

**It's Too Late for Jesus
to Come Soon**

**The Disillusionment
of Adventist Arithmetic**

God in Space-Time

FALL 2019 • VOL. 27 NO. 4

Adventist *Today*

**1844 - 2019:
Preaching the
Imminent Return
of Jesus for 175 Years**





features

8 The Remnant Church: Threat or Promise?

By Reinder Bruinsma

12 Watching the Clouds

By Kirsten Øster-Lundqvist

14 Fear and Eschatology

By TJ Sands

16 Hurrying God

By Jeremiah Smart

18 God in Space-Time

By Rebecca Davis

20 The Continuing Disillusionment of Adventist Arithmetic

By Fritz Guy

DEPARTMENTS

3 Editorial

It's Too Late for Jesus to Come Soon

By Loren Seibold

22 Alden Thompson

1844: Failed Prediction, Successful Prophecy

26 The Exegete

The Kingdom of Luke 17:21 Waits for Us:

Living the End Now

By Olive J. Hemmings

32 AT Interview

Smuts van Rooyen on Race, Homosexuality, and Grace

37 Contributors

38 Barely Adventist

News Briefs

Executive Editor

Loren Seibold

Copy Editor

Debra J. Hicks

Contributing Editors

James Walters, John McLarty, Jeff Boyd, J. David Newman

Art Director

Chris Komisar

Digital Media

News Editor, Bjorn Karlman; Editorial Associates, Mark Gutman, Carmen Seibold, Stefani Leeper; Weekly Email Edition Editors, Lindsey Painter, Stefani Leeper; Monthly Edition Editor, Heather Gutman; Correspondents, Alethia Nkosi, Tyson Jacob

Executive Director

Monte Sahlin

Chief Operating Officer

Paul Richardson

Operations Team

Operations Specialist, Bjorn Karlman; Bookkeeper/Database, Lee Myers; Member Services, Nancy Myers; Production Specialist, Stefani Leeper; Technology Strategist, Warren Nelson

FOUNDATION BOARD

Nate Schilt (chair), Jim Walters (vice chair), Monte Sahlin (secretary), Andrew Clark, Keith Colburn, Chris Daley, Larry Downing, Bill Garber, John Hoehn, Bjorn Karlman, Mailen Kootsey, Alvin Masarira, Keisha McKenzie, Chuck Mitchell, Jim Nelson, Nathan Nelson, Warren Nelson, Lindsey Painter, Gene Platt, E. Gary Raines, Paul Richardson, Sasha Ross, Timothy Ruybalid, Ed Sammons, Dan Savino, Carmen & Loren Seibold, J. Gordon Short, James Stirling, David Van Putten, John Vogt

SENIOR LIFETIME ADVISORS

(\$25,000+)

Patricia & Douglas Ewing, Kathi & Richard Guth, John Hoehn, Judy & John Jacobson, Al Koppel, Joan Ogden, Thaine Price, Judy & Gordon Rick, Mike Scofield, Lovina & J. Gordon Short, Marilynn Taylor, Nancy & John Vogt, Priscilla & James Walters

LIFETIME ADVISORS (\$10,000+)

Jane Bainum, Susan & Hernan Barros, Diana & Ken Bauer, Kelli & Robert Black, Ginny & Todd Burley, Pat & Ron Cople, Rita & Grant Corbett, Jill & Fred Cornforth, Kathryn & James Dexter, Rosemary & Merlyn Duerksen, Dan Engeberg, Sandra & Sam Geli, Patricia Hare, Jackie & Jim Henneberg, Mariellyn & Edwin Hill, Carmen & Clive Holland, Erika & Brian Johnson, Carmen & Yung Lau, David T. Person II, Patricia Phillips, R. Marina & Gary Raines, Judith Rausch, Dee Dee & Nate Schilt, Stewart Shankel, James Stirling, Tierrasanta SDA Church, Kit Watts

UNDERWRITING ADVISORS

(\$2,500+ DURING THE LAST TWO YEARS)

Charmaine & Robert Bainum, Gerald Chipeur, Keith Colburn, L. Humberto Covarrubias, Lawrence Downing, William Garber, Lyndon Marter, Corinne & Michael Pestes, Mariellen & Nicholas Reiber, Paul Richardson, Missy & Richard Rouhe, Yvonne Stratton, Alden Thompson, Amabel & Eric Tsao

GENERAL ADVISORS

(\$500+/YEAR PLAN)

Cherry Ashlock, Almon Balkins, Charlotte & Robert Brody, Steve & Marit Case, Beverly & Sidney Christiansen, Ruth Christensen & Glenn Henriksen, Joshua W. Dee, Debra & Anders Engdahl, Ed Fry, Jiggs Gallagher, Karita & DeWitt Goulbourne, Helen Grattan, Judy & Richard Hart, Dolores & Robert Hasse, Georgia Hodgkin, Melva Hicks, John G. Jacobson, Catherine Lang-Titus, Carl & Evangeline Lundstrom, Lillian McNeily, Vincent Melashenko, Barbara & Dale Morrison, Clea Nelson, Claudia Peterson, Edwin Racine, Orlene & James Riggs, Tracy & Craig Reynolds, Ruth & Beryl Rivers, Gretchen & Monte Sahlin, Beverly & David Sandquist, Carolyn & Robert Tandy, Gary & Diane Russell, Jackie & Hal Williams

Adventist Today brings contemporary issues of importance to interested readers. *Adventist Today* is a member of The Associated Church Press. Following basic principles of ethics and canons of journalism, this publication strives for fairness, candor, and good taste. Unsolicited submissions are encouraged. Payment is competitive. Send an email to atoday@atoday.org or mail to *Adventist Today*, PO Box 683, Milton-Freewater, OR 97862. Call 800.236.3641 or 503.826.8600 (outside USA).

Website: www.atoday.org

As an independent press, *Adventist Today* relies on memberships and donations to meet its operating expenses. To support *Adventist Today* and continue receiving this magazine, go to www.atoday.org, and click on Membership or Donate at the top. Mail payments to the address above. All donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Adventist Today (ISSN: 1079-5499) is published quarterly by Adventist Today Foundation, 14605 SE 262nd Avenue, Boring OR 97009-6038. Periodical postage is paid at Boring, OR, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Adventist Today*, PO Box 683, Milton-Freewater, OR 97862. Copyright (c) 2019 by Adventist Today Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering open dialogue in the Adventist community and beyond.



It's Too Late for Jesus to Come Soon

By Loren Seibold

To live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing.

—Anne Carson

It has now been 175 years since the most famous event in Adventist history: on October 22, 1844, Millerite Adventists gathered to await the return of Jesus. This was, of course, a misinterpretation of substantial proportions, for the expected event did not happen.

I am not among those of ungenerous disposition who regard our ancestors as stupid or naive. On the contrary, they were courageous and committed. That they settled on a backup explanation after their first expectation failed is to their credit. Why waste a perfectly good revival?

Yet the backup explanation they settled on is now troubling us. When Jesus didn't show up on time, they explained that he is coming *soon*, just not on the date they'd selected.

What does "soon" mean? To put it simply, how many years can be absorbed by that word? If you tell me, "I'll see you soon," I expect you in some reasonable length of time. If it's going to be 10 years before you see me, I'd expect you to describe your arrival in a different way, such as "Someday I'll come to see you."

Please understand that I'm not passing judgment on the Bible's promises that Jesus is returning. All Christians believe in some kind of eschatological end to history, and we must, too. I am saying that the passage of nearly two centuries has disconfirmed any expectation we had for a *soon* second coming in the Seventh-day Adventist eschatological schedule. One hundred and seventy-five years is much beyond *soon*—and that was only the Millerites' prediction. The eschatologies of Jesus and the apostles, which said that end-time events would unfold as *soon* to their day as the Millerites thought it was to theirs, go back 2,000 years.

You can say that Jesus' return is sooner than it used to be, but you can no longer say that it is soon, unless you mean merely that Jesus is returning someday.

The End of Our Myth

We have, to quote the poet Anne Carson, lived past the end of our myth. For what is troubling us now is not our hope that Jesus will return *someday*, but our specific formulation of that story: that this is all to happen in short order, according to a schedule outlined in Adventist teachings, interwoven with specific enemies and events.

Many of the toxic parts of that scenario, I'm happy to say, have faded like a black Aerosmith T-shirt left out in the sun. We don't teach the secret close of probation anymore. Rarely does anyone still mention the unbiblical notion of becoming so perfect that we can stand in the end without a mediator. Even the investigative judgment has been so reinterpreted that the pioneers would scarcely recognize it.

Yet we still say that Jesus is coming any day now, and in the service of that myth we continually update our drama, the cast of which has included popes and presidents and prime ministers and "apostate" Protestants. The plot is constantly evolving. For nearly a century, Turkey was a major player. The late Soviet Union had a run as king of the North. One of the most memorable actors in my generation was a Roman Catholic president, and even a born-again Baptist president had a brief cameo. For a while, we enlisted the religious right as an enemy—though now many North American Adventists love the religious right, and it's those who would ask us to bake cakes for gay weddings who threaten our religious liberty.

Always the pope is lurking in the background, about to do whatever it is we imagine him doing. The Sabbath as the last test of faithfulness appears to be a constant, though Sunday laws and the persecution of Sabbathkeepers are always just out of reach—rumored, but never arriving.

Never mind that the pope has done little that is very frightening. Never mind that religious liberty is as good around the globe as it probably ever has been. (Yes, there are exceptions, but please don't

What is troubling us now is not our hope that Jesus will return someday, but our specific formulation of that story: that this is all to happen in short order, according to a schedule outlined in Adventist teachings.



buy into the notion that Adventists are being persecuted every time someone doesn't get Sabbath off of work.) There is no evidence of enforcing Sunday worship, or even of persecuting people specifically for worshipping on Sabbath.

By perusing old Adventist books, you can see delightful paintings and engravings of “modern inventions” that fulfill prophecy (Dan. 12:4). But many of those inventions are not only no longer modern; they are now obsolete: steam engines, dirigibles, horseless carriages. In the 1960s such pictures were updated to bulbous science-fiction rockets, Sputnik-style satellites, computing machines with blinking lights, and men sporting lab coats while holding test-tubes. Although interesting, the illustrations now prove just the opposite of the original point.

Russian poet Vladislav Khodasevich wrote that members of an art and literary movement, called Symbolists, “were

constantly posing for themselves—playing out their own lives as if they were performing in a theater of fervid improvisation.”¹ Adventists have this (and little else) in common with the Symbolists: that in order to keep our teachings alive, we must keep improvising a fervid drama with ourselves as the central characters. Unless we live on the edge of conspiracy, much of Adventist eschatology fades like chalk sidewalk drawings in a rainstorm.

Explanations and Accusations

One explanation for why Jesus hasn't come is that we don't understand God's time frame. “A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by” (Psalm 90:4, NIV) is undoubtedly true. But we have never taught that “soon” in reference to Jesus' return is measured in God's timing instead of ours. Every person in my multigenerational Adventist family was told that Jesus was returning in his or her lifetime. So this explanation is false to our teaching.

At other times we say, “My lord delayeth his coming” (Luke 12:45, KJV). The word “delay” implies that Jesus *wants* to return, but we are preventing it. Many of us were taught that Matthew 24:14 was a statement of cause and effect: Jesus would come only after every nation, kindred, tongue and people (Rev. 14:6, KJV) had been reached with the Adventist message. In this we have failed, despite technologies that increase our ability to reach them.

But the most spiritually abusive notion is that Jesus hasn't returned because we aren't good enough. Ellen White wrote: “It was not the will of God that the coming of Christ should be thus delayed. . . . For forty years did unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion shut out ancient Israel from the land of Canaan. The same sins have delayed the entrance of modern Israel into the heavenly Canaan. In neither case were the promises of God at fault.”² Some have gone so far as to say that we must become perfect for Jesus to return. Ellen White's statement that “When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own”³ created the Last Generation Theology movement: people attempting to become perfect to force Jesus' return. (I believe that thousands of people vainly trying to perfect themselves and hiding the evidence that they have not succeeded is the recipe for abusive hypocrisy, as Last Generation Theology advocates such as Samuel Pipim demonstrate.)

So what some end up saying is that Jesus *could* return to end child abuse and nuclear destruction and waterboarding and Ebola—and he probably wants to, but he can't because one small denomination of about 20 million people haven't yet moved to the country, removed all dairy from their diets, and perfected their Sabbathkeeping.

To objections such as these, you'll hear: "In the last days scoffers will come.... They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'" (2 Pet. 3:3-4, NIV).

The Psychology of Disappointment

So what of grace is left in this doctrine? What of forgiveness? What of the assurance of salvation? Our message has created generation after generation of Seventh-day Adventists who know themselves to have failed. We are still the disappointed, still the left behind.

I have an acquaintance whose father left his family and moved to another country. She was Daddy's girl, and Daddy promised that he would be back to see her frequently. She lived for his letters, all of which promised, "I'll see you soon."

Eventually, inevitably, she realized that she was either being lied to or was dealing with someone whose promises ran beyond his abilities. She didn't see him again until she was an adult with children of her own. By that time, she had suffered some of the psychological problems typical of a child of broken promises—and spent time in therapy atoning for it. She had long since realized that Daddy wasn't going to make her life complete, and her eventual reunion with him wasn't a satisfying one.

Adventists were disappointed in 1844, and we are still disappointed. We embraced the Sabbath as something additional God wanted of us in order to be ready for his return, along with the remnant church teaching, Ellen White as a prophetic voice, and extensive health and appearance rules. Nonetheless, nearly two centuries of Adventists have been disappointed in their hopes for Jesus' return.

