note that such a parallelism appears several times in the book of Revelation. For example, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?” (Rev. 15:4, NIV).

Most naturally, the question arises: What does it mean to “give Him glory”? We need to implement the biblical meaning of these words to our stereotypical understanding of glorification. The prayer of Jesus Christ can help us: “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4). Here we again see an example of parallelism. To give God glory, first of all, means to fulfill His will, complete His work, and show obedience and submission to His will.

Hence, we can conclude that the first angel's call to "fear God," in fact, means to obey and fulfill God's will, conveyed in His commandments. This appeal becomes current in an era of humanistic and secular values, in an era where God is excluded from the human mind and affairs. These words have special significance in the era of postmodernism and a relativistic attitude of life, making any moral standards relative.

The final words of the first angel are highly significant: "'Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.'" These words were current in the mid-nineteenth century when a whole chain of discoveries in the field of geology and biology challenged the idea that God created the world. These discoveries were the beginning of a serious conflict between science and Christianity.

Hence the currency of the message of the first angel: "Worship him who made. . . ." The message calls people to think about their origin and reconsider their purpose. The Bible speaks about human origin: "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him" (Gen. 1:27, NIV). Accepting that humans were created in God's image can radically change the way men and women perceive themselves.

The second angel's message

In the context of what was mentioned previously, the message of the second angel becomes clearer. This angel proclaims Babylon's fall: "'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries'" (Rev. 14:8, NIV).

No direct relationship exists between Babylon in the book of Revelation and the historical Babylon. When John was writing the book of Revelation, Babylon, as described in the book of Daniel, did not exist. Most likely John sees a new religious-political power in his prophetic vision. This power, which John calls Babylon, while taking

into consideration the historical parallels, will confront God's people. This power will turn into a godless system, which will integrate all the false systems of worship and all the institutions that suppress human freedom. During this time, the second angel will proclaim Babylon's fall twice, which refers to the apostasy of religious bodies. Babylon will not overcome God's people; in the end, victory will belong to God's truth.

The third angel's message

The third angel's message proclaims the consequences for those who engage in the works of the "whore of Babylon." The angel's language here is strong. "'He, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath'" (Rev. 14:10, NIV). John uses language that was familiar to his contemporaries: a person who had experienced God's fury was pictured by prophets in the Old Testament as drinking wine from God's cup (Job 21:20; Pss. 60:3; 75:8; Isa. 51:17–23; Jer. 25:15–28; Ezek. 23:32–34).

In the "seductive" politics of the spiritual Babylon, John draws attention to the act of receiving a "'mark on the forehead or on the hand'" (Rev. 14:9, NIV). What does this mark mean, and how are we to understand it? John uses the Greek word *charagma*, which, in his time, referred to Caesar's image on coins, the imperial seal on official documents, and the brand mark carved on animals.

The mark on the forehead and hand perhaps also connects to the ancient practice among Israelites during prayer time when the tefillin or a phylactery, a small leather box with passages from the Torah (Exod. 13:1–10; Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21), is bound to the forehead and hand. This ritual depicts the conscious acceptance of God's will reflected through His commandments (binding on the forehead), and the readiness to fulfill this will in one's life (binding on the hand).

The beast's mark on the forehead and the hand represents the mark

of authority of the apostate church, the replacement of God's righteous standards with human standards. That is why one of the most important characteristics of God's faithful people centers in keeping His commandments (Rev. 14:12; 12:17).

To draw attention to one of the Ten Commandments is very important, just as keeping it has a special significance in the struggle between good and evil. In the first angel's message (Rev. 14:7, NIV) that speaks about true worship, John emphasized: "'who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.'" A clear allusion to the fourth commandment of God's law exists here: "'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. . . . For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day'" (Exod. 20:8, 11, NIV).

The Sabbath played a very important role in the worship of God's chosen people. In Old Testament times, Sabbath keeping sustained the people's hopes of future deliverance, Messianic peace, and well-being. Sabbath, as the Israelites understood it, was connected not only to Creation, but to deliverance, liberation, and redemption too. Sabbath served as a sign of the covenant between God and His people (Exod. 31:13, 17).

This leads us to understand why the pioneers of our church placed the "seventh day" in the church's title. The name "Seventh-day Adventist" carries a significant meaning. It reflects two positions that underscore a forceful identity. The "seventh day" indicates the church membership's commitment to God, the Creator of all life, and Provider of true meaning to human existence and hope.

No less important is the accent on the second position in the church's title. The word *Adventist* points to the second coming of Jesus Christ. We must emphasize that this position is biblical (John 14:1–3; Acts 1:10, 11; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). According to the Bible, God will put an end to the presence of sin one day and bring

back harmony to this world (Rev. 21:1–5).

So, the name of the Seventh-day Adventist Church testifies of two great events in world history—the creation of the cosmos in the beginning and the launching of the new heavens and the new earth at the second coming of Jesus Christ. These two events—the beginning and the end—are the alpha and omega of earth’s history. Indeed these two events, centered in Christ, make Him declare, “ ‘I am the Alpha and Omega, . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come’ ” (Rev. 1:8, NIV).


Conclusion

Summarizing the content of the three angels’ messages in Revelation 14, we must note the importance of this message in the formation of the church’s mission. The pioneers of our church did not accidentally emphasize that the three angels’ messages in the book of Revelation are placed in the context of the Second Coming. The sermon of the “eternal gospel” through the three angels’ messages became the

essence of the church’s mission. This sermon became the action program of the young Adventist Church. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was not formed as a result of a schism of an already existing denomination. Rather it was formed through consolidation of representatives of different denominations around the majestic message to be proclaimed before and until the Second Coming. This message reflects the tendencies that are characteristics of the historical era that began in the nineteenth century. Adventists recognized the actuality of this message in today’s historical situation. The preaching of this message defined the character and face of the church.

