

quarterly resource for local church leaders † october/december 2021

ELDER'S DIGEST

THE WORD OF GOD
STANDS FOREVER



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IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE WITH YOUR LIFE!

Are you tempted to think that life has passed you by, that your best years may be behind you? Could you imagine leading twenty thousand people to Jesus and into the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

A seemingly obscure man, Philip Ainslie Reekie, born in Scotland in 1846, did just that!¹ Amazingly, although thousands owe him their eternal thanks, few even know his name. In 1888, the widowed and divorced Philip Reekie and his four children emigrated from Scotland to Australia, looking for a new life. It didn't take him long to find it! In 1889, after reading Uriah Smith's *Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation*, he became a Seventh-day Adventist.

After his conversion, Philip Reekie left his work as an engraver to become a literature evangelist, and ultimately would facilitate God's Word being engraved upon hearts. On dusty outback roads, through dry, monotonous terrain, under a mercilessly hot Australian sun, Philip Reekie rode a bicycle to the homes of thousands. In 1896, Philip Reekie cycled to a farm in a middle-of-nowhere place called Eugowra, New South Wales. Unbeknownst to the literature evangelist, this family was grieving and searching. The mother of the home, Mary, had recently died, leaving the care of their eleven children to her husband Tom. Just before succumbing to pneumonia, Mary had asked Tom to promise that he would meet her in heaven and bring the children with him. Tom made the promise and was searching the Bible to discover how he could keep his promise. It was into this heartbreaking situation that Philip Reekie arrived with the book *The Great Controversy*.

After wrestling with some biblical truths outlined in *The Great Controversy*, Tom ultimately accepted the biblical teachings and excitedly shared his new findings with his children and neighbors. His children and five neighboring families became Adventists: the Packham, Chatman, Thompson, Gersbach, and Gray families.

Fast-forward from 1896 to 2021, and this remarkable story continues. When you add the descendants of Tom and the other five families to the numbers of people these descendants have disciplined into the Adventist Church, there are more than twenty thousand! That's twenty thousand lives transformed by a faithful literature evangelist and a farmer who shared a good book with his family and neighbors. If I may confess . . . I'm one of those twenty thousand. The Tom in this story is my great, great grandfather Thomas Robert Kent. But that's not the reason for telling this story.

The key point is that Philip, the seller of *The Great Controversy*, and Tom, the purchaser of the book, were both well into the second half of their lives when this decisive event happened. As older men, this was the defining point of their lives! While these two people now sleep in their graves awaiting the return of Jesus, their legacies live on.

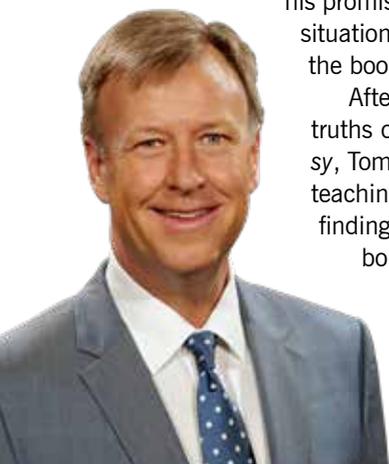
As an elder, what are you doing with your gift of life? For those of us in middle age, or older, this can be a challenging question, particularly in a world where innovative youth seem to be the trendsetters and difference makers. We need our youth to be filled with the Holy Spirit and change the world, but our zeal shouldn't die with our youthfulness (see Acts 2:16, 17).

In this life, each one of us has a finite period allotted. Fittingly, Moses asked God, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps 90:12, ESV).

For some, the reality of mortality prompts selfishness, and they seek to inject as much fun and excitement into their limited lives as possible. Yes, our Creator does intend for humans to experience the joys of life. But there's more to life than pursuing unbridled pleasure. Satisfaction from meaningful work, contributing to loving relationships, and giving to others offers infinitely more joy—and pleasure too.

While we number our days, through Christ, we have a vision beyond our days. Leaving a wholesome legacy, planning for eternity, a selfless life—for a person who has accepted the embrace of Jesus' grace, these are the real currency of life.

It's not too late for you to make a difference, to change the eternal destiny of who knows how many! What is your legacy? ED



ANTHONY R. KENT | General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary

¹ Special thanks to Ashlee Chism in the General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research.

THE WORD OF GOD STANDS FOREVER

The prophet Isaiah made a momentous statement: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa 40:8, ESV).

It is of interest to note the immediate context of this statement. Before affirming that the Word of God stands forever, Isaiah compares “all flesh” with “grass” (40:6) and underlines once more, “Surely the people are grass” (40:7). How long-lasting is grass or a flower? And yet a great number of people today rely on the human flesh, on grass, rather than put their trust in the only dependable foundation: the Word of God.

Everything around us changes. The only unchangeable reality is God Himself and His Word. The Bible expresses this in very clear words: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8, ESV). These words are placed in the context of an invitation not to rely on “strange teachings,” but rather to trust and have faith in the Word of God! (See 13:7, 9). “The truth of God is not changeable, uncertain, and powerless. It is truth presented in its purity that alone can convict and convert the sinner and turn him from the error of his ways. The word of God is the only fixed, changeless thing that the world knows. Like its Author in character, it is ‘the same yesterday, today, and forever.’”¹

We have the choice: a solid, everlasting rock or ever-changing human theories and philosophies? There is only one unchangeable, immovable, solid foundation: God and His Word! Everything else is comparable with the grass that withers and fades.

Throughout history there have been many attempts to destroy the Word of God and even get rid of God Himself. The atheistic regime of the former Soviet Union tried to do it throughout its entire history. For seventy years the main agenda was to “liberate” the Soviet society from God, His Word, and His followers. To achieve this goal, the leaders of the Communist Party destroyed churches and religious literature. They ridiculed and harassed everyone who dared to have their own opinion about God and religion. Many faithful Christians were incarcerated and executed. Believers were often arrested and put in prison just for the simple fact that they owned a Bible and read the Word of

**THERE IS ONLY ONE
UNCHANGEABLE, IMMOVABLE,
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HIS WORD!**

God! Many sacrificed their lives for daring to believe in God and share their convictions. It is estimated that over twenty million Christians were martyred in the Soviet prison camps.² “The punishment for being a Christian in the Soviet Union was just as severe as the punishment for murder.”³ The Communist leadership that was planning to establish heaven on earth without God saw in Him the greatest obstacle in achieving their goals and dreams. This was the reason for the war against Christianity.

In those seventy years, it sometimes looked as if the Communists were winning the war. It seemed that the only firm and unchangeable thing was the Communist Party itself. Almost no one, even in their wildest dreams, could see that one day the Soviet regime would wither and fade like grass and the Word of God would be preached in the very palaces of the Communist Party where their leaders announced death to God and His followers. However, those trusting the Word of God, even while being murdered, knew they were standing on the only firm foundation. The Lord allowed many Christians in those prison camps to go through experiences in order to see foretastes of the ultimate victory of His everlasting and unshakable Word.

A story is told of a Christian who was sentenced for his belief and trust in God to serve until his death in a prison camp in the very cold region of Russian Siberia. He was placed in a camp far away from any civilization and made to cut wood in the forest. The camp was surrounded on three sides by an impenetrable forest full of wild animals, and in the front of the camp was a river. The head of the prison mocked, sneered, and made fun of the believer. One day someone reported to the warden that there are some fun stories in the book that the believer calls the Word of God. They reported to him a New Testament story describing Jesus walking on the sea. The head of the prison camp asked the Christian if he believed that the amusing story of someone walking on water was the truth. The believer confirmed his strong belief in the Word of God. The head of the prison responded, “How in the world can you believe this garbage? And for these tales you are willing to destroy your life?” The believer continued witnessing that the Bible is not a compilation of hilarious tales, but the Word of a living and all-powerful God. The head of the prison determined they would test it: “In front of our camp there is a river. If your God is truly alive and this book represents Him, then go out and walk on the water through the river. If you are able to walk on water, then your God is a reality, and His Word is true. If you walk on water, you will be released from the prison. However, if you cannot prove the reality of God and



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are not able to walk on the water, we will make your life as miserable as we can until you rot.”