Our detailed eschatology is, for a few, still highly motivating. Yet the net result is a number of us who have never grown into spiritual maturity. Christians who don't understand love and grace and forgiveness. Christians

whose obsession with food and apparel and Sabbathkeeping and denominational exceptionalism and Ellen White resembles superstition more than faith.

The Disintegrating World?

"But there is real tragedy, difficulty, and danger in the world," people say. That's true. There has always been tragedy, difficulty, and danger in the world. Today we have environmental breakdown, mass shootings, and nuclear weapons. But look back, and you'll see that every few decades we have genocides of millions. A hundred years ago, a plague of influenza wiped out 50 million people. Seven hundred years ago, the Great Plague killed half of Europe, and no one knows how many elsewhere. Armies have regularly slaughtered entire nations. For longer than we've kept records, floods, tsunamis, and earthquakes have buried people in earth and water. Famines, plagues, and wars that kill millions are unexceptional in human history. The scale is different as more people inhabit the globe, but the suffering is the same. Some experts say that more people are actually safer, happier, and more prosperous now than at any prior time in recorded history.

Our church is growing and thriving, too, and we don't let you forget it. The General Conference treasurer reports how many billions we collect in tithes and offerings. The North American Division buys a new multimillion-dollar headquarters. The General Conference president flies around the world, treated in some regions like a head of state. We have billions in assets of all kinds—educational, medical, and administrative institutions, in addition to investments of many sorts—and tremendous growth in some parts of the world, of which we brag incessantly.

It's not the scoffers who are acting as if "everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:4, NIV). It's the church itself.

And so I tell you something you may not know, but it's about time you did.

In spite of our constant eschatological drumbeat, we don't *really* believe that Jesus is coming soon. If we did, we would have denominational offices in prefabs on blocks, not multimillion-dollar office complexes in the world's most expensive cities. We wouldn't have a retirement plan for workers. Treasurers wouldn't be talking about our real estate, our net worth, or our stocks and bonds. Church

members wouldn't be producing children, or buying houses, or taking vacations.

Awaiting Persecution?

As for the scary persecution stories, they give us a kind of thrill, but we don't really want them to happen. When you play peek-a-boo with a little child, she laughs because she's only momentarily scared, and because it's mommy's face that gets revealed. Adults get a thrill from a scary movie because we know there's not a real guy in a hockey mask butchering people with power tools.

Whenever real persecution has threatened, we've tried to stop it. We only perpetuate the persecution narrative because it's *not* happening. Most of us would be greatly disappointed if the events that initiate the second coming actually began to take place—even though they're the prequel to Jesus' return. Among other things, they would disrupt the smooth working of an impressive denominational organization.

I propose that we move from what is coming *last* to what we aspire to be for God *at last*.

No, the *imminent* second coming is dead in all but our fantasies. But there, we work it for all it's worth. Apocalyptic pessimism is like heroin—an addiction that many can't give up but that only fuels our need for more of it, no matter how disconnected our fantasies are from reality.

Khodasevich said of the Symbolists, "They knew that they were acting, but the act became their life." At some point along the line (it is impossible to say just when), the passage of time made Seventh-day Adventists' particular belief in the imminent return of Christ into an act, a myth. Jesus will return, but it is too late to say that he is coming *soon*, and no amount of tragedizing or excuse-making is going to change that.

What Now?

Some now reading this are angry that one who has been a Seventh-day Adventist minister all of his life would say what I've said here. You think I'm attacking the Seventh-day Adventist Church, trying to destroy it by undermining the teaching of the soon return of Christ.

But you would be very wrong. At this late date, it is not questioning the idea of an imminent Advent that hurts us, but rather, refusing to talk about it. I'm saying aloud what everyone is thinking but no one wants to say: that Jesus has not come "soon" and that after all of these years, it is no longer an apt word.

Let us imagine (it shouldn't be hard, given the 175 years that have already passed) that things will continue as they have until 2044. What will we say about that anniversary? That we've preached the *imminent* return of Jesus for 200 years? People will laugh—and they should.

Oh, we can continue this way for a few more decades, maybe even for another century. It just depends what type of people we want to be.

We can be the church that claims the sky is always falling. Should there be huge world disasters, we can borrow momentum from them. "See? Everything is falling apart, just as we said it would!" In between tragedies, we can warn of Sunday laws and imminent persecution. We will imagine tragedy and conspiracy everywhere, interpreting relatively benign events as precursors to the end of the world. Half of the Christians in the world will be our enemies, and the other half will be unsaved. If we're really lucky, someone in some corner of the globe will threaten a real Sunday law, and we can bask in our collective "I told you so."

We will, meanwhile, remain a little uncomfortable about the denomination's wealth and success in a world of increasing religious freedom. We don't want to *experience* persecution as much as we want to use the *possibility* of persecution. Which is why we will continue "performing in a theater of fervid improvisation" the idea that we are a day away from the end of all things.

But is that who we want to be? Or has the time has come for us to refine our identity?

In truth, we have in certain ways tacitly admitted that Jesus isn't coming *soon*. Even as our churches talk about imminent apocalypse, our universities and hospitals build new and better buildings. While most North American congregations are shrinking private clubs, our empire grows.

We are at a perilous moment, here at the end of our myth, and if we are to survive as a church, we need an evolved story.

What will that story be? There is so much about Seventh-day Adventism that is lovely and life-giving. The Sabbath. The health message. Religious liberty. Our intention to help people in the wholeness of their lives.

The expectation that there will be an end to history will remain part of our story. It is that word “soon” that needs to be redacted. How will we go about that?

An Aspirational Eschatology

Eschatology means “the study of last things.” But let us agree that we have exhausted both the truthfulness and the usefulness of the “minutes to midnight” motif, with its threats and terrors. I propose that we move from what is coming *last* to what we aspire to be for God *at last*.

May Seventh-day Adventists be *at last* the true heirs of the Reformation, those who show what it means to grasp the confidence of salvation wholly by faith, while relying on a generous and tolerant understanding of the Bible alone.

May we be *at last* the Christians who will distinguish ourselves by having the most honest, above-board church organization in Christian history—neither playing authoritarian games nor seeking money, success, or fame, but saturated in the spirit of the risen Christ.

May Seventh-day Adventists *at last* show the world what it means to have congregations that are happy, peaceful, and accepting of everyone who seeks God’s grace, who move beyond theological conflict to the highest quality of community life and love.

May we rededicate ourselves to our earlier belief in pacifism and be *at last* the church that stands for minimizing war around the globe and ameliorating the effects of it where it happens.

May Seventh-day Adventists *at last* join hands with other Christians who are pursuing goals similar to ours, rather than treating other lovers of Jesus as “apostates” and labeling them “Babylon.”

May Seventh-day Adventists *at last* become champions for ameliorating human suffering in a significant way: feeding the hungry and helping the poor, as well as being the spark for all Christians to oppose unjust laws that enrich a few and demean the immigrants and the impoverished. May we be on the front lines fighting against racism, discrimination, ethnic hatred, and misogyny—which means, among other things, *at last* giving women full status within our denomination and *at last* letting homosexual people be thoroughly at home among us.

Light the Candles

There is another story of “The Dark Day” that seems to me more instructive than the version in *The Great Controversy*.⁴ In May of 1780, forest fires had ignited vast acreages of the

Algonquin Highlands of Ontario,⁵ and so much smoke smothered New England that it darkened the sun. On May 19, the Connecticut legislature was in session when the smoke settled in. Some members were terrified and voiced concern that the day of judgment had come. One member moved for adjournment.

The legislative record says that congressman Abraham Davenport took the floor. “Mr. Speaker,” he said. “The day of judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought and we proceed to business.”

Candles were lit, and work continued. People were impressed by Davenport’s clear-eyed calm. Eventually he was promoted to Chief Justice for the Court of Common Pleas in Danbury. (In 1789 Davenport had a fatal heart attack while presiding at the bench, thus fulfilling his wish of meeting his maker while doing his duty.)

This is what I would wish for Seventh-day Adventists as we go forward. There will be disasters. There will be wars and rumors of wars. Nation shall rise against nation. There will be famines and plagues and earthquakes in many places. There will be false prophets and false messiahs. There will be political corruption and religious heresies. Where will Seventh-day Adventists be? Not, I dearly hope, running about doing the Chicken Little act. No, I pray that we would be the people lighting candles and keeping on with our work.

We are at a turning point. We have 25 years to prepare for what may be the most significant anniversary in our history. We can continue to “perform in a theater of fervid improvisation.” Or we can meet the tragedies and opportunities of the future, as they arrive, with courage and grace. Which type of people do we want to be? **AT**

¹ Vladislav Khodasevich, *Necropolis* (1939), translated by Sarah Vitali (2019), p. 8.

² Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 1 (1958), pp. 68-69.

³ White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (1900), p. 69.

⁴ White, *The Great Controversy* (1888, 1907), pp. 306-307.

⁵ Erin R. McMurry, Michael C. Stambaugh, Richard P. Guyette, and Daniel C. Dey, “Fire Scars Reveal Source of New England’s 1780 Dark Day,” *International Journal of Wildland Fire*, Vol. 16 (2007), pp. 266-270. Online at www.fs.usda.gov/treearch/pubs/41025.

THE REMNANT CHURCH: THREAT OR PROMISE?

BY REINDER BRUINSMA

WHEN IN 1956 I WAS BAPTIZED, AT AGE 14, the last question in the baptismal vow inquired whether I believed that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is the “last church” and whether it was my desire to be accepted as a member thereof. This baptismal question has remained essentially the same since then.

What do we mean when we use terms such as “remnant” or “last church”? And who belongs to this special group?

Soon after the Seventh-day Adventist Church emerged from the Millerite movement, it began to refer to itself as “the remnant” or “the remnant church.”¹ It became an important part of the Adventist self-understanding to see itself as the small group that would remain faithful to God and to his will during the final hours of Earth’s history. This group also often identified itself as the 144,000 of Revelation (7:1-8; 14:1-5), but as the number of Adventists increased and went far beyond 144,000, the idea took hold that this was a symbolic number.

Its Characteristics

The concept of the remnant has deep Old Testament roots. Gerhard F. Hasel

(1935-1994), a prominent Adventist theologian, placed the idea into a broader biblical setting.² Others have also written about the remnant as a “small group of God’s people who, through calamities, wars, and apostasy, remain loyal to God. This faithful remnant were the rootstock God used to propagate His visible church on earth (2 Chron. 30:6; Ezra 9:14, 15; Isa. 10:20-22; Jer. 42:2; Eze. 6:8; 14:22).”³

But the focus of Adventist interpreters has been mostly on Revelation 12:17, where an end-time “rest” (KJV: “remnant”) is mentioned. We are told that “the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring” (NKJV). It is widely accepted that the woman in this prophetic context stands for the church. The text is thus about a starkly reduced section of the church that remains loyal during the last turbulent period before the second coming of Christ. And how may this group, which has remained loyal to God, be recognized? They obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus (verse 17).

In the Adventist understanding, the fourth commandment about the

Sabbath is the test *par excellence* for man’s obedience to God, which means that keeping the seventh-day Sabbath is one of the two crucial distinctions of the remnant. The second distinct characteristic of remnant believers is that they “hold to the testimony of Jesus” or, as other Bible versions say, “the faith of Jesus.” To further define this testimony of Jesus, Adventists turn to Revelation 19:10, where the testimony of Jesus is defined as “the spirit of prophecy.” They equate the spirit of prophecy with the prophetic gift of Ellen G. White, one of the co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This leaves us with several questions. First, does obeying the commandments come down (as it generally does, in our interpretation) exclusively to the keeping of the Sabbath? Second, is the word “of” in the phrase “testimony of Jesus” to be understood in the sense of “originating from Jesus,” or does it have the meaning of “about Jesus”? Both translations are possible; and third, can we legitimately tie the spirit of prophecy specifically to one person within our own denomination?

We notice in the Bible texts an emphasis on the loyalty of the remnant under trying



circumstances. They want to do what God expects from them. They seek to profess the faith of Jesus in word and practice, and they staunchly bear witness (“prophesy”) about that faith. This much is clear. But I believe we must be hesitant to make the remnant virtually identical to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is safest to stay as close as we can to the biblical data.

Various Interpretations

Ángel Rodríguez, a former director of the Biblical Research Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, has identified six different approaches to the remnant in recent Adventist thought.⁴ I have summarized them⁵ as follows:

1. The traditional position: the Seventh-day Adventist Church is God’s remnant community of the faithful.
2. The remnant concept is broadened to include both Adventists and non-Adventists.
3. The remnant is to be found *within* the Adventist denomination but may constitute only a small minority of Adventists.
4. The remnant is an invisible entity and includes all believers in any religious

structure who are determined to be faithful to God.

5. The remnant is still future, and it is impossible for any church to now refer to itself as the remnant.

6. The remnant is to be understood primarily in a sociological sense; those

**I BELIEVE WE MUST
BE HESITANT TO
MAKE THE REMNANT
VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL
TO THE SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH.
IT IS SAFEST TO STAY AS
CLOSE AS WE CAN TO THE
BIBLICAL DATA.**

who belong to the remnant will work for justice and peace in this world.

As you can see, these range from very wide to very narrow interpretations. Rodríguez himself defends the traditional viewpoint, which identifies the Adventist

Church as the remnant, but he accepts that believers outside the Adventist Church should be included among the remnant.⁶

It seems to me that we should be very reluctant to think in terms of option three, in which the remnant is reduced to an elect group inside the Adventist denomination. That can easily bring us perilously close to Last Generation Theology, which is nonbiblical and a dangerous road to travel.⁷

I am inclined to follow option two or option four, which means broadening the remnant concept beyond Adventism.