We must note that the core of the three angels’ messages, proclaimed before the Second Coming, is worship. So, the author of the book of Revelation mentions two groups of worshipers. One group worships Him “ ‘who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water,’ ” and the other worships the beast and his image. One shows obedience to God and fulfills His commandments (Rev.

12:17; 14:12), the other participates in adultery with spiritual Babylon (Rev. 17:2). One will finally rest in God (Rev. 14:13), while the other will not rest “ ‘day or night’ ” (Rev. 14:11). The three angels’ messages call every believer to choose his or her position in this great controversy between good and evil, between truth and lie.

Let us draw our attention one more time to the phrase “the hour of his judgment has come.” The word “judgment” is translated from the Greek word *krisis*. This word means “process of judgment” (see Rev. 16:7; 18:10; 19:2), while a different Greek word *krima* means “verdict” or “sentence.” We indeed live in a time of crisis—economic crisis, financial crisis, energy crisis, food crisis, ecological crisis, moral crisis, spiritual crisis, and so on; all of them are part of life today. The time of the Second Coming is near, bringing with it the *krima*, the time for the verdict. For this reason, we consider it of great importance that we participate in the preaching of the greatest message of the Holy Scriptures. It is our duty and privilege—the essence of our mission. 

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Prayer and revival

Because of a close link between revival and prayer, revival is always the outcome of much prayer.

At the Day of Pentecost

“These days of preparation were days of deep heart searching. The disciples felt their spiritual need and cried to the Lord for the holy unction that was to fit them for the work of soul saving. They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with the burden of the salvation of souls. They realized that the gospel was to be carried to the world, and they claimed the power that Christ had promised.”¹

At the Protestant Reformation

“From the secret place of prayer came the power that shook the world in the Great Reformation. There, with holy calmness, the servants of the Lord set their feet upon the rock of His promises. During the struggle at Augsburg, Luther ‘did not pass a day without devoting three hours at least to prayer.’ ”²

At the Advent Awakening

“Carefully and solemnly those who received the message came up to the time when they hoped to meet their Lord. Every morning they felt that it was their first duty to secure the

evidence of their acceptance with God. Their hearts were closely united, and they prayed much with and for one another. They often met together in secluded places to commune with God, and the voice of intercession ascended to heaven from the fields and groves.”³

— TERJE BJERKA SERVES AS PRAYER COORDINATOR, NORWEGIAN UNION, ROYSE, NORWAY.

1 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 37.

2 White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1950), 210.

3 *Ibid.*, 403.

Revival
and
REFORMATION

Clyde Morgan, MDiv, founder and president of Adventist Frontier Missions for 22 years, now provides consulting services through Global Frontiers International (dba GFI Consulting).



Make the **main thing** your **first priority**

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church continues reaching new language groups at the same rate it has since 1975, the church will take more than 600 years to reach the remaining unreached language groups. In 1975, the church printed publications and conducted oral work in 559 languages. In 2010, that number was 921. At this rate, yes—it will take more than 600 years.

Imagine this scenario: Jesus suddenly appeared to you and said, “I am very eager to return. I want you to reach the remaining unreached language groups in the next 20 years.” If you followed His appeal, what would you do?

Could you do it without knowing the parameters of the task? Or without knowing who the unreached are, where they are, and how many there are? It is not that without this information you cannot find people to evangelize. However, if you are setting out to reach the remaining unreached in the next 20 years (or 50 or 100), you must plan strategically and execute well.

Leo Babauta, in his book *The Power of Less*, argues in favor of simplicity to become more productive. He identifies two steps as summing up the creation of simplicity:

1. Identify the essential
2. Eliminate the rest¹

From his six guiding principles,² the following three are especially helpful in our discussion:

1. Choose the essential
2. Simplify
3. Focus

Let’s explore these points briefly.

Choose the essential

Make the main thing your first priority. The church has a mandate, typically called the gospel commission. The Matthew version of this mandate reads, “ ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’ ” (Matt. 28:19, 20).³ A mandate is just that, a mandate describing what you are supposed to do. It tells you the main thing, the most important thing, the essential thing. The one imperative in this gospel mandate focuses on “making disciples of all nations.” All the other action words (“go” better translated as “having

gone,” “baptizing,” “teaching”) are participles, and reveal how the one imperative must be carried out.

There are many good things the church can do. But what essential thing is the church called to do? What is the main thing that, if not done, means total failure? Surely, it must be our mandate to “make disciples.” All that we do as a church and individual believers should contribute to that mandate. Every institution, program, and activity should be evaluated in terms of how successfully it contributes to fulfilling our mandate. This does not rule out everything except direct evangelism. Far from it. All the gifts of the Spirit are needed. However, we must be absolutely clear on defining our mandate and be unbending in taking up or laying down activities based on their contribution and effectiveness in achieving our mandate.

Simplify

The next step, directly tied to the first, is to eliminate the nonessential. The church has a large variety of institutions, programs, and activities. As previously stated, all of these must be evaluated by how successfully they contribute to our mandate. Anything that does not contribute, or inadequately contributes, should be

changed or eliminated. Otherwise, the church ends up doing nonessential things with the result that it has inadequate time and energy to do what it is called to do.