The believer asked for three days to be given him before attempting to walk on water. He spent the three days in fasting and prayer. After the three days were over, the head of the prison gathered all the prisoners and all the guards in front of the river. His goal was to demonstrate to all that God was dead and His Word was nothing more than a funny collection of jokes. He ordered the believer to start walking on the river. The believer came closer to the river and, kneeling down, spoke one more prayer. As he was still praying, he suddenly saw something like a bridge going through the river. He stood up and started walking through the river as if simply walking on a bridge.

The camp became dead silent. All the laughing and mocking suddenly stopped. They all witnessed the presence of a God who is alive and all-powerful. That day many prisoners, and even the head of the prison camp, became believers.

Even if the miracle had not happened at that time and our believer continued to be ridiculed and harassed, he would still have stood strong on the Word of God as the only foundation. Why? Because he knew Jesus personally! Since he had already experienced the power of the Word in his life, he was willing to sacrifice everything for his Master—even life itself!

We all remember the response of the three young men to king Nebuchadnezzar: “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan 3:17–18, ESV).

When we think about the millions of martyrs who faithfully witnessed and followed the Word of God even to death, the question arises: Why do so many of us today give up so easily our trust in the Word of God and instead follow human ideas and philosophies? Why do we so easily exchange the everlasting Word of God for grass that withers and disappears so quickly? Could it be that we have forgotten how to dig deep into the Word? Forgotten how to drink from the only Source

of living water? Forgotten how to preach a sermon that presents not simply human ideas, but allows the Word of God to speak for itself and demonstrate its beauty and power? Have we tested the magnificence of the Word? Once we have tasted it, no other source will ever satisfy our thirst!

What we as a church need most urgently today is to return back to the Word of God! Let us remain or become “people of the Book, people of the Bible.” And let us permit the Holy Spirit not only to refresh our desire for the Word, but also to guide us in the process of studying, researching, applying, and obeying the everlasting Word of God.

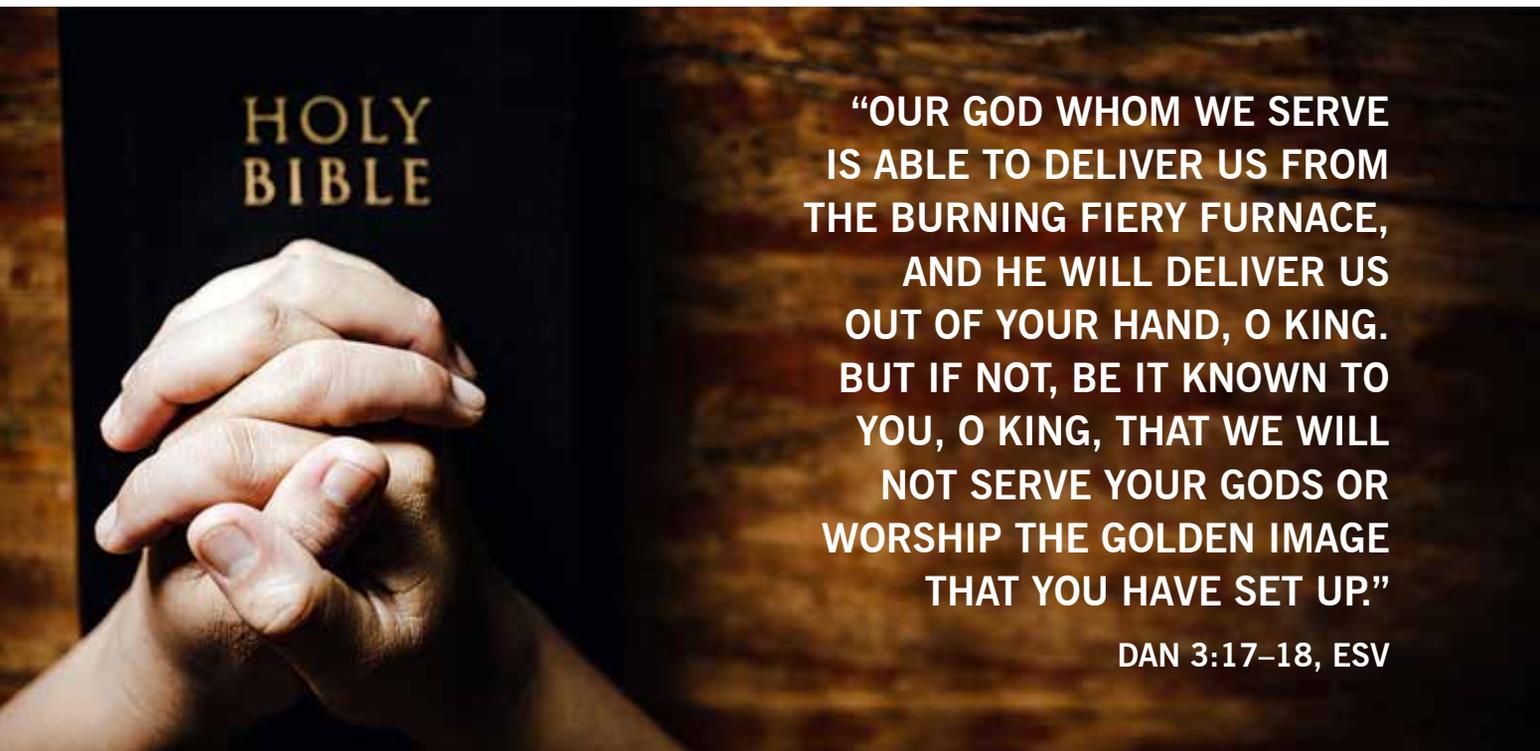
Let us never forget: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever!” **ED**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Bible Echo*, May 28, 1894, para. 1.

² https://mcgrath.nd.edu/assets/84231/the_demographics_of_christian_martyrdom_todd_johnson.pdf. Accessed July 6, 2021.

³ Alexandra Heywood, “God in the Gulag: Christianity’s Survival in Soviet Russia,” *The Dartmouth Apologia* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://augustinecollective.org/god-in-the-gulag-christianitys-survival-in-soviet-russia/>. Accessed July 6, 2021.

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“OUR GOD WHOM WE SERVE IS ABLE TO DELIVER US FROM THE BURNING FIERY FURNACE, AND HE WILL DELIVER US OUT OF YOUR HAND, O KING. BUT IF NOT, BE IT KNOWN TO YOU, O KING, THAT WE WILL NOT SERVE YOUR GODS OR WORSHIP THE GOLDEN IMAGE THAT YOU HAVE SET UP.”

DAN 3:17–18, ESV



"TROUBLING," BUT NOT WITHOUT HOPE!