The underlying issue, then, is how we Adventists see our denomination in relationship to other Christians. Do we consider those in other traditions as fellow Christians—who have in many respects the same goals as we have—or as the Babylonian enemy?

I consider myself a Seventh-day Adventist *Christian*, which means I am a Christian first and an Adventist second. I find myself in full agreement with these words in the book *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine*: “Seventh-day Adventists firmly

believe that God has a precious remnant, a multitude of earnest, sincere believers, in every church, not excepting the Roman Catholic communities, who are living up to all the light that God has given them.”⁸ And further: “We believe that finally the ‘remnant people’ will include every true and faithful follower of Christ.”⁹

Keep in Mind

There are several things we should consider when we discuss the identity of the remnant.

We can hardly overestimate the difference between the world of the early

solely of Protestants and a rapidly growing number of Roman Catholics. Adventism was one of the new sects that had arisen along the margins of American church life, and the atmosphere between Adventists and the vast majority of American Christians was characterized by animosity. The Adventist self-understanding as an unwelcome “remnant” was quite logical.

But society has changed. Non-Christian religions and rampant secularization, as well as an ever-increasing percentage of the population that declares itself to be atheist or agnostic, have greatly upset the traditional appellation. It can be argued that

Christ. Ellen G. White wrote in her book *The Great Controversy* that “the greater part of the followers of Christ” is “in the various churches professing the Protestant faith.”¹⁰ And in her book *Prophets and Kings*, she extends the concept of the “remnant” much further to include Catholics and non-Christians.¹¹

From our present perspective, it may seem that recent and current developments in the religious world provide us with reasons to believe that some of the powers and trends we have noticed in the past and continue to observe in the present will be part of the

**IT CAN BE ARGUED THAT IN THE MODERN WORLD,
OTHER CHRISTIANS ARE NO LONGER OUR ENEMIES, BUT
OUR ALLIES IN KEEPING THE GOSPEL FLAME ALIVE AND
PROTECTING THE CHRISTIAN HERITAGE OF OUR WESTERN
WORLD AND ITS BIBLICAL VALUES.**

Adventists and the Western world of 2019. The fledgling Advent movement that was emerging in the 1850s and 1860s was indeed a small remnant in a largely hostile environment. Moreover, the American religious landscape was totally different from what it is now—on both sides of the Atlantic. The population of mid- and late-19th-century America consisted almost

in the modern world, other Christians are no longer our enemies, but our allies in keeping the gospel flame alive and in protecting the Christian heritage of our Western world and its biblical values. This may well lead us to think of the remnant that remains loyal to their faith in Jesus in terms of a remainder of *Christians* rather than a remnant that consists solely of Seventh-day Adventists. And it should prompt us to be thankful that Adventists are not the only ones who are charged with proclaiming the saving grace of

final axis of apostasy. But it is probably best not to proceed beyond that point, for we cannot with any precision predict future developments. The biblical prophecies do indeed paint the broad outlines, but they do not allow us to fill in the details.

Likewise, we must be careful not to move beyond clear biblical data in defining the identity of loyal believers. Is there an *institutional* continuity between those who today preach the gospel message with the specific end-time emphases of Revelation 14 and those who will remain loyal during the final crisis? The symbolism and vivid imagery of

Revelation hardly allow for the existence of any kind of institutional life and organizational arrangements among God's people, as we know them today, when the great controversy reaches its crescendo.¹²

The term "remnant" indicates that the loyal followers of Christ represent a minority; however, there is good reason to believe that this minority may, after all, be surprisingly large. Certainly the Bible does not support universalism, the idea that in the end every human being who ever lived will be saved. While it is true enough that God does not want anyone to be lost (2 Pet. 3:9), sadly, not all people want to be saved and accept the offer of eternal bliss. There will be a judgment, and eternal life will be given only to those who wholeheartedly wanted it.

However, we must never lose sight of the magnificent truth that God is a God of love and that, as an inspiring hymn says, "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea!"¹³ We have good reason to believe that the remnant referred to under the symbol of the 144,000 is, in fact, identical with the "great multitude" that no one can count.

Belonging to the Remnant

Even though the composition of the remnant should not, in my view, be restricted to Adventist believers, it is important that we, through the grace of God, invest all of our collective efforts into ensuring that we are and remain part of that remnant. We recognize that we share in the task of proclaiming the gospel alongside and in concert with the many sheep who are not of the Adventist fold, but who do belong to the fold of Christ as much as we do (John 10:16). This does not diminish the fact that, as Seventh-day

Adventist Christians, we have been blessed with many precious insights, which we must faithfully and creatively share with non-Christians as well as with our fellow brothers and sisters in other faith communities.

When all is said and done, our task is not to define the composition of the remnant, but rather to reflect the characteristics of the remnant. Our daily question must be: "Do we through the grace of God try to obey God's will, and do we live by and model in our daily life the faith that Christ has given us, which he wants to further strengthen in us as we prophesy to the world around us?" **AT**

¹ Stefan Höschele, "The Remnant Concept in Early Adventism," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2013), pp. 267-300.

² Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (1980).

³ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (2005), p. 190.

⁴ Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *The Remnant and the Adventist Church* (2000). Online at https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/remnantSDAchurch_0.pdf.

⁵ Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (2009), pp. 199-202.

⁶ He recognizes that an article from Ellen G. White points in that direction: "They Shall Be Mine, Saith the Lord of Hosts," *Signs of the Times* (Nov. 23, 1904), p. 1.

⁷ Reinder Bruinsma, *In All Humility: Saying "No" to Last Generation Theology* (2018).

⁸ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrines—Annotated edition* (2003; original edition 1957), pp. 162-163.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888), p. 382.

¹¹ White, *Prophets and Kings* (1917), pp. 188-189.

¹² Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, pp. 199-200.

¹³ Frederick William Faber, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (1862).

WATCHING THE CLOUDS

By Kirsten Oster Lundqvist

RIGHT NOW, FROM MY HOUSE IN NEW ZEALAND, I SEE A CHANGE in weather sweeping in from Cook Strait. I can tell by the masses of dark clouds. I don't know the names of all of the different clouds, but sometimes I can tell if they're going to bring rain or snow or wind.

Watching clouds can be a sweet and innocent pastime. Yet for me, it didn't start out as mere curiosity about meteorology. I trace my fascination with clouds back to Sabbath School days, to the imagery of Jesus coming back in a cloud. Stories of "a small black cloud, about half the size of a man's hand"¹ that grew larger had me anxiously watching clouds from an early age, because I wanted to be ready for Jesus.

A Fearful Theology

Jesus' second coming dominates my memories of children's Sabbath School. I remember catchy songs about the "Father up above" watching us, so "be careful, little feet, where you go." They reminded us youngsters that the road to heaven was a narrow path with many twists and turns, and it was hard to find. This was all in the context of trying to get children to obediently sit still—because Jesus doesn't like us to be loud and active, which children naturally are.

Our teachers were well-meaning. But what they taught was damaging to a child's literal mindset and shaped a theology of a vengeful God who loves us only when we are perfect. The book of life was portrayed as a spreadsheet of our wrongdoings, to be scrutinized at the second coming to determine whether or not we are good enough for heaven. It caused me considerable anxiety: since I wasn't always nice to my sister, I wondered, would I even go to heaven?

Why People Leave

So many times it has seemed to me that heaven didn't sound like paradise but, rather, an exclusive club that was nearly impossible to access unless you were a perfect saint. Might this be a factor in why so many leave our church or choose to go elsewhere?

If a fear-driven theology about heaven and the second coming drives people away from church, it begs us to look critically at how we teach this belief to our children. We sometimes insist

that bad relationships are what drive people away from church, but I want to suggest, based on anecdotal evidence, that how we teach people about our faith in childhood has a big effect. A large portion of my generation who have left the church carried scars from children's Sabbath School teachings. By the time they reached their teens, they'd had enough.

When fear of not being saved and going to heaven becomes the main driving force, we as a church have failed the gospel of Jesus.

Longing for Jesus, or Mere Escapism?

If you grew up in the church, as I did, you heard that "Jesus is coming soon, and we must be ready." Generations before me have preached the imminent return of Jesus. And we are still here. Some of us still look up at the clouds and wonder: what does "being ready" mean? At what point does a longing for the second coming of Jesus become escapism from reality rather than a sincere hope for the future?

In the midst of our suffering is a comfort in knowing that one day "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (Rev. 21:4, NIV). Until that day, is my life one long suffering? Does this mean that I cannot stand to be on this Earth, where God in his wisdom has placed me at this time? That I can't be happy until I escape it?

All of us have experienced some suffering or hardship. But does it justify escapism from the realities we are living in? Does the belief that Jesus is coming again soon actually change how you live your daily life? Should it?

If we trust God to do what he has promised—that is, to return and take us with him to the new earth, as we claim to believe—then why are we hearing in some parts of our church that Adventists have not sufficiently hastened the coming of the Lord? Do we really have that much power?

Or perhaps we are not trusting God to keep his promises. We find church members who with all their hearts believe that if they work harder at being good, even perfect, then Jesus will come more quickly. No wonder that so many of us struggle with the assurance of salvation!

What We Should Have Learned

If there's one thing we Adventists should have learned after the Great Disappointment in 1844, it is that we shouldn't predict the second coming or try to hasten it by our works. What that chapter in our denominational history should have taught us that we must live in the present and prepare for a long life here. Remember the narratives of early believers who neglected preparing for winter when they believed that Jesus would return in October of 1844?

We survived the Great Disappointment, but we still get seduced by date setting. While I understand why we want to emphasize the return of Jesus, what we do borders on distrusting God's promise of returning unless we constantly pretend that it is going to happen next week.

As for being "ready," none of us is perfect. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), and it is only because of divine mercy and grace that I can claim the gift of redemption. So being ready cannot be about how good I am. It has to be based upon how willing I am to receive God's saving grace. Being ready is a relational longing for a reunion, much like awaiting your loved one's return from a trip. How erroneous, then, to think of it as a balanced spreadsheet of good deeds that somehow compel Jesus to return!

Adventists, of all people, should know better than to be so arrogant as to think that we can make Jesus come on our schedule. Jesus stressed that no one knows the day or hour of his return (Matt. 24:36). One of the most neglected truths in this whole belief is that Jesus tells us that his return will be *when no one is expecting it* (verse 44)! If that's the case, what could be the point of speculating about when it will happen?

When Is "Soon"?

So let us grow beyond our date-obsessed heritage and look at the soon coming of Jesus from a different perspective.

Let's start by analyzing the word "soon." Ask a child, and she'll tell you that "soon" is the next second or two. A student facing a deadline, a jobseeker being told that she will hear soon if she was successful, or an elderly sick man who is told that he will soon get help to relieve him from pain—each will have a unique sense

of what that word means. "Soon" is a relative term and cannot be measured.

So, might a focus on the "soon" return of Jesus invite escapism from dealing with the reality we are living in? If Jesus is coming soon, then why should I recycle and care for the environment? It will be destroyed soon anyway.

Consequently, we need to think carefully before we use the word "soon" to describe an event we are told could happen at any time—according to the Bible, when we aren't expecting it.

Another Way to See "Soon"

When you consider "the soon return of Jesus," what is the most important word in that phrase? It's not "soon." The *return* of our Savior is the key element here, not the time.

As Adventists, we have always believed that in a historical timeline, the second coming is sooner rather than later. But let's shift perspective and look at it from another angle. In a nutshell, our Fundamental Belief No. 26 says that we have one life and that in death, we are asleep until the second coming.

If we believe that Jesus will return to take us home soon, then it could be either when we are alive or dead. And if we are dead when Jesus comes again, it doesn't matter if it's one day after our death or hundreds of years later—for we have no concept of time in death! Subjectively, the return of Jesus will still be "soon" to us. So this event will always come in my near future—whether I'm dead or alive.

In this way, Jesus' return being "soon" becomes less disruptive to my daily life, allowing me to trust God to deliver on his promises in his time.

As clouds pass by overhead, I know that every day in the here and now with God is a gift. And one day, when God decides, we will see Jesus in the clouds descending from the heavens (Rev. 1:7). I want to look forward to the day, not as an escape from reality, but as the ultimate reality of living as we were originally created to be. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888, 1911), p. 640.

FEAR AND ESCHATOLOGY

BY TJ SANDS

I GREW UP IN THE ADVENTIST CHURCH. I also had an overactive imagination.

I can't pinpoint when I first heard a Bible story, but it was no doubt at a very young age. My earliest memories are of my parents and grandparents reading to me from a set of *The Bible Story* books by Arthur Maxwell and listening to cassette tape audio dramas about the life of Jesus. The stories from the Bible fascinated me. The tension, the excitement, and the wonder all gripped me from the start. The Bible, and the stories therein, became a healthy obsession for me.

During my formative years, when I should have been letting my imagination wander among the intricacies of nature, the resiliency of the human body, and the wonders still left undiscovered in the deep oceans, the vastness of space, and the dark coverings of far-away jungles, I was sidetracked by fear. A dark cloud seemed to rumble just above all of my childhood imaginings.

That's because my experience in the church (I pray yours has been different) was, more often than not, rooted in fear. Don't do *that*, or *this* will happen. *This* thing or *that* thing is a deception from the pits of hell.

These types of messages were especially prevalent in the numerous evangelistic series I attended. While often built around the promised return of Christ, they focused more on the dangers than on the promises. Much time was devoted to the devil's plans and schemes, while Jesus' actions and final victory were tacked on at the end, more as footnotes than as the thesis.