Focus

Once we commit to our principal mandate, we must focus on it like a laser beam. All kinds of opportunities to do good things will arise. Calls to take up many activities will be frequent and loud. If such things survive the sieve of clearly contributing to fulfilling our mandate, they might be adopted; if not, no matter how appealing or loud the call or strong the pressure, we must leave them aside. We have one main job to do. We must keep our eye single to this task. Babauta writes, “[F]ocus is your most important tool. Focus on less to become more effective. Focus on One Goal in order to achieve it.”⁴

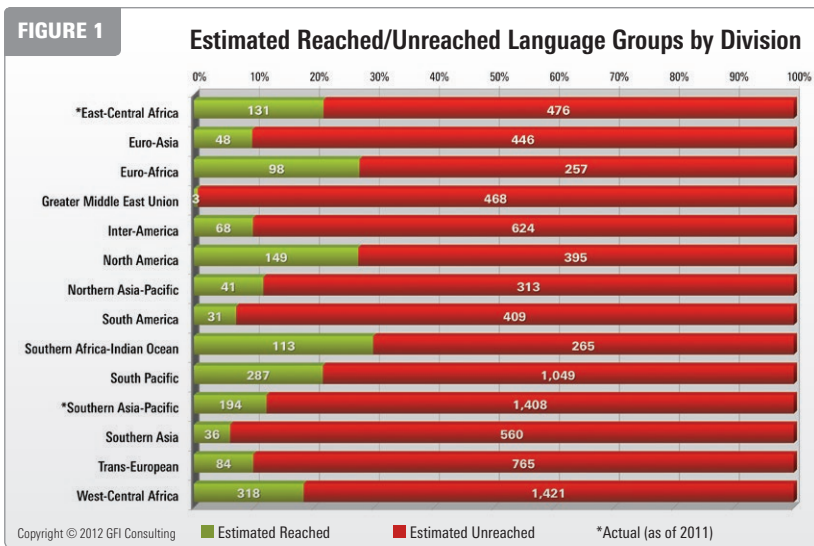
Sobering numbers

With this in mind, what is the status of Adventist work among language groups around the world? Nearly 7,000 languages are spoken worldwide.⁵ That’s distinct languages, not dialects. Interestingly enough, we do not know exactly how many of these could be considered “reached”⁶ by Seventh-day Adventists. Global Frontiers International (dba GFI Consulting) is working with divisions of the church that desire to know how many and which language groups are unreached in their territory. In the process, we also determine how many groups are reached. From GFI Consulting’s research, we now have information for two of these divisions (East Central-Africa and Southern Asia-Pacific) and partial information for two more.

As a percentage of total language groups in its territory, 85 percent of the language groups in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) are unreached/least reached, which means there are few or no churches and Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) members. In the other division completed so far, East-Central Africa

Division (ECD), 76 percent of the language groups are in the unreached/least reached category.

and percentages of reached and unreached language groups are as shown in Figure 1 with the estimated

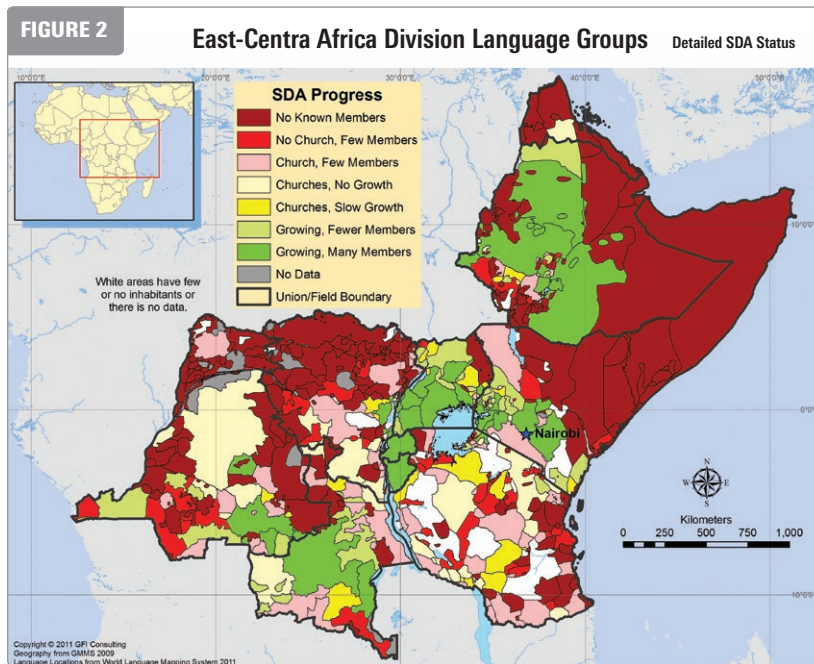


If we total the population of all the language groups in ECD, we find that nearly 100 million people are found in the unreached/least reached category; in SSD the population is even greater with nearly 270 million people in unreached/least reached category language groups.⁷

In just these two divisions, the population of the unreached/least reached category of language groups approaches half a billion people. We estimate the number

total population of the unreached language groups to be about 2.5 billion. Except for the two divisions in which research is completed (marked with an asterisk), the figures for the other divisions⁸ are estimates only, and we do not know which language groups are reached or unreached.

However, for the divisions in which research has been done, we now know precisely which language groups are unreached. As an example, Figure 2 is a color-coded




map indicating the detailed status of Adventist work among each language group throughout the East-Central Africa Division.⁹

Now, you can begin to get serious about developing a master plan to reach the remaining unreached in the next 20 years or whatever target time frame you choose. You know just which language groups are unreached, how many such groups there are, where they are found, and their population. Beyond these basic facts, much more information is available (though not depicted here) to further enable you to engage in meaningful strategic planning.

While we cannot know when the world has been reached in God's eyes, we *can* know whether there is a witness to the everlasting gospel among a language group or not. This is *knowable information* for us.