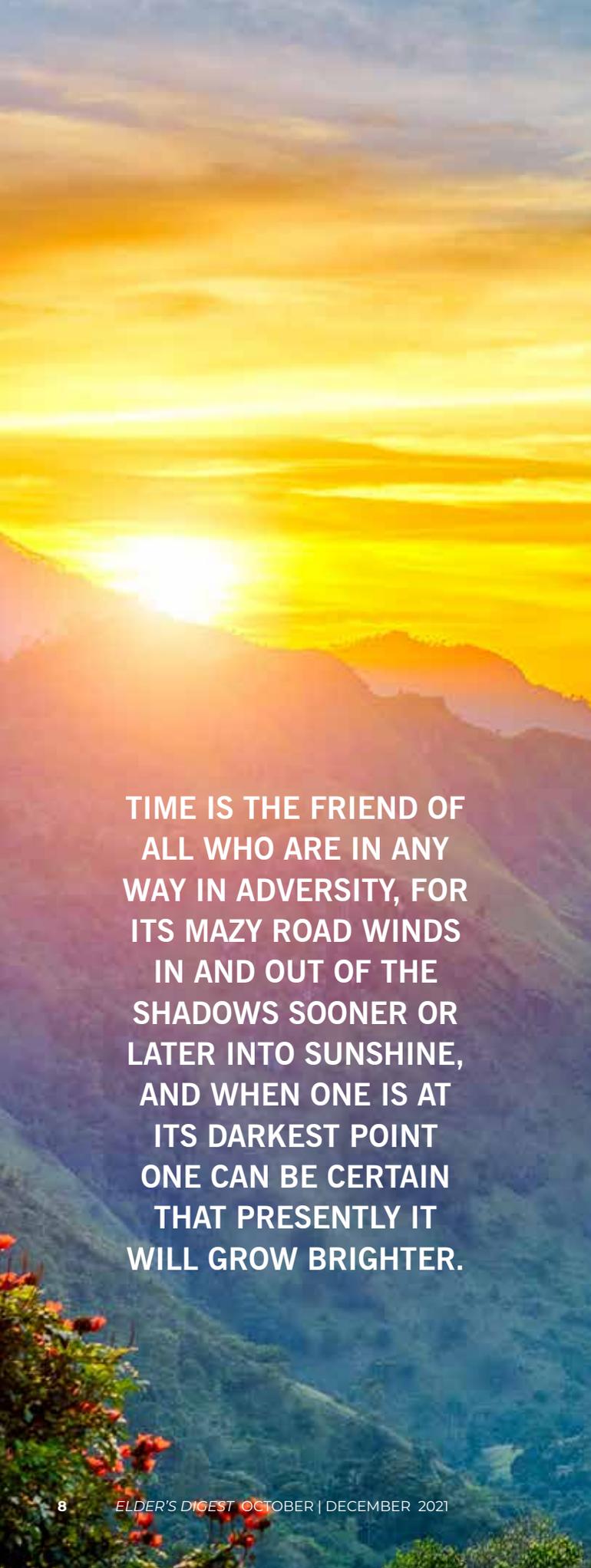
A DEVOTIONAL ARTICLE

European author Franz Kafka pictures a man whose life is suddenly invaded by government officials. He finds himself facing problems for which he is not responsible. Repeatedly, he goes to the authorities to try and resolve the issue. He asks, "Why all these problems? What is the charge?" But he can find neither satisfaction nor explanation. The story closes with this troubled, harassed man looking towards the government building. Suddenly he sees a figure leaning out from an upper story with arms outstretched. He wonders, "Is that God? Has he a message of truth, of love, of comfort? What does it mean?" And the story ends.

Kafka books have great appeal to many because they picture the enigmatic nature of existence—as some would say, "the perdition of existence." Or, in

the words of many commentators describing each year of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, as an *annus horribilis* on a global scale. Like all Kafka's stories that picture life as overwhelmingly difficult, we are in a century when it seems that a whole civilization is confronted with unsolvable problems. We are in the Valley of Achor!

Achor was that inhospitable valley through which the tribes of Israel entered the promised land at the end of their forty years journeying in the wilderness. If ever there was a valley to strike terror into the heart and envelope the spirit with gloom, it was this valley, a place of precipitous cliffs and overhanging crags into which the gladdening sunshine rarely entered. The vultures made their nests there, and their harsh cries would echo through the deep ravines, and in the



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tangle of the trees and thickets all manner of evil and unclean things lurked. To the Israelites, the world seemed to end in this abomination of desolation, and so they called the valley Achor, meaning “troubling.”

Centuries passed. Hosea came upon the scene and predicted disasters that would come upon the nation. He declared that the people would have to go through the Valley of Trouble. Then comes the assurance, “And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope” (Hos 2:15, ESV). Just as their forefathers found in their journey to the promised land, so they, at this latter day, would find their experience of sorrow leading them to something bigger and better than they had ever known before.

There are four ways our Achor valleys can do the same for us.

Firstly, the Valley of Trouble can prove to be a place of new beginnings. Indeed, it is a veritable door of hope in which our valleys of trouble become doorways opening to new and better things. For as Arthur Bryant observes, “time is the friend of all who are in any way in adversity, for its mazy road winds in and out of the shadows sooner or later into sunshine, and when one is at its darkest point one can be certain that presently it will grow brighter.”¹

So it was with Giuseppe Verdi, who in 1825 failed the entrance examination to the Conservatory of Music in Milan. This disappointment was the beginning of a journey into the Valley of Trouble for Verdi. He lost his wife and his two children within two years of each other, and, grief stricken, resolved never to compose again. It was then in the valley he was commissioned to write *Nabucco*, “Nebuchadnezzar.” Verdi became deeply absorbed as he read about the sorrows of the Hebrew captives. He poured out his own sorrow and grief into the music. With heart aflame, he identified with his own people who were oppressed by the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The opera’s theme of national independence inspired him, and its great chorus “Hebrew Slaves” became an anthem for the Italian Risorgimento movement for unification. Verdi went on to write an opera a year, to a total of twenty-eight, as well as fourteen vocal and instrumental compositions. For Giuseppe Verdi, his Valley of Trouble became the door of a new beginning and hope. “Trials and obstacles,” writes Ellen G. White, “are the Lord’s . . . appointed conditions of success.”²

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So it was also with the great pianist Robert Schumann. He lost a finger in an accident, which kept him from performing on the concert stage. Notwithstanding, he went on to write 268 compositions, ninety of which were piano music.

And then there was Ludwig van Beethoven, who transcended personal tragedy to write 398 compositions. From 1778 with his first public performance in Cologne to 1802 when he was depressed by hearing loss, he took lessons in organ and violin, studied briefly with Mozart and Haydn in Vienna, and among other works published the *Moonlight Sonata*. One of his biographers, Henry Thomas, wrote, “Beethoven’s deafness was no tragedy. The sounds of earth were stilled for him, that in the silence he might catch the harmonies of heaven.”³ Beethoven’s Valley of Trouble brought forth his most spiritual and exalted music.

Secondly, the Valley of Trouble can be a door of hope leading to self-examination. The Valley of Trouble provides an opportunity for reflection, to face the reality of what manner of persons we have become and what we are making of our lives. More importantly, ask the Lord to “search the heart and test the mind” (Jer 17:10, ESV), to “test and examine our ways” (Lam 3:40, ESV), and “to see whether you are in the faith” (2 Cor 13:5, ESV). If in the valley we learn anew what are life’s true values, its noblest ends, its abiding joys, then the Valley of Trouble becomes a door of change and hope.

Thirdly, the Valley of Trouble can be a door of hope if it awakens in us a realization that our human resources are unequal to meet the trouble in the valley. That trouble can knock us off the pedestal of our self-sufficiency and lead us into a renewed encounter with the One who is all-sufficient. “Before I was afflicted,” writes the psalmist, “I went astray, but now I keep your word” (Ps 119:67, ESV). Or, in the words of the *Megiddo Message*, “affliction is God’s shepherd dog to drive us back into the fold.”⁴ The Valley of Trouble emerges from the desert of our despair, and all our wisdom and power seem to be of no avail. If the Valley of Trouble is breaching the walls of our pride and breaking down our illusions of self-sufficiency, then it can become for us a door of hope.