People still leave Adventist presentations on the book of Revelation feeling fearful and worried about the future. I've heard countless horror stories from friends and family about their fears concerning end-time events. They took from these eschatological studies no assurance of salvation. Petrified of what the devil has in store for this world, they still wonder if they have done enough. Yet, they keep coming back to drink deeply from these fountains of fear.

What is wrong with us? Do we enjoy fear?

Fear as a Motivator

Humans can become addicted to fear. When something scares us, our bodies are flooded with powerful chemicals, which cause both psychological and physical responses. Dr. William George, a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow with Good

Samaritan Regional Medical Center in Oregon, has done extensive research on the topic of scary experiences for children. His research shows that while children can be traumatized by scary experiences, some adults thrive on them and keep coming back for more. Many adults love horror movies, for example.

When frightening thrills are connected with something positive, such as church attendance or Bible study, we psychologically associate the negative feelings of fear with the positive feelings of spirituality. It can even get to the point where we feel that we haven't received a spiritual blessing if we don't experience the thrill of fear.

I find it comical that so many in the church look down upon those who watch horror movies, yet we have our own "horror genre" within Adventism!

As a pastor, I sometimes meet people who will express unhappiness to me about a sermon focused on love, joy, or assurance. They'd prefer I warned them about things they can worry about. They say: "Pastor, why are you focusing so much on righteousness by faith? Shouldn't we be warning people about the mark of the beast? If we don't scare people, how do we know that they will ever change?"

I've not only met these kinds of people. I used to be one.

We have fooled ourselves into thinking that fear is a good motivator. It may be possible to scare a person into making the right choice, but is it the right way to bring someone to Jesus? Churches are filled with individuals who have chosen to follow Jesus, but these Christ followers fall into two groups: those who have decided to follow Jesus because they have fallen in love with him and his character, and those who follow Jesus because they are terrified of the devil and his abilities.

Those who try to live right because they want to please Jesus, and those who try to live right simply because they are scared of hell and punishment.

Which do we want to be?

Our Portrait of God

When I was a child, I followed my parents' rules out of fear. I obeyed because I was scared of the punishment that would come with rule-breaking, not because I believed that they loved me and had my best interest at heart. I've since repented.

Which leads me to ask: what portrait of God do we paint for those who take note of our motivations for following him? Focusing on punishment when talking about God paints him as harsh, vindictive, or unloving. From my own experience, I can say without question that while I was trying to be a good Christian for the wrong reasons, I was scared of God. I'm not talking about fear in the sense of respect. No, I was terrified of what he was going to do to me if I didn't get things right in my own life.

I now view God as being on my side. He fights for me, he chose me, he died for me. He's in love with me, and I'm in love with him. I work to please him and be a positive reflection of him to others. But, here's the catch: on the outside, these two opposing motivations looked the same. In both instances, I was helping others, attending church, studying my Bible, and trying to be a better Christian.

The apostle Paul admonished us to be on the lookout for this when he wrote the following in his letter to Timothy: "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5, NKJV). What is the power of which he is speaking? We need only to flip back two chapters in the same book. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of

power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV).

When we are scared, we tend to make rash decisions. When our minds are flooded with fear, anxiety, and worry, we are much more likely to make less-than-sound decisions. When we lead with fear, the message loses power. It lands in the mind but doesn't transfer to the heart—a "form of godliness." Fear may get a quicker reaction than love, but love will create longer-lasting effects.

We have fooled ourselves into thinking that fear is a good motivator. It may be possible to scare someone into making the right choice, but is it the right way to bring people to Jesus?

A Greater Power

I am not trying to be contrary or rebellious when I make these observations. I simply want to encourage those who are fed up with the fear tactics. I am trying to say that there is another, more hopeful and encouraging way of looking at God.

When I became head pastor in my local church almost two years ago, I decided that I was not going to use fear tactics in my sermons, teachings, or conversations. The results have been a tremendous reminder to me of the power of love. I have preached Jesus. I have preached grace. I have preached the gospel. I am currently preaching a seven-part series

on the book of Revelation, focusing on themes such as assurance, redemption, celebration, and restoration. Over the past couple of years, I have lost count of the number of people who have come to me with a newfound joy in their hearts—individuals who have the assurance of salvation for the first time in their Christian walk. Individuals who are no longer scared or trepidatious when it comes to studying their Bibles. Individuals who can finally leave church on a Sabbath afternoon with hope and encouragement.

I can't take the credit. My sermons come from the Bible, and I borrow from the studies of others, such as Elizabeth Talbot (whose short book *Revelation: The Fifth Gospel* I turned into a sermon series, with her permission). Through all of this, the spirit of power, love, and sound-mindedness is having a profound effect on my local church. Fear, worry, and anxiety are not needed to change a human heart. The love of Jesus is enough to change people's lives forever.

Fear does play a role in eschatology (just check out some of the passages in Revelation), but it should never overshadow love. God wants us to love him, not to be terrified of him. Is there any sense in fearing a God who chose to die for you (1 John 4:10)?

Do you fear end-time events? If so, turn your focus to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, which is the universal standard for perfect love. That perfect love casts out fear (verse 18). The cross, not an overemphasis of fear-based eschatology, will draw people to Jesus (John 12:32). And isn't that what our mission is all about? **AT**

HURRYING GOD

By Jeremiah Smart

“IF ONLY GOD’S PEOPLE WOULD GET THEIR ACT TOGETHER AND finish the work, then Jesus would come.” I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard this—or a variation thereof—and have even preached it myself. I thought I was being clever when I said that we aren’t waiting for Jesus to come, but that God is waiting on us so that he can send Jesus back.

But who is really in charge of the time of the second coming?

The Bible says, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matt. 24:36, NKJV). We have often used this verse to make the point that we don’t know the day or the hour.

The last clause may seem like an add-on, but it is vital to our understanding of the eschaton. It says that while we don’t know the day or the hour of his appearing, the Father knows the exact day and hour, and we cannot move that day either forward or backward, because it is already set by God.

This isn’t a mere philosophical argument about God’s foreknowledge of future events, but a direct statement by Jesus concerning the most climactic prophetic event in salvation history. Just as the pivotal events of Jesus’ life were laid out on a prophetic timeline that could not be altered, so also, according to Jesus, the moment of his return is prophetically determined.

Sometimes prophetic statements are subject to a condition of human participation, but there is nothing conditional about this one. It is crystal clear that we don’t even know when Jesus’ return will take place, let alone determine when it will happen.

Covenant Promises

God’s people may have some misunderstandings about how covenant promises work. We have noted that the problem with the old covenant was that the children of Israel thought it was conditional on their behavior. We quote critically their pledge that

they would obey all God had commanded (Exo. 19:8) so that the covenant could be fulfilled.

Clearly, the old covenant didn’t work out very well for God’s people. If we fail to distinguish between the principles underlying the old and new covenants, we are bound to repeat the failures of the past. Yet this is what we are doing when we make the second coming dependent on human works, whether perfection or performance. God has told us why he “delays” his coming. It isn’t because we aren’t perfect or haven’t done enough in perfecting others. It is because he is longsuffering toward us, not wanting a single one of us to perish, but desiring that all should be saved (2 Pet. 3:9, NKJV). Any change that makes the second coming dependent on human works moves us from a new covenant relationship, where God is responsible for the fulfillment, to an old covenant relationship that is doomed to fail.

It sounded pious for God’s people of the old covenant to pledge their obedience to the law in order to fulfill the covenant. It sounds similarly pious for God’s people today to make the second coming dependent on their obedience to the gospel commission to fulfill the new covenant. The fatal flaw in both situations is that the focus is placed on the human agent rather than on the divine agency. Any theology that makes fulfillment of the climactic event of the covenant of salvation dependent upon human works is doomed to repeat the failure of the old covenant.

The better formulation is that the same God who began the good work will be faithful to complete it (Phil. 1:6, NKJV). The second coming is God’s work, and it will be done exactly in his timing.

Looking for and Hastening

Yet 2 Peter 3:12, which appears to be telling us that we can hasten “the coming of the day of God,” has been interpreted to mean that Jesus’ return is affected by our actions. In his letter, Peter used *spendo*, the Greek verb for “hasten,” which has three meanings: (1) do quickly, (2) cause to happen soon, and (3) be eager.

In the other New Testament passages where this verb is used, found in Luke and Acts, the subject is *eagerly hurrying* toward the object. The shepherds *hasten* to find the baby Jesus in Luke 2:16. They aren’t trying to rush the birth of the baby Jesus. Likewise, Jesus tells Zaccheus in Luke 19:5 to *hurry* down from the tree and take him to his home. And Paul in Acts 20:16 isn’t trying to change the time of Pentecost when he *eagerly hastens* to get to Jerusalem in time for the celebration. They are all *eagerly hurrying* to meet an appointment made by someone else.

The same holds true when referring to the second coming. We are looking for and *eagerly anticipating* the return of the Messiah.

Any change that makes the second coming dependent on human works moves us from a new covenant relationship, where God is responsible for the fulfillment, to an old covenant relationship that is doomed to fail.

suddenly radiates with hope when we factor in the divine passive: ‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world...and then the end will come’ (Matt. 24:14). The verb ‘will be preached’ is passive. But why the passive here? In giving this sign of His second coming, Jesus could very clearly have declared: ‘And you shall preach [active verb] the gospel in all the world.’ But He didn’t. Instead He chose a passive verb without any actor delineated for the action described. And what does the divine passive signify? That the action will ultimately be accomplished by God Himself!” (p. 28).

Thus, the work that brings on the second coming is accomplished by the Father, leading to the precise day and hour of the second coming, exactly in his time. Note Romans 9:28: “For He will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness,

God’s prophetic moment is not subject to change; instead, we are the ones whose energy and anticipation are affected. The King James Version captures this meaning in its translation, which reads, “Looking for and *hasting unto* the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat” (2 Pet. 3:12, emphasis added).

Finishing the Work

But aren’t we supposed to “finish the work”? Doesn’t Scripture say we are supposed to preach the gospel to the world so the end can come?

In *The Chosen: God’s Dream for You*, author and pastor Dwight Nelson explains what he calls the “divine passive.” When no subject or actor is used in a sentence, the action is understood to be accomplished by God. After sharing several examples, he notes this about a relevant passage: “Consider another familiar text that

because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth” (NKJV, emphasis added). Finishing the work is God’s task with our help, not ours alone.

Ellen White concurs: “But like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God’s purposes know no haste and no delay.”¹

“Let me tell you that the Lord will work in this last work in a manner very much out of the common order of things, and in a way that will be contrary to any human planning. There will be those among us who will always want to control the work of God, to dictate even what movements shall be made when the work goes forward under the direction of the angel who joins the third angel in the message to be given to the world. God will use ways and means by which it will be seen that He is taking the reins in His own hands.”²

Just imagine the resulting chaos if God had to continually reset his heavenly calendar, based on our actions! Imagine what it would be like if we were in control and God had to hurry or delay, based on our whims! Praise God that the work is his from beginning to end, as are the new covenant promises of salvation.

Why We Do It

Then what motivation do we have to take the gospel to the world? If the second coming is already set and the work is in God’s hands, why shouldn’t the church just sit down and do nothing?

Only one motive is acceptable to God, and that is the motive of love. We work because we love God. We share the good news of salvation because we love our neighbor. Any other motive is disqualifying.

We do not work due to a desire for personal gain, or to avoid guilt or suffering, or to earn God’s favor. In this last great work, God fills us with his love for humanity, and we go out in his image.

If we have failed in anything, it is that our motives have been faulty. But God will never fail, because God is Love. The work will be finished. The second coming will happen at the day and hour of his appointing.

It is vital for the world to see that it is God in his incredible love who has brought this all to completion. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 32.

² White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (1923), p. 299.



GOD IN SPACE-TIME

By Rebecca Davis

I remember when any news that came out of the Vatican was interpreted as a direct sign of the imminent second coming and sparked rumors that Jesus would be here within the month.

I'm being facetious, of course. But it's hard to overstate how unnerving, insensitive, and downright frightening our explanations of current events have sometimes been.

I, too, have been guilty of using the second coming as a dismissive rationale. Many years ago, I remember leaving the campus café at Oakwood University, full and happy, when a friend approached me who was devastated after hearing the news

that a plane had just struck the second tower of the World Trade Center. He was from New York City, and he must have been experiencing tremendous grief and fear at that moment.

My immediate response to him, with a self-righteous shrug of the shoulders, was: "Jesus is coming again."

Oh, the irony! Me—walking my insensitive, unempathetic self to the theology department—unfazed, as the world around me was hurting!

Can Knowledge of Eschatology Save Us?

We must not avoid the real problems and issues of a hurting world by saying, "Jesus is coming again!" Adventists should know better, because we have had real experience with thinking that Jesus was coming and then being disappointed. Shouldn't Jesus' words, "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Matt. 24:36, KJV), tell us that we can't rely on such a dismissive rationale to dodge living and acting in the present?

Yet many of us are seemingly obsessed with understanding and dissecting current events. We try to gather as much

information as we possibly can, believing that in some way, the more we know means the more likely we are to be saved. This is in spite of what Jesus warned: "And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: *see that ye be not troubled*: for all these things must come to pass, but *the end is not yet*. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. *All these are the beginning of sorrows*" (Matt. 24:6-8, emphasis added).

Though I believe that our search for more and more information about the eschaton comes from a sincere desire to want to be ready when Jesus does indeed return, our knowledge has typically made us arrogant, and judgmental, and extremely insensitive to the world around us.

At the same time, perhaps weary of the current-events checklist so many made in previous generations, most of us have come to see the second coming as just a future event. As a result, we rarely consider it as we live out our daily lives.

Do we believe Jesus is coming again? Undoubtedly! Do certain events signify the nearness of the end? Yes! Should we be

aware of such events? Definitely!