Making it practical

Whatever level of church responsibility you carry, the clarity of your task is essential. Whether it is identifying unreached language groups in a union in Asia or in a metropolitan area in Europe, you need to know the parameters of your task. Whether it is identifying geographic regions that are beyond the current reach of the church in South America or a district pastor obtaining greater clarity about what parts of the district are not penetrated, knowing the parameters of your task enables you to plan meaningfully and strategically.

As a church pastor or other leader, you have many demands vying for your time and attention. Simplify these by eliminating what is not truly essential and focus on the most essential—carrying out our Lord's mandate. 

- 1 Leo Babauta, *The Power of Less: The Fine Art of Limiting Yourself to the Essential . . . in Business and in Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2009), ix.
- 2 *Ibid.*, xii.
- 3 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
- 4 Babauta, 25.
- 5 M. Paul Lewis, ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2009), August 31, 2011, <http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp>.
- 6 In this article, "reached" means there is at least one organized Seventh-day Adventist church (or its equivalent) that has a majority of its members from the language group under consideration, and at least 1 percent of the language group population, or 250 people or more, are baptized members. More Adventist churches and members may be present, but this is the minimum to qualify as "reached" in our discussion.
- 7 These assessments were done before the organizational restructuring made by the 2011 Annual Council. Both of these divisions now have even more unreached language groups with the addition of South Sudan to the East-Central Africa Division and Pakistan to the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.
- 8 Due to its size and population, we have included the new Greater Middle East Union in this chart. The Greater Middle East Union has a larger population than most divisions of the church.
- 9 On union-level maps, each language group is labeled by name.

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The most important ingredient in church growth: Faith-based optimism

Faith and *optimism*—two simple words that can change you, your church, and your future. A positive, healthy attitude based on hope and faith is the number one human ingredient in church growth. In research done in the Adventist Church from 2003 to 2007, the fastest growing Seventh-day Adventist churches in North America were identified.¹ These churches had at least 5 percent growth in attendance, membership, and baptisms for five consecutive years.

In order to be able to compare the churches fairly, the study excluded all churches that ministered to the highly receptive first-generation immigrant populations. There were five churches that met these strict criteria (named below as “Church A,” “Church B,” etc.). For each one of these fast-growing churches, the researchers identified three churches in the same geographical proximity that were either declining or in the plateau stage.

What can we learn from this study?

Same places, different results

At the time of this study, the fastest-growing church, Church A, was in mid-America. In order to understand the dynamic of this growing church, three pastors of stagnant Adventist churches in the same area were asked the reasons behind their lack of growth. Almost all said, “It is very difficult to work here. The people are not interested in the Adventist message. Most of the people are Baptist or Charismatic.”

“What about the future?” I asked.

“It does not look good,” they said. “The Baptists are getting stronger and we are getting weaker.”

In contrast, Church A was a church planted in a medium-sized city in the late 1990s and has a strong evangelistic ministry. When interviewed about his city, the pastor of Church A said, “I love living here. The people of our city love God, we pray for them, we meet their needs, and they keep coming to our church. God has been so good to us. We started our church approximately eight years ago with a handful of

people and today we have over five hundred people in attendance.”

Church B is one of the fastest growing Adventist churches, situated in a Southern metropolitan area of over three million people close to downtown. The church experienced revitalization in the last decade. Currently, this church can be described as a culturally diverse congregation with strong leadership and preaching, and about 500 attending.

Meanwhile, the pastors of plateauing or declining Adventist churches near Church B said that the people in the area are very strong Baptists and thus not interested in the Adventist message. I asked, “Are you telling me that all of the three million people who live here are religious and churchgoers?” There was no response.

In contrast, the pastor of Church B had a faith-based optimism. “We’re not intimidated by challenges. Our role is to pray, to have effective ministries and evangelism, and God’s role is to send the people to us.”

Church C is a long-established church in a suburb of a very large city in the Pacific Northwest. The congregation has more than doubled to between 450 and 500. It operates a strong and innovative community service ministry. The pastor of Church C said, “The best thing that ever happened to me was to be here. The people in our area have no church connections or ties. We pray for them, we minister to their needs, and they come to our church.”

But when three pastors of declining congregations in that same area were interviewed about the condition of their churches, they said, “We live in one of the most secular places in the world, which makes it very difficult to do any kind of evangelism. People here do not think about God and they don’t need Him, and they certainly don’t need the church.” One of those pastors said that the percentage of people who go to church in Paris, France, is higher than the percentage of people who go to church in this area. When asked about the future, the unanimous answer of these pastors was, “It’s going to become more difficult.”

Same place, much different attitudes, much different results.

And not just suburban or city churches have the opportunity to grow. Church D is in a small town in the central United States, but was growing well for its size (about 175 on Sabbath morning) and exercising various ministries. The pastor was not deterred by the small-town setting. He believed that, small-town or big town, the members of his church would be enthusiastic evangelists, praying for, and inviting their friends to church. Accordingly, he worked to grow the church spiritually and make it a place worth inviting people to. Five years later, the church had grown by 50 percent.

Church E is in a rural area in the West and was growing phenomenally with a strong community presence and a passion for souls. The attendance was around 400, predominantly Anglo-American. In addition, there was also a minority

Hispanic constituency.² But this was not always so. At one time the church had been dying and the new pastor arrived to hear words of discouragement: “This church will not grow. It’s in a small town and the town is not growing.”

Yet the pastor of Church E believed God could grow that dying church in a small town, and with that faith he went forward, leading his church to become a bright light in their community and a dynamic, enthusiastic Adventist congregation.