Finally, the Valley of Trouble becomes a door of hope if it leads us to a life vitally connected with a loving Christ. Christianity is not a creed to be memorized, but a Person to be followed and a way of life to be adopted. However, such a life brings no immunity from difficulties; rather, it is to produce a character adequate to meet them when it comes. But if God is a mere abstraction, then what provisions can He offer us in a crisis when in our self-dependency we are independent from Him? However, when the Valley of Trouble comes, it awakens a need that makes God necessary. Only then can we taste and see that the “Lord is good” and that “His mercy endures forever,” and then, looking back on the Valley of Trouble, we will have found it to be the door of hope. So,

Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing,
Hope and comfort from above;
Let us each, thy peace possessing,
Triumph in redeeming love.⁵

ED

¹ Arthur Bryant, “Adversity,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, ed. Frank Spencer Mead (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell, 1985), 1.

² Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1937), 471.

³ “Ludwig van Beethoven,” in *Classical Music*, ed. John Burrows (London: DK, 1939), 157.

⁴ “Affliction,” in Mead, *The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, 1.

⁵ “Hope,” in *ibid.*, 233.

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RESOLVING PASTOR- ELDER CONFLICT:

PATHWAYS TO HARMONY

Pastor I. M. Eger has recently arrived at his new church, a 225-member congregation in a city of just over five hundred thousand people. Pastor Eger was in his former church district for seven years. He is looking forward to serving in a new location where his children can attend a local church school. He is enthusiastic and open to new ideas.

The church of which Pastor Eger is now the pastor was without a pastor for almost a year. During that time, head elder Ben Wright had coordinated things well; church services were running smoothly, funds were adequate, and attendance was low but stable. Ben likes order, system, tradition, and predictability.

Pastor Eger has arrived with a host of new ideas that would bring substantial change in several areas of church life. Worship service features would change. Additionally, refreshments would be served in the foyer before and after worship. Ben Wright and Pastor Eger are headed for conflict. Here are six things they can do, individually and together, to turn conflict into concord.

1. REALIZE THAT CONFLICT CAN BE BENEFICIAL

The presence of conflict is most often viewed as negative—a blemish on the expected tranquility of life and relationships, a threat to progress, and a diversion from mission. However, conflict can be beneficial in helping an organization and individuals adapt to change. Healthy conflict resolution strategies bring realization of alternative ways of thinking and acting.

Leaders must recognize that conflict is inevitable. They need to spend less time lamenting about it and more time developing a principled practice of addressing conflict. Change is a constant reality of life, even in the

local church. Differences in viewpoints can yield new insights and new ways of doing things.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced many unwelcome changes to church life and meetings. The challenge of dealing with these changes resulted in various creative ways of maintaining church life but under altered circumstances.

2. EXAMINE YOUR OWN MOTIVES IN THE CONFLICT

The essential question is whether or not the conflict centers around me or around an issue separate from me. Am I feeling threatened, sidelined, ignored, criticized, challenged? Does the conflict center around my perceptions, my needs, my goals, pride in my opinions and my power? If so, I need to reevaluate the situation and get myself out of the center. I must not make or magnify a conflict into more than it really is. The questions I should be asking are: How does this matter affect the mission of the church? Is there a theological truth or principle at stake? Is this a matter of right or wrong, or is it a difference that stems from personal viewpoint or preference?

Differences are not always to be assigned to categories of right or wrong. Many times, they are just that—differences. All flowers are not the same color. All notes on the piano are not the same tone. The differences in flowers and the notes on the piano can actually add depth and variety to a bouquet or a piece of music.

3. ADDRESS CONFLICT INTENTIONALLY AND CONFIDENTIALLY

The principles outlined in Matthew 18:15–17 for situations in which one has been wronged also apply

very well to relationships that involve disagreement even though no wrongs may have been done. It is a mark of maturity to deal with conflict rather than trying to avoid it or attempting to magnify it by telling others about it in an effort to get people on my side. Being intentional and confidential means that I will first get control of my emotions. Conflict can trigger anger, in which case I need to “cool down” first.

Then I need to be sure that I understand the nature of the conflict. Does it truly involve right or wrong? Is there definite harm to the church in doing things differently? When I have understood the root of the conflict, am I prepared to assume the best about the other person? Have I listened carefully so as to understand the viewpoint of the other person?

Careful thought about the preceding questions prepares one for the next phase of conflict resolution: talking things over directly with the other person with whom I have a conflict. I need to share feelings honestly, speak the truth respectfully, deal with specifics rather than generalities, and refrain from attacking the person. I must be ready to accept responsibility for mistakes on my part or for misunderstandings that have contributed to the conflict.

4. INQUIRE; DON'T BLAME OR ACCUSE

Conversations that focus on blame often lead to aggressive or defensive behaviors. Instead of resorting to accusations, it is far better to ask questions or to use “I” statements to elicit response. For example: “Could you help me to understand better what you meant when you said . . . ?” “I am feeling a bit uncomfortable about your plans to . . . ; could we talk about how this might affect other aspects of our church family life?”

There is a huge difference between explaining and blaming. Asking questions and giving explanations allow the focus to remain on the issue. Accusations or blaming shift attention from the issue to the person, often with unsatisfactory outcomes. The aim in conflict resolution is to deal with ideas and perspectives rather than to attack persons.

5. BE WILLING TO ACCEPT A MIXED OUTCOME

In large groups it is rarely possible to please everyone. Good decisions don't always garner unanimous support. Resolution of interpersonal conflict often requires that both sides in the conflict demonstrate some flexibility. Insistence on your preferred solution, winning at any cost, establishes a foundation for other conflicts in the future. People who disagree with each other can often find points of agreement on which to build their relationship for the future.

CHANGE IS A CONSTANT REALITY OF LIFE, EVEN IN THE LOCAL CHURCH. DIFFERENCES IN VIEWPOINTS CAN YIELD NEW INSIGHTS AND NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS.

The apostle Paul (Phil 4:2–3) urges two women to “agree in the Lord.” He did not identify one as the winner and the other as the loser. Instead, he appealed for them to begin not with their differences, but with their shared commitment to Jesus Christ. This shared foundation would enable them to figure out how to address their other issues.

A mixed outcome should not be viewed as a compromise of principle.

It means instead that I am prepared to acknowledge and accept some of the concerns or ideas of the other person.

6. LEARN TO MOVE ON TOGETHER

The resolution of conflict has to focus on the future—and how it will be different from the past. One must not harbor a grudge towards another. Instead, all the parties involved in the conflict must be willing to put the matter behind them. Preoccupation with the past is a formidable obstacle to progress.

We don't need to agree on everything. But we can learn to live in mutual support and respect for each other.

CONCLUSION

Interpersonal conflict is a reality of life—in families and in organizations. The Bible provides numerous examples involving conflict: Moses and Aaron/Miriam (Num 12); Jesus' disciples (Mark 10:35–41); Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–41); the churches at Ephesus (Acts 20:29–30) and Corinth (1 Cor 3); Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2–3); and Peter and Paul (Gal 2:11). Conflict can advance or hinder a relationship and the mission of the church. How a conflict is handled is most important in determining whether the outcome is beneficial or detrimental.

There are times when external intervention may be necessary to aid in the settlement of differences. In the case of Pastor I. M. Eger and Head Elder Ben Wright, there may be great wisdom in both of them discussing with the church board the advantages and disadvantages of making major changes in church programming. Whatever their course of action, they need to begin with their personal submission to the lordship of Jesus, their love and respect for each other as children of God, and their commitment to God's mission in their community. ED

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RE-GATHERING IN THE WAKE OF THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN:

SEVEN WAYS TO BRING YOUR CHURCH TOGETHER AGAIN

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed church. Routines were upset. Most church buildings closed, and churches went online with various levels of success. Some buildings have since reopened, but with restrictions. And where churches have reopened, not all members have rushed back. What can be done to encourage our people to return to worship in our church buildings? What simple steps could local church leaders—elders, deacons, and deaconesses—take to maximize physical attendance when the opportunity to return is available?