In perhaps the most helpful biblical statement on the time of the second coming, Peter writes, “But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:8-9, KJV).

More Important than “When”

You know what’s more important than when? Everything! Because of all the things Jesus told us about his return, the one thing he didn’t tell us was precisely *when* it would happen!

Specifically—and I wish this went without saying—the most important thing is a relationship. Some are so caught up in the *when* that they have never experienced Jesus personally. Others even believe that they know Jesus *because* they know end-time events.

Without a relationship, we have a tendency to become militant against the gospel of grace; to be judgmental toward anyone who does not dress, eat, and dissect end-time events according to our standard; to treat others as heretics or apostates and to categorize them as “lost.” This frame of mind allows no heart, no empathy, and no love for others. We are reduced to judgment and self-righteous comparisons.

The second coming means nothing if Jesus has not first come into our hearts. It is just a spectacular event, as opposed to the reunion Jesus intends for it to be.

The Relativity of Time

Einstein theorized that time runs at different rates, depending on its relationship to space. Scientists tested the theory by flying an atomic clock around the world to compare it to an atomic clock left on the ground. The two clocks no longer agreed; they differed by a few 100 billionths of a second. This was enough to prove that motion affects the passage of time. Physicists now refer to space and time as the space-time continuum, which in essence means that when motion is taken into account, the past, present, and future can exist at the same time.

While Einstein’s theory had to do with testable phenomena, I can attest to the relativity of time in personal experience. I work out with a method called CrossFit, in which two minutes can feel like two hours because my body is constantly in intense motion—nonstop until the clock runs out. In 15 minutes I can get in what feels like a two-hour workout. On the other hand, when I’m just lying in bed watching Netflix, two minutes go by extremely quickly. Immersed in the plot of a riveting show, I’ll suddenly realize I’ve thrown away an entire evening.

In the context of Jesus’ promise to come again, Peter says that a day is as a thousand years with the Lord, and a thousand years as one day.

The 2016 movie *Arrival* is about an elite team of investigators who are summoned when gigantic spaceships touch down in a dozen different locations around the world. As nations teeter on the verge of global war, Louise Banks and her crew race to find a way to communicate with the visitors. She learns that these extraterrestrials don’t see time as linear, as humans do. They see past, present, and future all at the same time. Using this gift brought to humanity by the

extraterrestrials, Louise Banks is able to stop a global war.

The biblical evidence suggests that God doesn’t experience time as a straight line, but as past, present, and future all at once. This may be what Peter wants his readers to understand: that the promise of Jesus’ return hinges on understanding that one day is as a thousand years with the Lord and a thousand years as one day, because God does not experience time as we do.

Perhaps the God who is beyond space and time experiences the promise of his second coming as space-time. He is in rapid motion to work out salvation for as many as he can. Perhaps he is so fast because he does not want anyone perish. He is moving so quickly to allow everyone to come to repentance.

We Adventists should be the last people to set a date or watch the clock. Instead, we should be moving with God. It should grieve us that people are perishing. It should break our hearts that some people haven’t come to repentance. And we should be doing something about it. We shouldn’t be sitting in our corners, dissecting every current event. We shouldn’t be asking, “Jesus, when are you coming back for me?” We should be crying out, “God, extend the time a little more!” Like Desmond Doss in the movie *Hacksaw Ridge*, we should be praying: “Please, Lord, help me get one more! One more, Lord! One more!” We should be so longsuffering toward those who are lost that one day seems to us like a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day!

God is on the move in space-time to bring salvation to as many as he can. And we should be, too. **AT**

THE CONTINUING DISILLUSIONMENT of ADVENTIST ARITHMETIC

By Fritz Guy

WE ADVENTISTS HAVE HAD A LONG AND COMPLICATED LOVE affair with arithmetic. Take, for example, the 2300 days/years prophecy of Daniel 8:14, understood as stretching from 457 BCE to 1844 CE (taking into account the lack of a year 0 between the 1 BCE and 1 CE in the standard Western chronology). When nothing of historical significance happened by October 22, 1844, the chronological arithmetic was said to refer to heavenly rather than human reality.

Food for Worms

More recently (but well before any of us contemporary Adventists were born), Ellen G. White made a clear and specific prediction. Referring to the persons attending a church meeting in Battle Creek in 1889, she envisioned a wide spectrum of future experiences for them: “I was shown the company present at the Conference [in Battle Creek, Michigan, May 27, 1856]. Said the angel: ‘Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.’”¹

Nearly 90 years later, when I was a middle-school student in the early 1940s, I overheard some arithmetically inclined Adventists observe that if there were very small children or infants in attendance at that gathering, they could have still been alive—although by then they would have been in their late 80s—and thus, Ellen White’s prediction would be literally correct.

Clearly that arithmetic no longer works, for the event took place more than 163 years ago; the seven last plagues have not occurred; and no one who was at that conference “will be alive and remain ... to be translated at the coming of Jesus.”

Still Disappointed, Still Wrong

Ellen White’s prediction still has not been fulfilled. In that sense she was simply mistaken. And so once again we are disappointed—though not so dramatically and painfully as in 1844.

Our disappointment has impressive company, for no less a personage than the great apostle Paul made exactly the same kind of mistake—indeed, chronologically it was many times worse. More than 1,800 years before Ellen White, he wrote to the Christian community in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica in northern Greece this explicit prediction: “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:16-17, NRSV).

Another memory from my Adventist childhood features the first coast-to-coast radio broadcast of the Voice of Prophecy on the first Sunday night of 1942, which was January 4. The program began with the King’s Heralds quartet singing, “Lift up the trumpet! Loud let it ring! Jesus is coming again!” and the announcer, Fordyce W. Detamore, saying, “Hello, America!” Then, as now, the message of the program was that *Jesus is coming soon!*

More recently—just two decades ago, as world history approached the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era—an Adventist church official predicted that the end of history could well come on or before January 1, 2000. What, after all, could be a more appropriate moment for the end of human history and the beginning of the hereafter?



The one completely consistent characteristic of Adventist arithmetic is that every prediction we have ever made about the timing of the second advent has been wrong. Surely this should tell us something.

Theology, Not Prediction

What it tells us is that the problem is not the *inaccuracy* of our arithmetic; it is the *erroneous assumption underlying* our arithmetic. That assumption is the almost universal but profoundly mistaken notion that the purpose and function of prophecy is *prediction*.

This is as mistaken as the notion that the purpose and function of the biblical narratives of creation is *science*. In both cases the proper response is a polite and respectful, but firm and clear, “No!” In both the creation narrative and Advent hope, the purpose and function is *theology*: an expression (and, hopefully, an understanding) of the motivation and activity, the values and functions, of *God*.

And the fundamental idea and fact about God is neither unlimited power nor eternal being. It is *infinite love*.

In other words, both Genesis and Revelation, both creation and consummation, are first and foremost about *God’s love*. If we don’t get that point, we have missed the boat completely. We have simply flunked the course. The Christian understanding of creation, as distinct from but not at all opposed to a scientific account of the origin of the universe, is that there is purpose and meaning to all reality and that this purpose and meaning come from the transcendent truth that God is love. The Christian understanding of consummation, as distinct and essentially

different from scientific scenarios of the ultimate future, is that the future offers hope for the fulfillment of the purpose and meaning of all reality, especially, but not limited to, human reality that is created “in the image of God.”

So even the ambiguous adventures of Adventist arithmetic have an ultimately happy ending.

According to a possibly fictitious but plausible and ultimately truthful story, a church pastor encountered the church janitor taking a break and reading the Bible. The pastor asked what part of the Bible the janitor was reading, and the janitor replied, “The book of Revelation.” Recalling his own difficulties in grappling with the exegesis of Revelation and its complicated symbolism when he was a seminary student, the pastor gently inquired if the janitor understood what the book of Revelation says. “Yes, indeed,” the janitor replied. “It says that Jesus is gonna win.”

Although our Adventist curiosity would naturally like to know *when*—and maybe also *how*—the ultimate victory is going to be realized, the consistent failure of our Adventist arithmetic is not a major problem. Indeed, it may well be a blessing we have not yet recognized. For it can remind us that the purpose and point of biblical prophecy is not a revelation of the historical future, but of the values, purposes, and intentions of God. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1948), pp. 131-132.



1844: Failed Prediction, Successful Prophecy

By Alden Thompson

It has been 175 years since 1844, and it is time to ask again why Jesus hasn't returned.

If one is brave enough to consider the question from a "whole Bible" view, one could easily say that there is no practical problem, for if God delays his plans, it doesn't affect our responsibilities in the slightest—no call to frenzied activity, no invitation to "a little folding of the hands" (cf. Prov. 6:10).

Yet for many Adventists, every anniversary makes the question either more urgent or more irrelevant, depending on one's perspective. Therefore, I offer an 1844 primer with five concise chapters—succinct, with some overlap. Some may be provocative. But all should point us to the kingdom.

1. Delay. A thoroughgoing Calvinist won't talk about a delay in God's plans. Though hardly a Calvinist, Ellen White noted that "God's purposes know no haste and no delay."¹

Some up the ante when it comes to divine sovereignty. With reference to prophecy, for example, the American fundamentalist John MacArthur says: "The standard for God's prophecy was absolute accuracy. If you found one prophecy in the Bible that did not come to pass, then you could

throw away your Bible....A true prophet predicts the future with one hundred percent accuracy."² And George Marsden cites an 1888 quote that describes prophecy as "photographically exact forecasting of the future."³

But awe in the presence of the divine should not prevent us from seeing the many ways God allows humans to alter his plans. That is especially clear in connection with Jesus' end-time

Awe in the presence of the divine should not prevent us from seeing the many ways God allows humans to alter his plans.

narrative in Matthew 24-25, a passage that features a number of subtle tensions, not least of which is the tension between signs and surprises. The first part of Matthew 24 emphasizes the signs that show the end is near. But then the focus shifts abruptly from signs to surprises. No fewer than five times, this Gospel's author declares that the end will come as a surprise (Matt. 24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:1-13),

highlighting the importance of constant preparedness.

But in the process, a powerful subtext introduces the challenge of delay (Matt. 24:48; 25:5). While we are called to always be ready, we also know that delay is part of the story. We see both emphases most clearly in the Parable of the Ten Virgins. The wise slept just as did the foolish, but the wise had oil and the foolish didn't.

2. Failed Prediction, Successful Prophecy. Many, perhaps most, Adventists are troubled that our forebears were mistaken about 1844. How could something that was so wrong point to something true? Under this heading, we must look at the conditional element in prophecy.

At the simplest level, a change in circumstances can make a prediction irrelevant. When David was on the run from Saul, for example, he was inside the walls of a small town, Keilah. Saul heard about it and headed for Keilah to capture David. The biblical narrative sheds fascinating light on the nature of predictions. Using the sacred ephod, which the fugitive priest Abiathar had brought, David enters into dialogue with the Lord. "David said, 'O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account.

And now, will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant.' The Lord said, 'He will come down.' Then David said, 'Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?' The Lord said, 'They will surrender you.' Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, set out and left Keilah; they wandered wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition" (1 Sam. 23:10-13, NRSV).

In short, when the human conditions changed, the divinely given prediction was no longer relevant. An Ellen White statement from 1883 points toward an explanation: "The promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional."⁴ We shall return to that statement, but here it simply describes what is evident in Scripture: a prediction can be conditional.

More significant under this heading is the concept of *failed prediction, but successful prophecy*. And the book of Jonah provides a remarkable example. Jonah's prediction was: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4, NRSV). Scripture does not tell us whether this was a direct command of the Lord

or a prediction that came from prophetic authority. But that's not really relevant from God's perspective, for his concern was saving the city.

Here Jonah was wildly successful—the whole city repented. Strictly speaking, of course, the prediction failed, and Jonah was angry about that. But the Lord was pleased that the prophecy accomplished its purpose.

Without conditionalism, Adventists would most likely be with the dispensationalists who are looking for a rebuilt temple on the site of the Islamic Dome of the Rock shrine in Jerusalem.

In short, the Lord does not hesitate to use a failed prediction if it can result in a successful prophecy. Might this be part of the answer to our 1844 dilemma? We shall see.

3. En Route to Conditional Historicism. The 1883 quotation about the conditionality of both the promises and threatenings of God is crucial here, and the circumstances surrounding it

are tantalizing. As reproduced in *Selected Messages*, Book 1, "the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional" is part of a larger response to a somewhat mocking inquiry to Ellen White about the failure of the 1844 prediction. White notes that her response is highly unusual; normally she would ignore such inquiries. But she was making an exception in the hope that her response might be helpful to others with similar concerns.

Her response is particularly intriguing because she cites four New Testament passages that predict (from the perspective of the New Testament writers) that the return of the Lord would be "soon" (1 Cor. 7:29-30; Rom. 13:12; Rev. 1:3; 22:6-7). She applies her statement about the promises and threatenings to these earlier passages and also to the 1844 experience. Thus, she roots her response in Scripture. But perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that the letter was apparently never sent, and her critic is nowhere identified by name. In short, Manuscript 4, 1883, is essentially an orphan in the Ellen G. White files. And while she was alive, White never cited it. Indeed, it was not published for the church at large until it appeared in *Selected Messages*, Book 1, in 1958.

Perhaps Ellen White did not use the document because the idea of conditionalism is a difficult one for devout conservatives. When the concept of conditional prophecy is taken seriously, however, it is helpful in interpreting biblical material.

We should note that “conditional prophecy” was not in the vocabulary of our Adventist forebears. They were all strict historicists, visualizing biblical/historical events on a timeline leading up to the return of Christ. Had they believed in conditionalism, there would have been no Great Disappointment and no Seventh-day Adventist Church as we know it. But with the passage of time, conditionalism became more believable, opening up possibilities beyond strict historicism that would lead to a more consistent interpretation of both Testaments.