The most important ingredient

No single factor alone will help your church grow (including some imaginary, ideal location where growth is automatic), and no combination of efforts or strategies will make your church grow without the Holy Spirit. But with the Holy Spirit we have every reason for optimism and enthusiasm for the future. Of the factors that this research study identified as contributing to church growth—including effective leadership, enthusiastic involvement of the laity, utilizing the power of prayer, and inspiring and dynamic worship—none was more important than faith-based optimism.

The most important ingredient in church growth is to have a winning attitude based on faith in God. With God’s power and blessing, we can win the world for Jesus. When we say that the people are not interested or are difficult to reach, we limit God, limit ourselves, and limit the people we are trying to reach. If you have the underlying belief that people are not interested, would you work or try new methods to reach them?

The situation today is much the same as it was when Jesus walked this earth. In the first century, three major philosophical ideas were represented by three major cities. Jerusalem represented tradition, uninterested people, and rigidity in beliefs. Athens represented modern philosophy and openness to new ideas. Rome represented post-modernity, a culture of entertainment,

hero worship, and hedonism. And in every city, faithful Christians faced unremitting persecution. Despite these challenges—challenges no easier than the ones we face today—the Christian gospel spread and the kingdom of God grew. The first century was the era of church growth and Christian spirituality that we look back on with envy, but the first-century church grew not because it did not have challenges but because it had a strong faith in Jesus Christ and the power of His Spirit.

In our time, God will carry His church to triumph and success. If we want to be part of that triumph, we must believe in God and His Spirit.

During the research interviews, we heard many excuses of why the churches were not growing. One pastor said, “Our church is in a very affluent area and people have no need for God.” Another one said, “My church is in a very poor area, thus people have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet; therefore they have no time for God or the church.” One pastor said, “My church is in a very educated part of town; people question God.” Another one told me, “My church is in a very rough part of town, people don’t like to change, and it is difficult for them to come to our church.” One said, “Our church is in a very postmodern demographic, people are open-minded to everything except absolute truth.” Another pastor said, “My church is in an industrial part of town, people find it difficult to look at new ways of experiencing God.”

We heard excuse after excuse after excuse for why the churches were not growing. But the pastors of the growing churches have a faith that they can win the world for Jesus and an attitude that says that all things are possible with God. They also have faith that with God every church could be growing, dynamic, healthy, and excited about ministry and evangelism. This amazing faith and attitude of hope tends to be contagious. The members of these churches have the

same faith, attitude, and optimism; they believe that God will do great things for them, their families, and their church.

In *Common-Sense Church Growth*, Howard K. Batson writes, "The pastor's response will set the tone for the congregational response. If the pastor is publicly defeated, bitter, disappointed, or depressed, the congregation will mirror his feelings."³

The Lord is willing to do great things

We are coworkers with an almighty God who can accomplish anything. Ellen G. White stated, "The Lord is willing to do great things for us. We shall not gain the victory through numbers, but through the full surrender of the soul to Jesus. We are to go forward in His strength, trusting in the mighty God of Israel."⁴

The Lord will do great things for His children and church. Faith-based optimism is not wishful thinking, ignorance of reality, or dismissing of difficulty. No, we find optimism based on the power of God who can do the impossible.

God can do impossible things. This is the testimony of the Scriptures. The Bible demonstrates that God can do anything. God gave a child to a barren woman who was 90 years old married to a man who was 99 years old (Gen. 17:17; 18:10–14); He gave a child to a virgin who never knew a man (Luke 1:34–38); He took a little boy and defeated a giant (1 Sam. 17); and He promised that if we have the faith of a mustard seed we could move mountains (Matt. 17:20). The entire weight of the Scriptures relies behind faith in a God who can do all things.

" 'Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. . . . You performed miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt and have continued them to this day, both in Israel and among all mankind, and have gained the renown that is still yours. You brought your people

Israel out of Egypt with signs and wonders, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror' " (Jer. 32:17–21).⁵

"Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God' " (Mark 10:27).

When people believe in the power of God, He rewards them with His rich and abundant blessings. The Lord Almighty is still almighty. Our optimism remains based on His unchanging nature, His abundant power, His faithful promises.

The faith factor

How does an attitude of faith affect the church and make it grow?

1. *Nothing is as inspiring as seeing God moving in our midst.*

To witness God in action energizes individuals and congregations in an uncommon way. An attitude of faith enables God to work miracles among us, and these miracles beget more faith, which beget more of God's visible action.

2. *We can choose our attitudes.*

An atmosphere of a winning attitude is more important than anything else, more important than the church's history of success or failure, the church's budget or attendance, or the church's fame (or infamy). And even more important than the church building, the giftedness of the members, or the skill of the pastor.

The remarkable thing is that we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The single most significant decision we can make is the choice of our attitude.

3. *An attitude of joy is contagious.* Your attitude of joy at the Lord's work can permeate the whole congregation. Your enthusiasm and belief in the greatness of God has a way of influencing everyone in the congregation and changing their attitude into possibilities and victories. Build

up your faith in God. Start seeing the mighty works of God, and your church will go on to effectiveness, health, and growth. And God will reward you according to the size of your faith and vision. He will give you that church that is full of joy and energized with confidence in God.

What kind of pastor do you want to be?

What kind of pastor do you want to be—full of excuses or full of faith and optimism? If you have the right kind of attitude, you will be able to acquire the necessary skills for success, and God will give you the resources you need. Someone might say, "You do not know my area. You do not know my church. You do not know the difficulties I am facing, the conflicts I have." Growing a church is not effortless, not even easy, but with God all things are possible, including growing a church in a difficult area. God has not called us to live a defeated mentality but to have the spirit of success. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). He has assured us that He will be with us always even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Making it happen: Four practical steps

1. *Strengthen your own faith.* Study God's action in the Bible and history.
2. *Live that faith.* Demonstrate faith in word and action, always talking about the incredible power of God.
3. *Instill a vision in the congregation of the greatness of God.* Use sermons, testimonies, slogans, banners, and songs.
4. *Build an enthusiastic congregation with a healthy self-esteem that believes all things are possible.*
 - *Celebrate the blessings.* Call attention to the action of God in your church. Celebrate high attendance and offerings. Make anniversaries a time to bless the past and

mark how far the church has come. Have a time for prayers of thankfulness that focus on the good God is doing in your church.