Here are seven things your local church can do to increase physical attendance:

1. FOLLOW THE STRICTEST HEALTH GUIDELINES AT CHURCH

Many have suffered during this pandemic and want to reconnect with fellow believers, but they expect

church to be a safe place. Some have told me, “I want to go back, but when I have returned people did not maintain social distancing guidelines. They wanted to hug and shake hands, but I am nervous with that! I do not want to return to church if the strictest standards to prevent the spread of the virus are not maintained.” This means no handshaking, hugs, kisses, or touching. It also means that the bathroom/toilet facilities are regularly wiped, hand sanitizer is available, and registration requirements are followed. To encourage physical attendance, all that can be done must be done to ensure members feel comfortable and safe returning.

2. DO THE THINGS THAT ATTRACT NEW PEOPLE

Attractional churches must attract. Most Adventist churches have been established on the attractional model—that is, inviting people to attend a worship ser-

vice at a set time, often a great distance from the communities where the members live. What attracted them in the first place? New members were attracted by intentional invitations—often using printed brochures advertising the speakers and messages, with the times and places.

Many Adventists churches first attracted people by the types of sermons preached, the personality of the preacher, the friendliness of the members, and the style of worship service offered. It is important to reactivate the procedures that attracted members in the first place: intense visitation—including regular (even weekly) phone calls to all members, personal invitations, promotion of the subjects or themes that will be presented in the Sabbath sermons in the coming weeks, and consistent preaching by the local pastor or key elders. Attractional churches do not attract if people do not know who the preacher will be and what the message will be about.

3. PROVIDE REGULAR (AT LEAST MONTHLY) PASTORAL CARE

Many members rate fellowship as a primary reason for physical attendance in a church building. However, attendance is not synonymous with fellowship. Many of our people come to sit, and then leave with little meaningful interaction with other believers. COVID-19 has helped some pastors, elders, deacons, and deaconesses to maximize the advantages of their phones—and also to delegate. By inviting others to join them in making calls—with members each calling the individuals in up to three households—all members and friends can receive a personal call every week or second week.

The purpose of these phone calls is to listen, encourage, and pray. In churches where this has happened during lockdown, believers are positive: they have received regular fellowship and pastoral care. In some cases, these calls have been complemented

with personalized cards and messages to each young adult (and sometimes all members) each month. Sadly, many have told me they have not heard from their churches during COVID-19—and they really have no reason to return!

4. PROVIDE CLEAR COMPELLING REASONS TO BE PHYSICALLY PRESENT

Many are weary of simply attending and sitting as spectators. During COVID-19 they have learned that they don't need to do this any longer. However, many have not comprehended the meaning and purpose of church—and the importance of participation. Here are three compelling reasons to attend physically:

- **Each sermon is of practical and vital significance to people's lives.** They are not simply the latest hobby-horses of the preachers—or sermons already shared in other places!
- **Sabbath School classes are small teams—organized according to where people live.** This will involve restructuring all Sabbath School classes (and other ministries) into small teams of no more than eight to ten, all engaging with their immediate communities.
- **There is a dynamic outreach culture.** All attending sense that the purpose and direction of the church is to engage with the community to share the good news of salvation through Jesus.

5. EQUIP BELIEVERS AS DISCIPLE-MAKERS

We are not suggesting door-knocking campaigns or dropping literature into letterboxes, nor urging all members to give Bible studies—something for which even most elders, deacons, and deaconesses are ill-prepared. Jesus taught simple, reproducible approaches to disciple-making—and if this equipping and support is provided by local churches, believers will be encouraged and inspired to attend. To make disciples and cultivate His kingdom movement, Jesus used five invitations: (1) come and see, (2) follow me, (3) fish with me, (4) love your enemies or sacrifice with me, and (5) receive the Holy Spirit.

In Luke 10:1–24 Jesus outlines three simple steps to take when we have connected with a neighbor, colleague at work, or family member: (1) eat their food—and listen to their story; (2) heal them—encourage, meet their needs, share your story, and pray for them; then (3) share God's story—tell the good news of what Jesus has done for us, and that He cares for them! When believers know that your church is a resource center to equip and encourage them to lead their friends and families to Jesus, they will be excited about attending.



6. MULTIPLY DISCOVERY BIBLE READING GROUPS

Discovery Bible Reading is a really simple way of reading the Bible. As your members eat, heal, or meet needs and tell God's story, they can suggest reading God's story (which most have never looked at) by exploring the Gospel of Mark. It is only about twenty pages in length and provides an overview of the story of Jesus. The process is simple:

- One prays, "Dear God, please guide us. Thank You."
- Then, one reads the first story (Mark 1:1–8), another reads it again, then one tells the story in their own words.
- Then discuss this story using five questions: What is new? What surprises us? What do we not understand? What will we obey or apply to our lives? What will we share with another this week?
- Then pray, "Dear God, thank You for Your Word. Help us to follow You. Amen."

The more members participate in such groups, engaging with unbelieving friends and family—with these multiplying—the more relevance they will see

in church. Sabbath School classes and worship services can use this process, and in this way church is equipping and encouraging believers in their journey of faith sharing.

7. OFFER MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PHYSICAL ATTENDANCE

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, some have learned that they do not need to attend a church building to be considered faithful members. For various reasons they have enjoyed Bible classes online, or the opportunity to read the Bible in smaller household, community, and generational groups. The fact that some members who came to the church building before lockdowns no longer attend does not necessarily mean they are drifting away.

If members gather in household or community groups—and these are affirmed as integral to the physical attendance of believers—the number of those gatherings will increase and even multiply. It means that your task as elders, deacons, and deaconesses is now more complicated—for you may now have an in-church-building congregation; perhaps five or six (or ten or twenty) "households of faith" with believers gathering to read, worship, serve, witness, and fellowship in their neighborhoods; as well as an online congregation—but the mission of the church to reach people with the gospel and God's end-time message may have just expanded.

AND, KEEP THIS IN MIND—WHAT NOT TO DO!

If you shut down your online options or attempt to compel people to close down their household or relational groups, they will simply choose another online option and go elsewhere—and some will choose to continue with their groups. Rather than alienating them, cultivate and equip them to be faithful, multiplying households of faith—and your in-person attendance will multiply.

God's Old Testament people were scattered as judgment, while New Testament believers were scattered by persecution—for mission. COVID-19 has sent us home. We long to return to our church buildings to worship, but don't miss the opportunities to cultivate New Testament models of church for God's mission. ED

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SALVATION: THE NEED

INTRODUCTION

Shipwrecked in space! Apollo 13 was more than two hundred thousand miles from earth when astronauts Lovell, Haise, and Swigert heard an explosion in the room containing the electrical generator, main engine, and guidance system. They watched in horror as clouds of gas and debris flew past the windows of the command module! Half of the craft's electrical system was nonfunctioning.

They contacted Mission Control in Houston, Texas, USA. Command module pilot Swigert said, "Okay, Houston, we've had a problem here."¹ It was an understatement. The computers in Mission Control analyzed the data coming from the command module and decided that an oxygen tank had ruptured. This meant no power; the main engine was dead. An accurate diagnosis was absolutely essential if the men now drifting in space could survive and return the crippled ship home. Could the guidance system in the lunar module perform the delicate maneuvers necessary to bring the men back to earth, or would they be marooned in space forever?

New maneuvers were programmed by the NASA specialists to solve the crisis. The dead command module was repowered and the sensitive maneuvers needed to separate it from the service and lunar modules were successfully made. A new flight plan was worked out just eight hours before splashdown. Their accurate analysis of the problem and execution of remedial measures finally led to the release of the orange-and-white parachutes that safely dropped the spacecraft to the surface of the Pacific Ocean. The three men were saved!

In the realm of salvation, the necessity of proper remedial measures is infinitely more important, for here our eternal salvation is at stake. A superficial or inaccurate analysis of our basic problems could have dreadful and irreversible consequences (see 2 Cor 13:5). And yet it is obvious that only too often we are more concerned over the *results* of sin than with sin itself; with reformation than with regeneration; with human measures than the divine remedy; with temporary ease rather than with eternal cure.