The key turns out to be *multiple applications of biblical passages*, especially prophetic ones. One of the best examples is the “dark day,” which Adventists have traditionally interpreted as happening in 1780. If one sees Scripture through the lens of strict historicism, each prophetic image has just one application. But once the windows are thrown open to other possibilities, then one can see in several Old Testament books that the dark day was a sign of the “Day of the Lord,” always a local judgment that pointed to its ultimate fulfillment in *the* Day of

the Lord, the return of Jesus.

One sequence is particularly illuminating. The dark day (Day of the Lord) described by the prophet Joel was a grasshopper plague—but with long-range overtones. In Acts 2, Peter quotes the dark day references from Joel and applies them to the events surrounding the crucifixion and Pentecost. Our Adventist pioneers applied that same imagery to the dark day of 1780. But the ultimate dark day is still future, at the second coming. Revelation 6:12-16 refers to the same cluster of

It is daring to speak of a failed prediction that results in a successful prophecy. Yet the story of Jonah is an unmistakable example.

events that Adventists had limited to the 18th and 19th centuries: “a great earthquake” (assigned to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake), the sun became “black as sackcloth” (May of 1780), and “the stars of the sky fell to the earth” (the Leonid meteor shower of 1833).

Yet in Revelation 6, the context is *the* Day of the Lord: Jesus’ return. Uriah Smith couldn’t see any of that, because he was still a strict historicist. Today, Adventists can view themselves

as conditional historicists or applied historicists, believers who take a both/and approach to prophetic passages, keeping the original historicist interpretation in place but “applying” it to other entities in the light of subsequent events. Thus, we can see Joel’s application to a grasshopper plague, Peter’s application to the Day of Pentecost, the Adventist application to 1780, and the final application to the return of Jesus—the ultimate “Day of the Lord.” All of that, compliments of the Great Disappointment of 1844!

Without conditionalism, Adventists would most likely be with the dispensationalists who are looking for a rebuilt temple on the site of the Islamic Dome of the Rock shrine in Jerusalem. They take the words of Scripture literally but do not see the larger picture that is now available to Adventists.

4. God’s Original Plan for Israel. An amazing essay in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* is titled “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy.”⁵ Although largely ignored by modern Adventists, it builds on the foundation of conditional prophecy and offers a coherent view of the end-time plan presented in Zechariah 14. In short, it describes the death of Christ in the first century, except that Christ is accepted by his people and then, in keeping with the details of Zechariah 14, evil gradually disappears. Under this scenario, there would have been no

Great Disappointment, and history might never have brought us to 1844. In truth, we cannot begin to imagine all of the implications of such a sequence of events. But at least we can now be honest with all of Scripture as we await the return of the Lord.

5. The Return to Jesus'

Understanding of Law. Another intriguing aspect of the 1844 story is the role it played in recovering the law of God for Adventism. Yes, it didn't take long before we became very legalistic. As Ellen White wrote in 1890: "We have been at work on the law until we got as dry as the hills of Gilboa without dew or rain. Let us trust in the merits of Jesus Christ of Nazareth."⁶ It appears that Adventists didn't really discover grace until 1888. And even then, it was blood, sweat, and tears!

But today we need to take one more step in our understanding of law, namely, seeing it as "natural law"—something that becomes intuitive, without command. Jeremiah's new covenant promise is crucial: No one will tell us what to do, because the law is written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-34). And when we take that step, we are close to Jesus' one-verse summary of law as expressed in Matthew 7:12: To treat others as we would want to be treated is the law and the prophets.

If we had time and space, we could explore more of the nature of law in both Testaments. Deuteronomy 5 suggests that law focuses not on eternal salvation,

but on living well in this world. Ultimately, such an approach brings together the secular and religious perspectives. The primary difference between them is simply the motivation: We keep the law because of his gracious gifts to us, and that is a theme we will explore through all eternity.

Intended for Good

The pages of Scripture are peppered with stories of how God took evil deeds and turned them to good. The Joseph narrative tops the list. As he told his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Gen. 50:20, NRSV).

It is daring to speak of a failed prediction that results in a successful prophecy. Yet the story of Jonah is an unmistakable example. God did it his way instead of Jonah's, because he wanted to save the people of Nineveh.

Can we not put 1844 at the head of our Adventist list of failed predictions but potentially successful prophecies? I strongly suspect that the gracious God who wanted to preserve the Israelites in Egypt and the people of Nineveh in Jonah's day also wants to take this motley crowd of Adventists into his kingdom. It is, after all, God's business to save people.

"I will come again," he told his disciples, "and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3,

NRSV). That's a promise God intends to keep, a prophecy he wants to see fulfilled. He will turn heaven and earth upside down to make it happen. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 32.

² John MacArthur, *Is the Bible Reliable?* Study notes from 1974 sermon series (1988), pp. 119-120.

³ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980), p. 56.

⁴ White, Manuscript 4, 1883, published in *Selected Messages*, Book 1 (1958), p. 67.

⁵ *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4 (1953), pp. 25-38.

⁶ White, Manuscript 10, 1890.

The Kingdom of Luke 17:21 Waits for Us:

LIVING THE END NOW

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

As a child, born and raised in a churchgoing family, I was sure that time would not last beyond the year 2000, and even 2000 seemed impossibly far into the future. But here I am—older than I once thought possible—and I still wait for the kingdom to come. The more I contemplate the state of human life and the world as it stands in light of the gospel preached by the Hebrew prophets, Jesus of Nazareth, and the early church,¹ the more I am inclined to think that perhaps the kingdom waits for us.

“When will the kingdom of God come?” the Pharisees asked Jesus. Jesus’ answer: “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21, NRSV).

This statement about Messiah’s coming was a major point of contention in the first-century debate between synagogue and

church (Acts 2:22-36). It defied the logistics of a first-century Jewish political investment in the overthrow of Roman rule by a Messiah from the Davidic line, who would restore Judaic sovereignty and thus fulfill the Abrahamic covenant.²

The early church’s argument was that Messiah had come in Jesus of Nazareth, not as a political figure, but as a spiritual reality in which all (not only Jews) are invited to participate (Rom. 3:29-4:25). Indeed, the kingdom of God has come in the message and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Comparing the Gospels

Matthew’s statement of this same truth is: “If anyone says to you, ‘Here is the Messiah,’ or ‘there he is,’ do not believe it. For false prophets and false messiahs will appear and produce great signs and omens to lead astray, if possible, the elect” (Matt. 24:23-24, translated by the author). Do not go anywhere else

to look for the Messiah, Jesus warns, for Messiah’s coming will be as obvious and phenomenal as a flash of lightning.

Only Luke 17:21 says that “the kingdom of heaven is among you,” though Matthew implies the same thing when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10, NRSV).

So both Matthew and Luke (each drawing on Mark) present this two-dimensional picture of the end. On the one hand, they portray a cataclysmic apocalyptic emergence, but on the other, an elementally communal/spiritual experience available not just to Jews, but to everyone. They were not only waiting for the last judgment, when God through Messiah puts an end to pain and suffering, but were participating in the messianic experience by living the fulfillment—the end—right now. “The kingdom of God is among you” says that they were subverting and disabling



When and how will the fulfillment of God's purpose occur if the church can hardly distinguish itself from political corruption in the pursuit of an ideological agenda?

those structures that create pain and suffering in the first place.

The four Gospels emerge from the teachings of the early church, and Matthew's in particular reflects a clear picture of the early church's understanding of messianic fulfillment and the end.

In the first-century church understanding, the kingdom of God, Messiah, and the end are inseparable. A close examination of this messianic interpretation by the early church may alleviate the chronic anxieties and spiritually toxic distortions that abound regarding the end of the world.

The Kingdom of God

In prophetic Judaism, the kingdom of God is defined as Israel under a reign of justice that leads the nations to God, who is one. Israel "subdues the nations" (Psalm 47:3, NLT), bringing all nations together as one, so that "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie

down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them" (Isa. 11:6, NIV). For the prophets, the kingdom of God can only be established when righteousness-justice³ reign in Israel.

For the first-century Jew whose "promised land" is under Roman colonization, the "kingdom of God" takes on apocalyptic and political urgency. In the time of Jesus and the early church, the covenantal land was a conquered land and had been so for 700 years. Israel enjoyed about 80 years of self-government under the Hasmonean dynasty, before the Roman conquest of the divided Alexandrian Empire. The covenant stands unfulfilled, because the land is not theirs.

In the strictest sense, the true sovereign of Israel has always been God the Creator. Kings of Israel were anointed in place of the Messiah or Christ to lead Israel in righteousness-justice. They were

acting in God's stead as stewards. So, in the first-century C.E. when Jesus made this statement, it was loaded with meaning for a people who had come to expect the kingdom of God as the re-establishment of the Davidic kingship over Israel and a demonstration of the triumph of God's righteousness-justice.

The Meaning of Messiah

The meaning of Messiah in the first century is locked up in chronic colonization of the chosen descendants of Abraham and the re-establishment of the Abrahamic covenant, by which the land returns to its rightful heir—Israel, "Sons of the living God" (Hos. 1:10, RSV). In simple terms, Messiah for the first-century Jew is to make Israel, a colonized underdog in the Roman Empire, great again.

The Hebrew *Mashiach* is the Greek equivalent of *Christos*, or Christ. These words literally and functionally mean "anointed one." Kings of Israel

were anointed to lead God's people in righteousness-justice. In Isaiah 45, King Cyrus of Persia is God's *Mashiach*, or Christ, because he was anointed and appointed by God to bring justice to Israel by initiating their repatriation and restoration after Babylonian captivity and dispersion.

In keeping with the renewal of the covenant with David, Messiah is from the Davidic line. For the politically oriented Jew, Messiah re-establishes Israel's sovereignty. For the apocalyptic Jew, he not only re-establishes Israel's

Jesus left us, the church, to continue his messianic mission. We cannot evacuate this world while we have not fulfilled our responsibility to it.

sovereignty, but also ushers in God's reign of righteousness-justice upon the whole world.⁴ Under Roman oppression, the average Jew, and even more so those in the Jewish power structure, are obsessed with the coming of Messiah to wrest control of Israel from the Romans. For them this marks the end, the fulfillment.

The End

According to Matthew, Jesus says that the "good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14, NRSV). The Greek word *telos* means not "end," as we think of it, but "goal" or "purpose." Again, the prophetic understanding of God's *purpose* for Israel was to bring all nations together under one Sovereign creator.

"The end" for the Jews was covenantal justice: the deliverance of

God's people from their oppressors and the re-emergence of Israel to prominence. Matthew dedicates his Gospel to the argument that this "end" goal or purpose is now fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, because Israel had failed to accomplish it. Thus, the many prophetic statements in Matthew are less about *prediction* and more about *fulfillment*,⁵ with the Messianic statements finding realization in Jesus.

In You or Among You?

Theologians who teach an eclecticism of Eastern and Western philosophies tend to translate this statement: "The kingdom of heaven is *within* you." The Greek grammatical rendering of the phrase (*entos humōn*) makes either "within you" or "among you" possible. The translation "within" comes from the presumption that humanity bears the divine image. This is a valid argument based on the Genesis account of creation and is indeed important to the conversation.

However, context leads to favoring the translation "among you." Jesus means that the kingdom of God will not come with a magnificent leader, a Messiah who uproots the Romans and restores the Davidic kingship over Israel. Jesus means that God's reign is already present in his preaching and his mission of justice and mercy. The early church appropriated this saying to mean that the kingdom of God is about human responsibility in community: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, NRSV).

In prophetic ideal, Messiah brings in God's reign of righteousness-justice, which is the kingdom of God. The Greek conjunction *kai*, translated "and"⁶ in "Strive first for the kingdom of God *and* his righteousness," shows that in Matthew 6:33, God's justice and God's kingdom are one and the same.

Of course, when we love our neighbor as ourselves, the kingdom manifests in all of us. As the author of the fourth Gospel argues, "the one

who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:8, NASB). So in practice, there is really no significant difference whether the kingdom is *within* or *among* us. Said Mahatma Gandhi, “If you want to change the world, start with yourself.”

False Messiahs and False Prophets

The early Adventist pioneers did not envision the year 2020. They were sure the world as they knew it would end very soon. But we are still here. We wait for the kingdom to come—but perhaps the kingdom waits for us.

Many have set dates over the centuries. The Christian expectation of the end of the world goes as far back as the first century—2,000 years ago. The Shakers had a 1792 date. The Jehovah’s Witnesses set several dates between 1914 and 1994. Many doomsday forecasts were set for 2000, 2001, and 2012.

But the early church through Matthew’s Gospel gave us Jesus’ warning that “false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24, NRSV).

Many immoral and authoritarian people are leading the world today because so many Christians support them. Some justify immoral and authoritarian leadership as the sign that the end will come soon. They seem to be attempting to force the end of the world by erecting false messiahs through their false prophecies. This is religious hypocrisy and deceitfulness of a high order.

Other Christians erect such demagogues because they promise to make a nation “great again,” which really means that they promise to weed out and marginalize those who pose a threat to the traditions that give power and wealth to a chosen few and that enable an ideologically obsessive culture.

Adolf Hitler promised to make Germany great again,⁷ and he was able to rise to power and wreak havoc because the Christian church, both Protestant and Catholic, supported his program. History repeats itself. This was what many expected of Messiah in the time of Jesus. Messiah would make Israel great again! This greatness is about power and supremacy, not about true prophetic liberation. So Jesus’ warning two millennia ago against looking to demagogues, false messianic pronouncements, and false prophets is ominous in this regard.