- *Change the language.* Address problems from the perspective of faith, calling them opportunities and challenges. Do not think of problems as limitations but as occasions to be creative. Banish the word *failure* by blessing risk: "We are a church not afraid to try new things for God."
- *Recruit cheerleaders.* Find the people who have faith-based optimism and belief in possibilities. Let them serve as cheerleaders by giving testimonies, taking leadership roles, and speaking out at decision-making times.

Faith-based optimism

An attitude of optimism and faith means that instead of being

intimidated by challenges, we expect God's triumphant intervention. We pray for conversions in large numbers. We work in the power of the Holy Spirit. We expect God to do great things.

What are your expectations? God will reward us according to our faith and expectation. Therefore, expect great worship, great services, great faith, great Sabbath School, great people, great growth. Expect God to do great things. Expect God to help you fulfill your potential. Expect people to be changed and to change the world and do great things for God.

"Prayer and faith will do what no power upon earth can accomplish. We need not be so anxious and troubled. The human agent cannot go everywhere, and do everything that needs to be done. Often imperfections manifest themselves in the work, but if we show unwavering trust in God, not depending upon the ability or talent of men, the truth will advance. Let us place all things

in God's hands, leaving Him to do the work in His own way, according to His own will, through whomsoever He may choose. Those who seem to be weak God will use, if they are humble. Human wisdom, unless daily controlled by the Holy Spirit, will prove foolishness. We must have more faith and trust in God. He will carry the work out with success. Earnest prayer and faith will do for us what our own devising cannot do."⁶ ■

- 1 To find these churches, the researchers contacted every local conference in the North American Division and asked for churches within their jurisdiction that met the criteria of the study. Once the growing congregations were identified (as well as the plateaued churches in close geographical proximity), the pastors were interviewed about what makes their church grow, training and equipping the members, prayer in their churches, and worship in their church.
- 2 The Hispanic constituency was not included in the growth calculations, but was in addition to it.
- 3 Howard K. Batson, *Common-Sense Church Growth* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1999), 89.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Silver Spring, MD: E.G. White Estate, 2003), 279.
- 5 Scripture quotations taken from the New International Version.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Release* (Silver Spring, MD: E.G. White Estate, 1993), 8:218.

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Fixing our eyes on Jesus

The year was 1889. For months, Ellen White traveled extensively to promote revival and reformation, speaking continually of the transformational beauty of Christ's righteousness. Though she had just spent three weeks preaching at a Kansas camp meeting, she pressed on for more appointments at Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

The journey would not be easy. Because of heavy rains and flooding, trains were delayed or canceled, and many passengers returned in frustration to New York. Ultimately, finding no other recourse, Ellen and her assistant hired two drivers, a carriage, and horses to continue the

journey. In the end, Ellen walked many miles through the mud and rain, slipping and sliding over the mountain rocks, around uprooted trees and flood debris, crossing gulches where the bridges were entirely washed out. They did not know a dam had broken southwest of Williamsport, causing a roaring flood through Johnstown and killing more than 2,000 people.

At last, they reached a hotel, but no warm food was available. Wet and hungry, they went to bed only to awaken to the roar of the swollen river, which now seemed impassable. Undeterred, Mrs. White organized a raft-building project, safely crossed

the treacherous water, and found the soggy campground with the campers discouraged but safe.

Was the arduous trip worth the trouble just to talk about revival and reformation at a soggy camp meeting? Ellen White thought so. She found a group of believers who had listened to a lot of doctrinal discourse, but were in desperate need of practical instruction on how to believe, simply believe, in Jesus Christ.

—CINDY TUTSCH, DMIN, SERVES AS AN ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE, SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND, UNITED STATES.

Revival
and
REFORMATION



Islam and Christianity in Prophecy

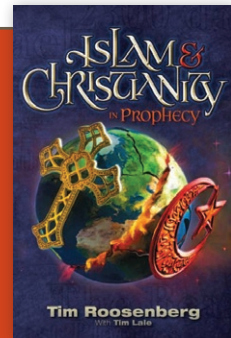
by Tim Roosenberg with Tim Lale, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2011.

This book comprises the latest in a series of books and articles dealing with Daniel 11, and has 14 chapters and four appendices of which the first one is the most significant, as it includes a comparison of Daniel 11:2–12:4 with historical events. The main thrust of the book, as the title indicates, shows that Daniel 11 mainly describes a history of the wars between Christianity and Islam. Putting aside the issue of Islam for the moment, the book contains some excellent material on the Sabbath, the state of the dead, and the Second Coming. This manuscript is basically an evangelistic book with appendix C, “A Gospel Appeal,” as the altar call at the end of the evangelistic series. I commend the author for his adherence to the basic Adventist doctrines and for the evangelistic emphasis in the book.

Roosenberg’s basic outline of Daniel 11 is found on pages 203–212:

- Verses 2: Media-Persia
- Verses 3, 4: Greece
- Verses 5–19: Wars between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies
- Verses 20–22: Romans
- Verses 23, 24: Rise of the papacy
- Verses 25–28: Crusades (First conflict between Christianity and Islam)

PUTTING ASIDE THE ISSUE OF ISLAM FOR THE MOMENT, THE BOOK CONTAINS SOME EXCELLENT MATERIAL ON THE SABBATH, THE STATE OF THE DEAD, AND THE SECOND COMING.