Hence, we need a true awareness of our condition. This may come to us as an overwhelming experience whereby we realize our spiritual need. Or, it may be the result of hearing a Christian truth, which for the first time explains our condition and its cure.

There are four basic things that all of us need to confront.

I. WE NEED FORGIVENESS

We were created for companionship with God, but that relationship was broken by what Lord Byron describes as "this uneradicable taint of sin, This boundless upas, this all-blasting tree." In the words of John Bunyan, "one leak will sink a ship; and one sin will destroy a sinner."² And now, as Henry VI in Shakespeare's play writes, "forbear to judge for we are sinners all."³ And sin's wages are severe: death and eternal separation from God. Hence, as Thomas Carlyle said, "the deadliest sin were the consciousness of no sin"⁴ and deadly, because there is no remedy for it.

Nothing is more calculated to impress us with the enormity of sin than a frank realization that it cost nothing less than the death of Christ to restore at-one-ment. Viewing the dying Savior will expose the unhallowed desires, impurity of lips, selfishness of motives, and infidelity of heart. Only then will we exclaim,

Lord, bend that proud and stiff-necked I,
Help me to bow my head and die;
Beholding Him on Calvary,
Who bowed His head and died for me.⁵

The only way back to restoration is forgiveness, which is remedial mercy that separates the sinner from his sin.

Abraham Lincoln was asked how he would treat the defeated Southerners. He replied, "As if they had never been away."⁶ That's the way God forgives. He accepts us—as though we had never been away, as though we had never sinned.

II. WE NEED CLEANSING

Cleansing means a removal of evil in all of its aspects and a replacement with that which is pure and holy. It means a change in the content of our thoughts and actions. It means a spiritual change and renewal (see Phil 4:8).

God has provided the cleansing agent: "And the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from sin. . . . If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7, 9, ESV). Sad indeed is the one who belittles the blood of Christ, for mysterious as it may seem, we are cleansed by faith in Christ and His blood, shed on Calvary. "You" writes Paul, "have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13, ESV).

The hands of Christ seem very frail,
For they were broken by a nail.
But only they reach Heaven at last
Whom these frail, broken hands hold fast.⁷

In addition, the Word of God has a cleansing effect. "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you" (John 15:3, ESV).

III. WE NEED EMPOWERING

No matter how high and holy our aspirations, we are confronted with an unregenerate reality: the spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak, or in the words of Paul's confession, "the good that I would, I do not" (Rom 7:19, KJV). So, our attempts at self-reformation end in miserable failure. Every effort at self-improvement is like "plucking bitter apples off a tree, and in their place tying good apples on with a string."

Christ made it clear to His disciples the source and the need of the power by which alone they could become effective witnesses. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8, ESV). Why are we apt to ignore this imperative? Is it because we have become blinded by our self-sufficiency?

IV. WE NEED A NEW NATURE

We need Jesus' prescription for this to happen: "You must be born again" (John 3:7, ESV). This means the divine implantation of a new nature. This is not only outward change, a putting away of this or that bad habit, but a change that results in a completely new way of life (see Rom 6:6; 12:2).

In the words of Floyd E. Hamilton, Christianity takes the dissolute rake and changes him into Augustine, the saint and the great theologian. Christianity takes a John Bunyan, a prisoner in an English gaol, and makes him into the revered author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. . . . Christianity takes the bleary-eyed drunkard in the slum, . . . and changes him into the loving husband and father, giving him victory over temptation and making him a respected and honored citizen of his country.⁸

Such a change comes about by the renewing presence of the living Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit" writes Ellen G. White, "re-creates, refines, and sanctifies human beings, fitting them to become members of the royal family, children of the heavenly king."⁹

CONCLUSION

Augustine tells the story of a man who fell into a pit. A solicitous passerby inquired how he came to be in such a predicament. "Don't ask me that," cried the victim, "but help me out!" But "no one has strength of himself to emerge [from his wickedness]," writes Seneca, a Roman statesman of the first century. "Someone must needs hold forth a hand; someone must draw us out" (see Acts 4:12). We need something neither we nor anyone can do for us: a divine transformation. That need is gloriously fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Without Him we are lost in space on the spaceship Earth. "Mission Control" at the center of the universe offers to us and the world divine guidance and salvation. For "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15, ESV). Thank God for His rescue plan. **ED**

¹ "50 Years Ago: Houston, We've Had a Problem," NASA History, NASA, April 13, 2020, <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/50-years-ago-houston-we-ve-had-a-problem>.

² John Bunyan, "Sin," *Pilgrim's Progress*, pt. II., in *The International Dictionary of Thoughts*, comp. John P. Bradley (Chicago: J. G. Ferguson, 1975), 668.

³ Henry VI, pt. II, act III, scene 3, in *The Works of William Shakespeare* (Roslyn, NY: Black's Reader's 1944), 572.

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, "Sin," in Bradley, *International Dictionary of Thoughts*, 668.

⁵ Author unknown.

⁶ Quoted by George Vandeman in "Guilt," *These Times*, August 1971, 17.

⁷ John Richard Moreland, "His Hands," in *The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, ed. Frank Spencer Mead (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell, 1985), 56.

⁸ Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basics of the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1946), 320.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1948), 287.

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SALVATION: PRESENT ASSURANCE

INTRODUCTION

William Saroyan, the talented storyteller and playwright who won quick fame and wealth, died of cancer in Fresno, California, USA, in 1981. *Last Rights*, written by his son Aram, is not only an account of his last month, but is also his life story as seen by family members who for years received from him only vilification and abuse.

William Saroyan had no intention of dying without a last flourish. He telephoned the Associated Press in Fresno that cancer had spread to his “liver, heart, kidney and bones”—all truth except, of course, for his heart. Characteristically, he then confided to the AP the statement, to be transmitted on its wires only after his death, “Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. Now what?”¹

That’s the question for which we want an answer. As dreadful as the inevitability of death is, I cannot think of anything more terrifying than *not* knowing whether I will be among those who “go in” through heaven’s gates on the earth’s day. In fact, Ellen G. White urges us not to “remain in perilous uncertainty” whether we are “among the saved, or the unsaved.”² The vital question remains: Can we know whether salvation is a present reality, rather than a vain assumption? Thank God, yes! John testifies, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13, ESV).

I. PRESENT SALVATION

Now, consider the ways the apostle John assures us that we have present salvation:

1. There is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Sincere faith in Jesus is itself an evidence of salvation. “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15, ESV).

2. Honoring Christ as the Lord of life. The evidence that Christ is Lord of our lives will manifest itself in conformity to the will and Word of God (see 1 John 2:3–5).

3. Walking after the example of Christ. “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6, ESV). Jesus cannot be a Savior to those who do not follow His example.

4. Habitually practicing righteousness, rather than sin. “If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him” (1 John 2:29, ESV).

5. Loving the believers. “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death” (1 John 3:14, ESV).

6 Possessing a consciousness of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. “Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us” (1 John 3:24, ESV). It is sheer presump-

tion for anyone to claim present salvation who is not trusting in Christ with a sincere heart, keeping His commandments, walking in His steps, loving fellow Christians, and practicing righteousness.

Please note that these evidences are not veiled “good works” to earn salvation, but rather qualities that naturally follow an established and continuing personal relationship with God. Nothing we do can add to what Christ has already done! John encourages us to maintain our faith, if we would continue to share the eternal life of God through Christ (see 1 John 2:23–25).

II. WHY UNCERTAINTY?

With all these affirmations, why is there any uncertainty and confusion brooding over the doctrine of the believer’s present assurance?