German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a courageous early critic of the Nazi Party and also a critic of the church that supported this oppressive regime. Bonhoeffer rightly argued, based on the Pentecost experience, that the church is to be Christ in the world. Under the Third Reich, the church was absent.

Again in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, church members slaughtered each other. Messiah was nowhere to be seen, the kingdom of God eclipsed by a human obsession to dominate others. In these instances, the church itself eclipsed the fulfillment of God’s purpose.

How much better if the kingdom of God were to manifest within and among us as the power to love beyond ideologies, political persuasion, tradition, and socially erected barriers!

The Church Fulfilling the Kingdom

At Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) the Holy Spirit anointed the church as Jesus himself was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. This means that the church becomes God’s Christ, or God’s Messiah, to the world “to tell those who are held captive that they can now be set free, and to tell the blind that they can now see...to liberate those held down by oppression...to proclaim that now is the time; ... the jubilee season of the Eternal One’s grace” (Luke 4:18-19, VOICE).

Paul solves divisive issues and abuse in the early church through his interpretation of the Jesus story, calling the Church to be “in Christ” (Phil. 2:1), “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:11), or “in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). This is a way of reminding the church of its *anointing*.⁸ It is a spiritual way of being: of oneness, love, universal sisterhood and brotherhood. In this way the kingdom of God comes, and divine will manifests “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Certainly, the first Jesus followers expected the Messiah to return in their generation. But as the seemingly conflicting texts in Luke and Matthew indicate, they were not merely waiting

So Jesus’ warning two millennia ago against looking to demagogues, false messianic pronouncements, and false prophets is ominous in this regard.

for the last judgment, when God through Messiah puts an end to pain and suffering. They were not just waiting to evacuate this Earth. They were participating in the messianic experience by living the *fulfillment*—the *end*. They sought to root out the divisiveness from among them that caused pain and suffering. They were entering the kingdom of God and inviting everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike, to participate in the messianic experience.

Experiencing the Coming of Messiah

Messianic experience in the teaching and practice of the early church is a profound spiritual experience. It is transcendence—beyond rituals and dogmas and other temporal experiences of division and conquest. It nurtures and restores the divine image that binds all in their differences as one. So the invitation into righteousness is one beyond rules, rituals, and dogmas (Romans 14). It is justice, as the Hebrew prophets defined it. It is about loving your neighbor as you love yourself. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt.

7:12, NRSV).

In propagating the message of liberation, the early church included practicing Jews who observed various days and rituals, and nonpracticing Jews who did not observe those days

and rituals (Romans 14-15). The apostle Paul pleads to the church to not allow these things to hinder the work of God (Rom. 14:13-23). He included men, women, and slaves, all working together to spread the good news of God’s justice—God’s love. We see that in Romans 16, where Junia, a woman, was among the apostles in prison with Paul (verse 7) and Tertius, a slave, writes the letter (verse 22).⁹ All of this was outside the norm in the Roman Empire, as well as in the Judaic religious system built upon hierarchy and exclusiveness. Jews, Gentiles, and slaves in their diverse experiences all demonstrated the reality of Messiah to a world sinking in the chaos of human pride. In this fundamental way, the early church acted out the kingdom of God.

When Will the End Come?

When and how will the fulfillment of God’s purpose occur if the church can hardly distinguish itself from political corruption in the pursuit of an ideological agenda? If we are constantly quarrelling over conformity to rules that only serve to divide and alienate? Why miss out on this glorious messianic experience because we are too busy lobbying votes and enforcing rules?

The coming of Messiah heralds the coming of God into the world. This is what the early church invokes by Matthew’s use of the Isaiah oracle:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us” (Matt. 1:23, NRSV, quoting Isa. 7:14).

Jesus left us, the church, to continue his messianic mission. We cannot evacuate this world while we have not fulfilled our responsibility to it. Those who call upon the name of God before the world must practice justice, do mercy, embrace diversity, and advocate for human solidarity. The church cannot in any way participate in the degradation and disrespect for the life and dignity of others. To do so is to make a mockery of God and continue to breed atheists with little trust in any religious system. Messiah does not reign in a world or in a community that practices injustice, or any kind of inequity.

Until we begin to live the Christ life, until the Spirit anoints us and overflows into a world yearning to be free, until we begin to love and respect all beings deeply and faithfully, until then, the kingdom waits for us. **AT**

¹ The early church of the first century C.E. is different from early Christianity. It did not identify as a religion, but rather sought to nurture a community of Jews and Gentiles with their own peculiarities. It was a spiritual “Way” (Acts 9:2) of being in pursuit of human liberation within a Greco-Roman and Judaic culture that were predicated on domination and social hierarchies, leading to a vast tradition of existential crisis described by the apostle Paul as a groaning creation (Rom. 8:22).

² The Jewish *raison d'être* rested upon God's covenant with Abraham, to give them a prosperous land, to multiply them, and to bless all the nations of the earth through them (Gen. 12:1-4). The land promised to Abraham and his descendants came to be the central aspect of the covenant in one way or another, either as literal geography and political self-determination, or as spiritual liberation. See Paul Nadim Tarazi, *Land and Covenant* (2009).

³ As I have argued elsewhere, the words translated “righteousness” in both Old and New Testaments actually mean “justice,” as “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you”; or loving one's neighbor as one loves oneself. See “Prophetic Eschatology and the Ethics of the Kingdom,” *Adventist Today*, Fall 2016, pp. 16-17.

⁴ Remnants of this apocalyptic/political idea remained in Peter's first sermon at Pentecost.

⁵ Eleven times Matthew wrote that a particular experience in Jesus' life and ministry fulfills an Old Testament passage. The phrase “This fulfills what was spoken by the prophet” is unique to Matthew's Gospel, because he particularly wanted to emphasize that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's call, hope, and purpose.

⁶ This is called the exegetical *kai*, which serves to connect two parallel and equal sentences, phrases, or words.

⁷ Martin Doblmeier, *Bonhoeffer*, Journey Films documentary (2003).

⁸ This reminder is explicit in 1 John 2:27.

⁹ *Tertios* is the Greek word for third. In the Roman Empire, slaves were not named, but rather were numbered.

SMUTS VAN ROOYEN on Race, Homosexuality, and Grace

All across America, Christians are struggling with how their churches should treat gay, lesbian, and transsexual people. In this interview, *Adventist Today* Editor Loren Seibold talks to Dr. van Rooyen about how Christians use the Bible to support views on race and homosexuality, and how change happens in the church.



SMUTS VAN ROOYEN IS NOT ONLY A WELL-KNOWN preacher, but also a psychologist and theologian who has been present at many of the junctures for change in the modern Adventist church.

Born and raised in South Africa, he became a Seventh-day Adventist at the age of 12 and later attended Helderberg College, where he met his wife, Arlene Moore. He earned both an M.Div. and a Ph.D. at Andrews University in Michigan. Half of his 40-year ministry has been in pastoring and the other half in teaching at Adventist institutions of higher learning, including Southern Adventist University, Helderberg College, and Andrews University. After siding with Desmond Ford at the time of Glacier View, he lost his ministerial credentials, which weren't restored until 1990. He then pastored churches in Riverside and in Glendale, California. Now he lives in San Luis Obispo, where he continues to write and speak.

LOREN SEIBOLD: What was your attitude toward people of other races as you grew up in South Africa?

Smuts van Rooyen: I had what I would now call a condescending affection for people of color. Josephine, our Bantu servant, worked in our home for 17 years before she died from a botched backstreet abortion. We mourned her death, but we'd never celebrated her life. She and her two children, Violet and Jessie, occupied a room in our backyard next to the coal shed. I felt affection for these good people, but I never dreamed that any of them had aspirations for a better life. In my immature view, they had their place that was defined by the Bible and our cultural beliefs.

Our terrible sin was that we never allowed their lives to blossom, never encouraged them to "go for it," never saw that they were created in the image of God as we were, or that we benefited from the deprivation we caused them.

SEIBOLD: One thing you just said may surprise some: that South Africa's institutionalized racism was a theology, supported by Bible texts and taught from Christian pulpits.

van Rooyen: Racist South African Christians used the Scriptures to justify their right to be separate and superior. The state received moral and theological backing for its apartheid policies from the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC).

One proof-text used by the DRC was Acts 17:26, where the apostle Paul said of God, "From one man he made all the nations, that should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (NIV). This was used as a theology for the separation of ethnic groups.

When the Lord saw the Tower of Babel going up, he said: “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other” (Gen. 11:6-7, NIV). So God was responsible for both the separation of races and the misunderstandings between them, they argued, and he intended it to remain that way.

That white people would be superior in this relationship came from the story of Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth (Gen. 9:18-27), from whom “came the people scattered across the earth” (verse 19, NIV). Ham found his

I was able to go beyond mere intellectual assent to the doctrine of civil rights, all the way to the genuine love of a person of color.

father drunk and naked, and he treated him disrespectfully. For this he was cursed to be “the lowest of slaves” to his brothers (verse 25, NIV). This has been widely interpreted to mean that the descendants of Ham were the dark-skinned races, and their curse was to serve white people.

Similarly, the DRC claimed biblical support for purity of the white race from Numbers 25, which says that the nation of Israel was cursed with a deadly plague when their men were seduced into sex with Moabite women. The plague ended only when the high priest’s son drove his spear right through a mixed couple indulging their desires. This was said to show that white and dark were not to have intimate relationships.

An Adventist pastor used Daniel 2, which said that the clay and the iron in the feet of the image would never stay mixed (verse 43), to show that God had predetermined racial

separation. He also nullified Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:28 that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” by insisting that the text held true only for those who are in Christ, not for society in general.

SEIBOLD: Many Christians in the United States say that homosexuality is also against the Bible’s teaching. Some have argued that homosexuality should be outlawed and punished, but that even if it is legal, Christians who oppose it shouldn’t be required to give fair treatment to homosexuals. This came into focus in a congressional bill called the Equality Act (HR5) that legislates full and fair treatment of LGBT+ individuals.

van Rooyen: There are indeed similarities between the two situations. Both racists and those who oppose LGBT+ people use the Bible as an armory and not as a medicine chest. I’m surprised more American Christians don’t see the similarity when they argue that the civil rights of homosexual people needn’t be protected. Would they say the same thing of black people?

SEIBOLD: We hear “clobber texts” used against homosexual people or those who have differing gender identities—passages such as Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:10. What is your response to this biblical anti-gay theology?

van Rooyen: It’s notable to me that although Jesus discussed sex, he never discussed homosexuality. He never condemned it, although he had the opportunity to do so.

If you go beyond simple proof-texting, you’ll see that what the Bible authors opposed is homosexuality as a means of idol worship. Pagan gods were fertility gods. Sex in these settings was an act of worship. The temples kept male and female prostitutes for the convenience of the worshippers. Every reference to homosexuality in the Bible has to do with pagan worship, not to loving, monogamous, and faithful persons who seek to live out the implications of the gospel as a faithful heterosexual couple would.

Even the conservative scholar Helmut Thielicke, after discussing all of the relevant texts, concluded in his *Theological Ethics*, “There is not the slightest excuse for maligning the constitutional homosexual morally or theologically.” I would also suggest *The Good Book* by Peter Gomes as a place to learn more.

SEIBOLD: Don’t we run the risk of playing games with the Bible text, trying to justify what we want to believe?

van Rooyen: The Dutch Reformed Church theologians said the same thing about those who fought against racism. The hard truth is that virtually none of us accept everything that is in the Bible. Take the trial by ordeal as described in Numbers 5:11-31, where a woman who is suspected of unfaithfulness by her jealous husband must drink a concoction of dirt swept from the temple floor mixed with water to prove her innocence—if she gets sick, she is guilty. Our courts use rules of evidence, not the ingestion of filth, to determine guilt or innocence.

Nor do we subscribe to being governed by either priests or kings. Democracy is Christians’ favorite form of governance, although it is not found in the Bible. We wear clothes made of more than one fiber, and we find mules useful, although in the Bible both were prohibited (Lev. 19:19). We reject all slavery outright, even though the Israelites were permitted to buy and trade slaves as long as they came from other nations (Lev. 25:44-46).

Don’t get me wrong: I live my life marinated in the Scriptures. My grouse is not with the Bible, but with literalists who claim they accept everything in the Word but do not want to admit that they, too, use their reasoning powers to interpret the Bible and pick and choose what they want to support and oppose.

SEIBOLD: What changed your attitude toward people with dark skin?

van Rooyen: I was asked to preach at the mostly black All Nations Fellowship Church in Hinsdale, Illinois, on a regular basis. Although I was still a heretic in the white Adventist community because of my association with Desmond Ford, this congregation joyfully took Arlene and me in. There I took the longest and most significant journey that grace can ever take: namely, the 12-inch distance from one’s head to one’s heart. I was able to go beyond mere intellectual assent to the doctrine of civil

rights, all the way to the genuine love of a person of color.

Over a period of weeks, I’d told a series of children’s stories illustrating the Ten Commandments. One Sabbath I wanted to teach the children about the fifth commandment and always holding your parents in high esteem.

But the incident I had chosen to tell them was way bigger than my own soul could bear. I had massive—I think subconscious—unresolved issues with my alcoholic father and stepmother. I told how they had been disrespected on my brother’s wedding day by not being allowed to sit at the head table during the reception. Dad did not have a decent suit to wear, and there was a fear he’d show up tipsy. I said to the children, “Even if your mom and dad are sitting on the garbage dump, you still find something to respect in them.” I then called for the congregation to kneel for the morning prayer.