- Verses 29–39: Second conflict between Christianity and Islam during the time of the Reformation
- Verses 40–45: Third and future conflict between Christianity and Islam

This outline presents a number of problems. Two of which are the following:*

1. On page 12, Roosenberg claims that Daniel 11 predicts three holy wars between Christianity and Islam. The first he sees in the Islamic conquest and the Crusades. However, when he comes to the text in Daniel 11:25–28 (207), he finds no room for the Islamic conquest and begins with the Crusades. Therefore, page 91 calls the Crusades the “first conflict between the papacy and Islam.” This is historically problematic. If Daniel 11 describes the wars between Christianity and Islam, then it does not mention the most important war in the past—the Islamic conquest in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. that wiped out Christianity in the Middle East. If Daniel 11 deals with the conflict between Christianity and Islam, why

have others ignored the greatest conflict?

2. Much of the interpretation of Daniel 11 is based on subjective conjectures rather than exegesis. Roosenberg claims that the prophecies in Daniel are historically sequential (13), for example, nations or events follow each other chronologically, as they do in Daniel 2, 7, and 8. Yet, he has the Crusades (1095–1291) in verses 25–28 (207) with the events in 11:31 (“taking away of the daily” and “setting up the abomination of desolation”) taking place 500 years before the Crusades in 11:25–28. His interpretation destroys the chronological sequence of the prophecy at this point.

Roosenberg’s book on Daniel 11 shows an interesting interpretation of one of the most difficult chapters in the Bible, but the book is by no means exegetically as solid as it claims.

—Reviewed by Gerhard Pfandl, PhD, retired associate director, Biblical Research Institute, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States. 

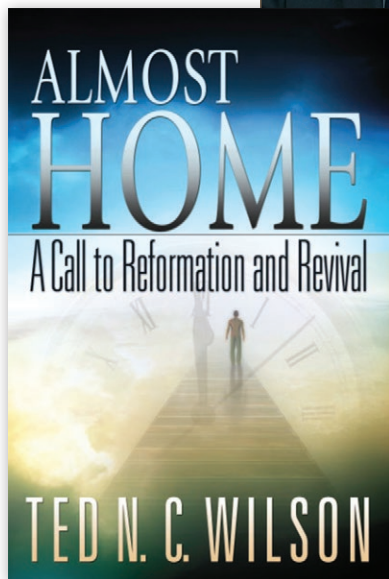
* For a more complete evaluation, write to pfandlg@gc.adventist.org.



GC president publishes first book

Silver Spring, Maryland, United States—Seventh-day Adventist world church president **Ted N. C. Wilson** has published his first book, a compilation of recent sermons on themes of commitment to God and service to others.

Almost Home: A Call to Revival and Reformation was published and released by Pacific



Press Publishing Association. Wilson said the book focuses on Christ's soon return and the three angels' messages, as found in the book of Revelation. This manuscript also underscores how church members

can view their own role in anticipation of Christ's return as people who are servants of the Lord and to each other.

"I hope readers catch a full picture of the urgency of the times and the Lord's soon return. It is my prayer that church members will feel very much a part of the great Advent movement and its real objective, which is to tell people the Lord is coming soon," Wilson said.

All proceeds from *Almost Home* will benefit the Mission to the Cities initiative, which is the Adventist Church's program to share the gospel mes-

sage with people living in large metropolitan areas.

"One of my favorite and most cherished objectives is for people in cities to know of Christ's love and soon return," Wilson said. *[ANN Staff]*

Seventh-day Adventist Church launches committee to study theology of ordination

Silver Spring, Maryland, United States—Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders on September 18,

2012, voted to establish a Theology of Ordination Study Committee with a goal of delivering a report to the 2014 Annual Council (a yearly meeting of world church administrators). Four committee sessions, each lasting for up to three days, will precede the October 2014 report, leaders said.

"We want an open process," Pastor **Ted N.C. Wilson**, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, told the group's Administrative Committee, or ADCOM, before the vote was taken. "We want to hear what God wants to tell us, through Bible study, study of the Spirit of Prophecy, and prayer."

The decision to launch this committee comes a year after the 2011 unveiling of a roadmap for the study process. Church officials affirmed the outline that was presented and provided terms of reference for the study committee. The committee is a direct response to a request during the 2010 General Conference Session for a church-conducted in-depth study of ordination. The denomination's Executive Committee at the 2014 Annual Council may decide to recommend action concerning ordination to the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas.

The committee will be comprised of a variety of individuals including "women, men, younger and older members, theologians, Bible students, those who have written or spoken on the subject, and some others." The committee will have no world church officers as participants other than the chairman, vice chairman, and secretary, though these three executive officers will be ex officio members.




“When the process starts there are two issues that will be studied,” said **Artur A. Stele**, head of the world church’s Biblical Research Institute and chairman of the new committee. “First, the theology of ordination—what ordination is or isn’t. Second, ‘What are the implications for church practices with a special emphasis on women’s ordination?’ ”

The membership of this committee represents a wide perspective of views on ordination, and the committee members hope that they

can interact in a highly respectful and spiritual discussion setting. The committee includes two delegates from each of the 13 world church divisions, which will work with regional Biblical Research Committees in the study.

An official statement voted by ADCOM emphasized that, unlike many church committees where actions are voted up and down, the committee’s terms of reference include “an aim of reaching consensus on as many points as possible.” Where differences are

evident, they will be carefully noted for the final report to the 2014 Annual Council.