Firstly, some misunderstand Ellen White’s comments concerning present assurance. On the one hand she describes the assurance of salvation for Christ’s followers in these colorful words: “If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.”³ On the other hand she writes, “Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversion, should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is misleading. Every one should be taught to cherish hope and faith; but even when we give ourselves to Christ and know that He accepts us, we are not beyond the reach of temptation.”⁴ Misunderstanding occurs when the first and second parts are separated. Rather than negating assurance, the second quoted phrase “*know* that He accepts us” harmonizes with 1 John 5:13: “You may *know* that you have eternal life” (ESV). The first part of Ellen White’s quote is her response to the concept of “once saved always saved.” This is a warning against “cheap grace” advocated by those who profess Christianity but disobey God’s requirements. It is, she says, “stating a falsehood” when they say, “I am saved.”⁵ Then she offers the imperative, “It is essential to have faith in Jesus, and to believe you are saved through Him.”⁶ Further, “the perishing sinner may say: . . . ‘I need not remain a moment longer unsaved. He [Christ] died and rose again for my justification, and He will save me now.’”⁷

Secondly, there is a failure to understand the relationship between justification and sanctification. This failure stems from separating pardon from holiness. C. H. Spurgeon sees this danger when he says, “God’s blessings are blessings with both hands. In the one hand He gives pardon; but in the other hand He always gives holiness; and no man may have the one, unless he has the other.”⁸

So then, sanctification begins with justification. And justification accompanies sanctification all along our journey with God. Need we wait a lifetime for the all-sufficient gift of

Christ’s righteousness, or may we have it for as long as we accept it in penitence and consecration?

And what about the blessings that attend our present salvation? Even now, we are sons and daughters of God, heirs of the kingdom. As partakers of the divine nature, through the Spirit, we come into living union with Christ. In Him we have “passed from death to life”—eternal life (John 5:24, ESV). All this is ours in our Lord Jesus—today! And He intends that life shall continue that way.

The manifold grace of God assures us that our present salvation may yet result in our eternal redemption. In living faith we may ask for and receive salvation in “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23, ESV), “who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30, ESV).

Who, then, is your salvation today? And who is life eternal? Is it not He “that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy”? (Jude 24, KJV).

Thirdly, there is a failure to understand how to live consciously in the steady reality of the “already” and the “not yet.” Jiří Moskala explains, “We have eternal life, but not yet; we are saved, but not yet; we are perfect in Christ, but not yet; we sit with Christ by the right side of the heavenly Father, but not yet. Thus we experience the true joy of salvation.”⁹

CONCLUSION

We can have the assurance of salvation right now, and when Christ returns our present hope of redemption will become tangible reality, and He will “let us in.”

I stood outside the gate, a poor wayward child; Within my heart there beat a tempest loud and wild. “O Mercy!” loud I cried, “Now, give me rest from sin!” “I will,” a voice replied, and Mercy let me in. Oh, what a blest return for all my years of sin! I stood outside the gate and Jesus let me in.¹⁰

ED

¹ Noland Norgaard, “Son’s Bitterness Pervades Story of Saroyan’s Death,” *The Denver Post*, August 22, 1982.

² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1923), 443.

³ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1892), 62.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), 155.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:315.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:373.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:392.

⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons: Third Series* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, 1857), 268.

⁹ Jiří Moskala, “Assurance of Salvation,” *Adventist World*, October 2017, 28.

¹⁰ Josephine Pollard, “I Stood outside the Gate,” in *Christ in Song*, comp. F. E. Belden (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1908), 90.

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SALVATION: PRESENT JUSTIFICATION

INTRODUCTION

A great king gave all his citizens an invitation to a royal banquet at the palace. For admission the guests had to bring what they thought was the fairest flower that ever bloomed. The citizens thronged to the palace but were turned away by the thousands. Only a few found entrance. Many brought the deadly nightshade of superstition and offered that at the door. Others arrived flaunting poppies of denominational pride. Still others brought the hemlock of self-righteousness, and the geranium of legalism. The few admitted had chosen the Lily of the Valley, the Rose of Sharon, and the blood-red Rose of Calvary. Jesus is the price of heaven, and nothing else is acceptable to infinite holiness.

Jesus is God's "inexpressible gift" (2 Cor 9:15, ESV). That gift includes being "justified by faith" (Rom 5:1, ESV). Justification by faith is both the divine heart of the gospel and the gospel for the human heart. Justification by faith is the one unchanging message and method by which God receives sinners. "The only thing of my very own which I can contribute to my redemption," writes William Temple, "is the sin from which I need to be redeemed." This sermon seeks to answer the question: how can we be just before God?

I. THE DEFINITION OF JUSTIFICATION

Justification is that judicial act of God's free mercy whereby He pronounces guiltless those sinners condemned under the law, and constitutes them as actually righteous, once and for all, in the imputed righteousness of Christ. This pronouncement is on the grounds of His atoning work, by grace, through faith alone apart from works. This assures them of a full pardon, acceptance in His sight, adoption as sons, and heirs of eternal life, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit. These gifts bring them into a new relation and standing by the power of the same Spirit, enabling them to perform good works. Yet, such works performed, as well as the faith out of which they spring, make no contribution to their justification, but they are to be regarded as declarative evidences of their acceptance in the sight of God.

II. THE NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION

Here it is necessary to distinguish between a legal and moral sense of justification—that is, between "to declare righteous" and "to make righteous." The truth is that God sees the believer as constituted righteous in Christ, and accepting him "in the Beloved." He pronounces him to be what he is—in Christ. Here is the paradox of the gospel—a man is a sinner yet perfect. Yet it is only a "righteous" man who can be declared righteous. The vital question then is: whose is the righteousness on

account by which God gives His verdict of "not guilty" and "acceptable"?

III. THE GROUNDS OF JUSTIFICATION

Two issues may be distinguished here, referred to as the *ultimate* and the *immediate* grounds of God's act of justifying the sinner. The *ultimate* ground lies in the will and mercy of God. Note Romans 9:16: "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (ESV). Upon these great facts our justification is ultimately based. Our justification is based solely upon the objective mediatorial work of Christ for us. It is with our Lord's deed on the cross that it is connected. This means that our justification is something external to ourselves. It is not something done either *by us* or *in us*. It is what was done—once and for all—for us. We are justified, it is declared, by the blood of Christ (Rom 5:9), by His "righteousness" (5:18), by His "obedience" (5:19), "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 6:11, ESV).

The more immediate grounds, however, of our justification is the imputed righteousness of Christ. He was made sin by bearing our sins, so we are made righteous by bearing His righteousness.

IV. THE CHANNEL OF JUSTIFICATION

The Scriptures declare that faith is "fiduciary." It is a living and personal trust in a perfect redemption and a present Redeemer. Faith is "a gracious and gratuitous gift of God." In this connection two facts must be stressed. First, faith is the only channel of our justification. It is the "instrumental," not the "formal" cause. It would be fatal to turn faith into a "work." Second, faith has no place for any kind of help. To make faith, then, the only channel of justification means quite literally that all works are excluded (see Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8).

Note this contrast between James and Paul. James' discussion about the necessity of works turns not on their *meritorious* value, but their evidential value. James is condemning a faith that is merely intellectual, while Paul is rejecting works as having saving merit. James says an inactive faith cannot justify; Paul says meritorious works do not justify. Paul requires a saving faith, therefore apart from works, and James a living faith, therefore a faith that works. And neither contradicts the other.

The faith by which the sinner is justified is not, then, itself a work of obedience. But neither is faith an equivalent for obedience; it is rather the germ out of which obedience springs. Faith is the medium by which Christ is received and by which we are united to Him. We are never said to be justified on account of faith, but only through faith, or by faith.

V. THE RESULTS OF JUSTIFICATION

It certainly includes pardon. The justified man is also certainly accepted "in the Beloved"; not only is he a "child of God" by birth, but he is also a son by adoption.