But when we knelt, I completely lost it. I cringed behind the pulpit and began to weep bitterly and uncontrollably. I was shaken to my core by a desperate, surfacing grief I did not understand and simply could not stop. Suddenly I felt an arm around my shoulders. It belonged to the black brother offering the prayer beside me. He’d seen my plight, entered my pain, and decided to protect me from public exposure with his prayer. He was determined to pray as long as it was going to take for me to compose myself. So his prayer wandered from pillar to post, across the planet, on and on until I finally subsided. In that protective act of grace, I felt his empathy, I felt his humanity. We were the same. And I loved him.

SEIBOLD: Is there a lesson here for understanding LGBT+ people?

van Rooyen: Absolutely! *It is crucial to be with people if you want to understand them.* There is so much more to LGBT+ people than the sexual component of their lives, and it’s wrong to define them by only that. I would not want to be defined by my heterosexual orientation alone. These are *whole people* we are speaking of. They laugh at our jokes, bleed when we cut them, and are moved by the Spirit as we are. We can never appreciate their humanity if we don’t associate with them. My lesbian daughter, for example, is an outstanding mother, a marvelous director of nurses, a committed wife of a gay woman, a spiritual being, and a great person to be with. I could not be more pleased with her than I am.

SEIBOLD: From this vista in your life, how do you evaluate the argument that “My Christian faith says I am allowed to discriminate against gay people, because the Bible disapproves of them”?

van Rooyen: I would respond by reminding the person who makes such an argument of the words of Jesus: “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?” (Matt. 5:46-47, NIV).

We become mature (perfect) by treating others as indiscriminately as God does (verse 48). I would appeal to the words of Jesus, “And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles” (verses 40-41, NIV). As a follower of Jesus, I’m sometimes called to compromise my legal rights. Maybe both sides could

Every reference to homosexuality in the Bible has to do with pagan worship, not to loving, monogamous, and faithful persons who seek to live out the implications of the gospel as a faithful heterosexual couple would.

give a little. What if the baker said, “I’ll make this couple a beautiful cake to show the compassion of God to them, to show I do not reject them as people.” Or the gay couple could say, “If these folks won’t bake our cake for us, we are happy to find someone else who will.”

SEIBOLD: Do you think there’s a role for laws such as HR5 to force us to do what Christianity says we should do with regard to LGBT+ people?

van Rooyen: I have great respect for the yearning of the LGBT+ community to secure their civil rights. I also treasure the religious liberty and the freedom of speech the

Christian community must have. I have no idea how the Supreme Court will ultimately resolve this issue. To me, at present, the conflict feels like a Sophie’s Choice. How can I sacrifice either? I have a church that must be free to believe and to speak, and I have a daughter who is lesbian who must be free to live. Where is Solomon when we need him?

Yet God can use the secular state to prod us. The Civil Rights Act dragged the country kicking and screaming toward a more just treatment of black people, just as the end of apartheid did in South Africa. Sometimes the church, like a slow horse, needs a sharp slap to get it going.

South African Adventism did not give the apartheid government overt moral or theological backing, as the DRC did. Nor did it directly oppose the government, as the Methodists and Anglicans did. Instead it tolerated apartheid practices within its own structure, claiming that it did not want to obstruct the spread of the Third Angel’s Message by means of political involvement.

Yet congregations were separate, and white ministers were paid much more than were ministers of color. While Adventism grew among all the ethnic groups and did not suffer the drastic loss of membership the DRC experienced when apartheid collapsed, I would argue that we nonetheless erred by not standing for the right though the heavens fall, by not showing the world the God that Jesus knew.

SEIBOLD: Perhaps this is a problem of community. How hard is it to change community?

van Rooyen: Change occurs in both an evolutionary and a revolutionary fashion. A community may experiment with truth slowly and over a long period, testing it to see if it bears up. Revolutionary change occurs when a society says: “Enough already! We can and we must do a different thing!” It’s as if an impulse that has been passing through deep ocean waters is finally confronted by a slope of ascending earth, forcing it to form a high cresting wave that crashes on the beach.

In South Africa, evolutionary change pushed through the sea of apartheid for centuries. Afrikaners moved from the land to the city, from being farmers (Boers) to industrial workers and business owners. Dutch Reformed Church members became Pentecostal. While before they’d been relatively uneducated, they began attending universities. They produced F. W. De Klerk, an Afrikaner

who said, “Enough already!” and freed Nelson Mandela from prison.

The Bantu people also changed. They left animism behind and became Christians. They learned English in addition to their own language. They moved to the cities. They produced educated leaders, lawyers and doctors, who entered the political debate and wrote a Freedom Charter that demanded a nonracial South Africa. They produced Nelson Mandela, who said: “Enough already! Let the revolution begin!”

Change in a community is slow until it reaches the revolutionary stage, when the time for an idea has come, when

God can use the secular state to prod us. The Civil Rights Act dragged the country kicking and screaming toward a more just treatment of black people, just as the end of apartheid did in South Africa. Sometimes the church, like a slow horse, needs a sharp slap to get it going.

the wave crests and breaks with a crash. Then change is very difficult to stop.

Seventh-day Adventists are already caught in a revolutionary change system with regard to the ordination of women. The wave is hitting the beach. It is unstoppable. With LGBT+ people, we are still evolving. We need to get more information out there, challenge the fundamentalist way of interpreting the Scriptures, argue the cause more widely, and bring gay people into membership so that they have the full right of participation.

Although I understand why they might be reluctant, I wish LGBT+ folks were more overt in associating with other church members. Nothing is more powerful than the testimony of a gay believer who is living a Christlike life.

It will not be easy. Ours is a church in transition.

SEIBOLD: You’ve been one of the leading encouragers in our denomination for tapping into the power of God’s grace. How do we make use of grace in our efforts to become a community of diverse peoples?

van Rooyen: Justice gives someone what they lawfully deserve—what is rightfully theirs, such as civil rights. Grace goes beyond merely granting civil rights to making room for the other in one’s heart. Although both justice and grace are important, grace is often more effective in relationship problems, and certainly more fun. Even Christians seem to get grumpy around discussions of civil rights, perhaps because someone feels righteous and someone else feels accused. It’s hard to become a community while arguing about the law.

All Christians have received grace. In Philippians 2, Paul asks us to give to others what we’ve received: “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (verses 1-2, NIV).

Pentecost is the grand reversal of the separation, exclusivism, and superiority among peoples. It is by the Spirit that we hear others’ language and grasp a culture we have not before understood. Once we understand that, the awful tower of separation we have built crumbles. **AT**

Contributors



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

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



REBECCA DAVIS is the pastor for young adults and groups at Mt. Rubidoux Adventist Church in Riverside, California.

She loves to spend time with her children, Olivia and Justin.



FRITZ GUY is a retired professor of philosophical theology at La Sierra University in Riverside, California.

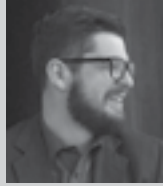


OLIVE J. HEMMINGS is a professor of religion and ethics at Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland.



KIRSTEN ØSTER-LUNDQVIST is originally from Scandinavia and now pastors in Wellington, New Zealand. She is the

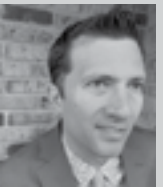
communication and media director for the North New Zealand Conference. She has over 20 years of experience in ministry in Europe, in all kinds of pastoral settings. Having lived on five continents, she identifies as a global citizen.



TJ SANDS pastors in Oklahoma, where he lives with Sarah, his wife and best friend.



LOREN SEIBOLD is the executive editor of *Adventist Today* magazine and website and is retired from pastoral ministry.



JEREMIAH SMART is pastor of the Des Moines Seventh-day Adventist Church. He enjoys outdoor activities with his wife

and two daughters, riding his Harley, and the menagerie of animals his wife raises. He has a passion for evangelism and is an avid scholar.



ALDEN THOMPSON is professor emeritus of biblical studies at Walla Walla University in Washington.



SMUTS VAN ROOYEN is a retired pastor living in Central California. He holds an M.Div. and a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from

Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. His ministry has been divided between teaching undergraduate religion and pastoring. He has been married to Arlene for a long time.

BIBLE CREDITS

King James Version is in the public domain.

Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation (www.Lockman.org). Used by permission.

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan (www.zondervan.com). All rights reserved worldwide. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Voice Bible Copyright © 2012 Thomas Nelson, Inc. The Voice™ translation © 2012 Ecclesia Bible Society. All rights reserved.

Adventist Today



NEWS BRIEFS

New AV Guy Misses Praise Service Cues

INDIANAPOLIS — Joyful Noise Adventist Church members are at a loss as to what to do with their audio/visual guy, Han Sauver, who has yet to get through a single service without forgetting to advance slides during at least one praise chorus.

The congregation's nominating committee has endured withering criticism for weeks because it picked Sauver for the job without noticing his propensity to fidgeting and impulsivity. The committee chair defended its choice of the perpetually distracted Sauver by noting that nobody else under the age of 80 was willing or physically capable of enduring ear-piercing feedback.

Prodigal's Big Brother Suddenly Goes Vegan

ANCIENT JUDEA — A catering crisis blew up minutes after the prodigal son returned to his father.

Although most of the household and its well-compensated staff were delighted that the father had ordered fattened calf to celebrate his youngest son's return, one member of the family dropped a culinary announcement that wet-blanketed the festivities immediately.

"I'm vegan," announced the rule-abiding older brother, adding that unless someone could rustle up some premium Worthington products pronto, he'd be a no-show at the feast.

With no Adventist Book Center open at that hour, the household caterers were unable to meet the elder son's demands.

The rest of the partiers breathed a sigh of relief as the older brother turned in early for the night. No amount of reasoning about inheritance values could shake the pouty, newly minted vegan of his mood or his unbending misinterpretation of NEWSTART principles.

Still-at-Home Son Refuses to Leave Nest

BRACKNELL, Berkshire — The Browns have been praying for their son Mark to get a life and get out of their house.

But three years after getting an English Literature degree, the star temp worker at a local call center hasn't quite summoned the courage to "go forth and multiply," despite frequent reminders from his parents that still living with them is getting downright unbiblical.

Mark's mother has been known to mention that there are plenty of nice, young women at church who would



be pretty impressed if he'd only give up his packed evening schedule of gaming and Doritos consumption.

For now, though, Mark has told his parents that he will stay put until he feels "called" to put down the first and last month's rent on a studio that suits him.

Pathfinders Complain About "Roughing It"

NORTH AMERICA — After complaints from thousands of Pathfinders and counselors that traditional Pathfinderism is way too tough, clubs in the North American Division are beginning to offer glamping experiences.

For the first time ever, Pathfinders will arrive at campgrounds featuring spacious, pre-assembled walk-in tents outfitted with raised beds featuring 1,500-thread-count sheets, feather pillows, and down comforters. En suite bathrooms with double-ply toilet paper will replace old, smelly porta potties. Spacious tubs and spa products will drown any lingering memories of cold, tricky camp showers.

Pathfinders will be able to enjoy Sabbath services in climate-controlled auditoriums with comfortable seating, wearing freshly ironed

uniforms. For lunch, haystacks will now feature locally foraged organic veggies, artisan cheeses, and fresh guac made from carefully picked, sun-ripened avocados.

Tesla Update Prevents Eating Out on Sabbath

PALO ALTO, Calif. — In its latest software update, Tesla has included an "Adventist" feature that cross references Adventist membership records with customer lists. Wherever there is a match, the software prohibits drivers from entering restaurant parking lots or even heading to a drive-thru on Sabbath.

If a driver tries to override the software, the Tesla will begin to play "Don't Forget the Sabbath" on full blast.

Camera technology on the vehicle will also track drivers who park a Tesla somewhat near restaurants so they can make the rest of the Sabbath journey on foot. The infraction will be documented and submitted for inclusion in next week's church bulletin.

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.





What You See Isn't All You Get

You hold in your hands Adventist Today's print magazine. As you leaf through its pages, you will see that our editors and writers are intentional about bringing you top-quality content four times a year. But did you know there's more to Adventist Today than what you see in our print magazine? Our digital publishing presence far and away eclipses our paper resources.



AT Update

Every Friday, our free email newsletter is delivered to your inbox. It's a summary of the week's news, commentary, announcements, exclusive offers, and more. It's an easy way to keep up with what's happening in the Adventist community, and it's sitting in your email inbox until you have a spare moment to read it. At our website, you can sign up to start receiving AT Update, and you can also refer the signup to a friend. It's a no-cost way to become familiar with all that Adventist Today has to offer without committing, yet.



Website

Our Adventist Today library of resources is there whenever you want to access it. You'll find more there than you ever imagined: all of the magazines, from 1993 to the present; all of our published books; plus news, commentary, features, the arts,

and letters to the editor. In addition, whenever we have announcements of special events or items of interest to our readers, you can count on finding them at www.atoday.org



Facebook Page & Instagram

We are particularly proud of the way these services are bringing people worldwide together around independent journalism and innovative resources. Digital publishing channels are giving Adventist Today the opportunity to make the global church aware of important values and themes that have become more common knowledge in North America, Europe, and the South Pacific. While our print and email services keep us connected with a legacy readership, we are reaching young adults under the age of 30 in amazing ways through Facebook and Instagram.



Digital Magazine

If you aren't able to keep up with all that is released online, a summary of our articles is emailed to our members every month. This digital file is often accompanied by a message from our CEO, who shares significant survey data. It's a great resource you can read at your leisure.

For just \$20 per month, you can maximize a ministry you know you want to support.

Please go today to www.atoday.org and sign up for our free newsletter. Then find the pull-down Donate tab at the top and choose a one-time or monthly gift that fits what God is prompting you to give now. You'll feel good about supporting more than our print magazine.

Adventist^{Today}