According to the statement by ADCOM, “Through strong prayer sessions, study of the Bible, study of the Spirit of Prophecy, and the resulting careful discussion, the Theology of Ordination Study Committee should focus on solutions that would support the message, mission, and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” [Ansel Oliver, Mark A. Kellner, and Elizabeth Lechleitner/ANN] 



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Archaeology Exhibit, November 7

“The Battle Over King David: Excavating the Fortress of Elah” features artifacts from digs by professors and students during recent trips to Khirbet Qeiyafa, Israel. This new, temporary exhibit opens at the Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum.

Biology Research Seminar, November 8

Leonard Brand, Ph.D., will discuss new findings in Utah that are driving scientists to explore alternate explanations of the fossil record. The presentation takes place at 7:30 p.m. in the Hulsey Wellness Center.

Shawn Boonstra, November 9-10

Join the former speaker/director of It Is Written for a series of key messages during the School of Religion’s Pierson Weekend of Evangelism and Missions at various times in both the Collegedale Church and Thatcher Hall Chapel.

Shaunti Feldhahn, November 29

This bestselling author and columnist will give two presentations on personal relationships: 11 a.m. in the Iles P.E. Center, and 7:30 p.m. in Thatcher Hall Chapel.

Art Gallery Reception, December 5

Join us for opening night of an exhibit by Rick Lovell, acclaimed illustrator and faculty member with the Savannah College of Art and Design, at 6 p.m. in the John C. Williams Gallery of Art.

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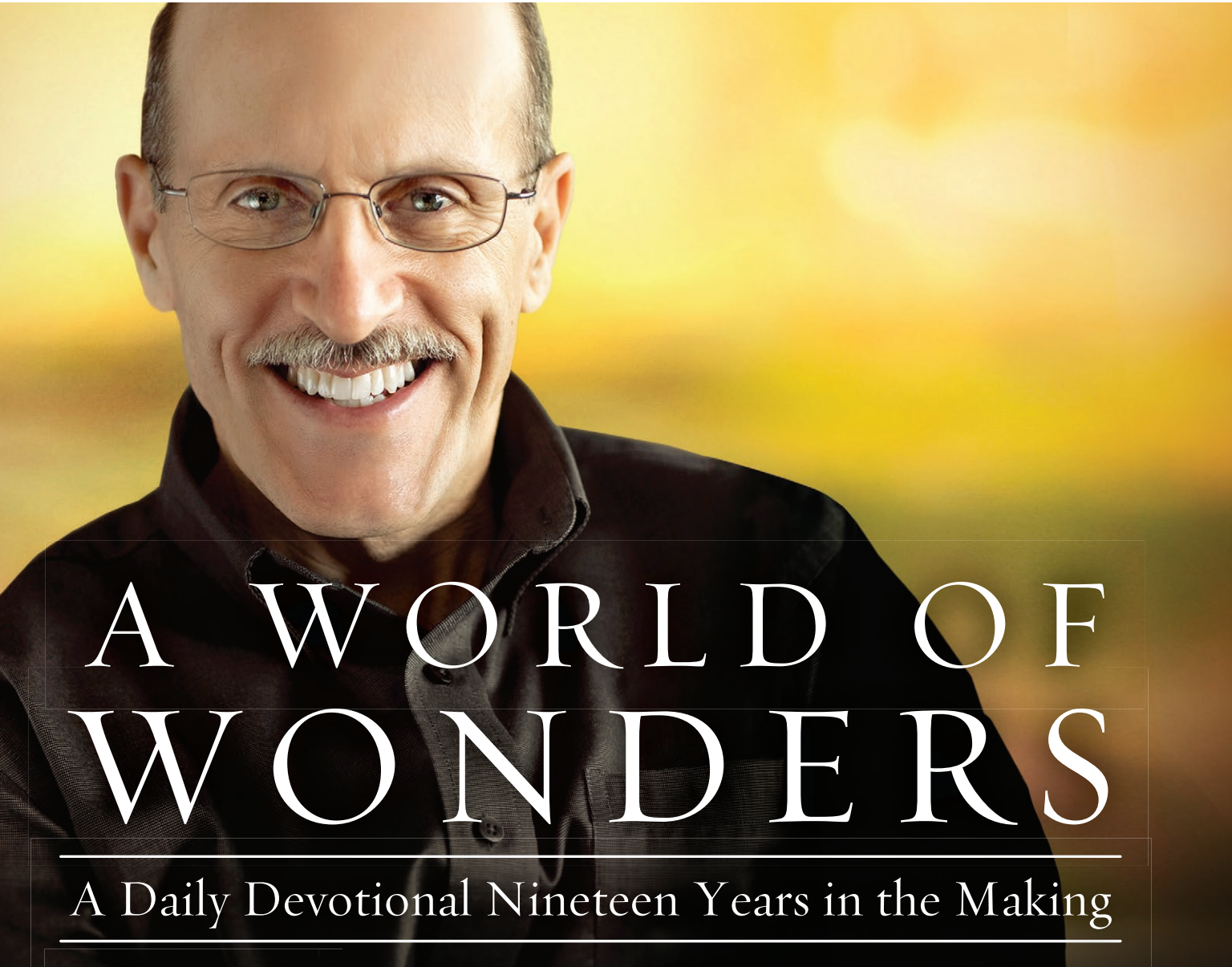
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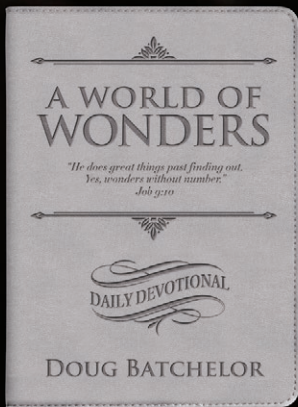
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