He is brought into the enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the family of God (see Rom 8:23; Gal 5:5; Eph 1:5). So, adoption embraces both the renewal of our true relationship to God as a father and the bestowal of the privileges of sonship in this life and that to come. Thus, we who were by nature alienated from God and were under His judgment are received by Him as His dear children and heirs of eternal life now. Such believers possess eternal life as a present position (see John 3:15–18). Such, too, have the Holy Spirit—not only as an earnest of our purchased possession (Eph 1:14), but as the one by whom our sanctification is effected and assured (see Eph 3:16; 1 Pet 1:2).

CONCLUSION

The old-time Scottish preacher John McNeil believed that of all the people in Jerusalem, Barabbas had the best idea of justification. In the gospel story, it was Barabbas who should have been crucified, and Jesus who should have been released. The order was reversed. The prison doors swung open and Barabbas steps out free. He comes out onto the street. People seem to be hurrying in the same direction. He hears that Jesus is to be crucified. He reflects, "Why, that's the man who is dying in my place!" He is compelled to follow the crowd to see Him. He pushes his way out through Jerusalem's gate, crosses over the Kidron Valley, and up the Hill of Golgotha until he reaches the surging mob crowded around the cross. For a moment he stands in the outer circle, and then he pushes his way right up to the front and looks up. As drops of blood from Jesus' wounds splash his upturned face, he cries, "I don't know who You are, but I do know You are dying in my place." Justification and all the enjoyments that follow in its train are yours now, because He took your place! ED

Rex D. Edwards, DMin, is a former vice president for religious studies at Griggs University.

SERMON NOTES

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SALVATION: PRESENT SAINTHOOD

INTRODUCTION

John Nepomucene Neumann, who on June 19, 1977, became America's third Roman Catholic saint, was no ecclesiastical superstar, but a priest of simple piety and workaday faithfulness. So much so that Vatican officials who screen candidates for sainthood almost overlooked him. They shelved his case in 1912 because of serious doubt whether he had displayed the necessary "heroic virtue."

Neumann's advocates persisted, and they finally got a hearing with Pope Benedict XV and a board of cardinals in 1921. Just a few hours before that meeting, the main opponent of Neumann's canonization collapsed and died in a barber's chair. Benedict, subsequently, designated Neumann as Venerable (worthy of veneration and a proper recipient of private prayers)—a beginning of the long process to Roman Catholic sainthood. The next stage was to be named Blessed, which meant that two healings were certified by the Vatican as miracles attributed to Neumann's intercessions in heaven. One further healing was required for sainthood.

Religionists have frequently affirmed that sainthood is reserved for the superior few whose spiritual stature is beyond the reach of ordinary Christians. What does the Bible say?

I. THE TRUTH ABOUT SAINTHOOD

1. Sainthood is not a title or status conferred after death. Saints are not holy persons of the past, but rather are living Christians. For example, Paul in his missionary travels "came down . . . to the saints who lived at Lydda" (Acts 9:32, ESV). In his letter to the Ephesian Christians, he addresses them as "the saints who are in Ephesus" (Eph 1:1, ESV), and likewise in his introductory greeting to the believers in Corinth he calls them "saints" (1 Cor 1:1–2).

2. Sainthood is a quality ascribed to all Christians. Paul asserts that the whole church is "called to be saints" (Rom 1:7, ESV). In the early church, as soon as one was converted and joined the church, that person was designated "saint."

3. Sainthood is nondiscriminatory. In the Roman Catholic Church, only the few rare souls considered unique in piety are classed as saints. The consequence has been the creation of two orders of believers: one possessing a preeminent piety and morality obligatory on the clergy and a favored few, and the other possessing a piety inferior in quality. God has no favorites of this kind. The deadliest egoism is that which denies the power of God for the majority, and makes God appear to reserve His gift and power of sainthood for the few. God has expected holiness from all His people. His purpose through the gospel has always been to "present the church to

himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27, ESV).

4. Sainthood or righteousness cannot be dispensed to anyone else. The belief underlying the veneration of saints is that some persons died with a surplus of good works over and above what they needed for their own salvation. These works of supererogation, as they are called, are said to be laid up in the "treasury of the church," from which they can be dispensed to poor sinners who fall short on their own account (see God's warning to Israel of His coming judgments, Ezek 14:13–14).

5. Sainthood is not awarded for good works whether they be few or many, but by the righteousness of Christ (see Titus 3:4–7).

II. THE DEFINITION OF SAINTHOOD

In the Bible, the word for "saint," both in Hebrew and in the Greek, is translated "holy." Other forms of the same word are translated "holiness, sanctification." All these words have identically the same root and the same meaning. The basic idea is religious and not primarily moral. God alone is holy. To be a saint, to become sanctified, to be holy, occurs only through one's relationship to God. The root idea is separation unto God, dedication or consecration to Him, to His divine purpose, set apart for a life with Him. Acknowledgment of divine ownership is the true meaning of sainthood or sanctification.

Sainthood is not conferred after a life of loyal service to God. Sainthood comes at the beginning of the Christian life. Nothing is holy or sanctified in itself, but it becomes holy by its consecration to God or by being sanctified by God. For example, the temple is holy because it is set apart for a holy use and the Sabbath was made holy by God. The tithe is holy because one tenth of our increase belongs to God (Lev 27:30). Israel was said to be holy—not because of superior merit or piety, but because God had chosen them for His service (Deut 14:1–2). The real significance of sainthood then, is more about what God does than the activities of the individual.

In John 17:19 Christ says He sanctified Himself for our sakes. Obviously, the meaning is that He was set apart for His sacred mission—not that He purified Himself of sin, for He was sinless (Luke 1:35).

Consequently, sainthood, holiness, and sanctification can never be adequately expressed in terms of any moral formula. A "saint" is not one who is spiritually superior to all other Christians or morally sinless. He is one who belongs entirely to God. Nothing is implied of a superior piety for the few.

III. THE CAUSE AND EFFECT OF SAINTHOOD

Believers are said to be sanctified not

when they reach moral and spiritual perfection, but when they are purchased by the sacrifice of Christ (Heb 10:10, 14; 13:12).

A saint is one who fully acknowledges the claim of Christ and lives as one who belongs to Christ. Believers are sanctified not when they are raised to spiritual perfection, but when they have a relationship with and give themselves wholly to God. The transformation that follows is because of divine ownership that was purchased at Calvary. Sanctification, then, was accomplished at the cross and believers are therefore not their own. Thus the Sabbath is "a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them" (Ezek 20:12, ESV). Sabbath keeping does not make a person holy; it is a sign that God does it. True Sabbath keeping is an acknowledgement of God's full claim in our lives. John pictures the saints with the Lamb's "name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Rev 14:1, ESV). We put our name on things that belong to us; God does the same.

But, is this relationship to Christ enough for victory in the face of temptation and trial? Yes, indeed. What can be more transforming than the control of God in the life? The true believer never elbows Christ out of his life. The whole of our lives, not just one day a week, is to be set apart for God.

To live apart from the lordship of Christ in our lives is to call a moratorium on our relationship to God. Could a marriage survive if it were not a commitment for life? It is not for one or two days a week. The continuous commitment to God is highly moral because obedience to the full revelation of the will of God follows inevitably. A life of harmony with God is a natural consequence of such a relationship (Amos 3:3). Every test of obedience to the will of God is a test of how closely we acknowledge God's ownership and control in our lives. The greatest folly of all is to become more sure of ourselves than we are of God. We can be sure of God's hold on us if we are truly surrendered Christians. Only then will we find the daily support of His everlasting arms.

CONCLUSION

When Queen Victoria asked General William Booth of the Salvation Army for the secret of his ministry, he replied, "I guess the reason is because God has all there is of me." Jesus never put discipleship in fine print in the contract. He called on us to love Him more than anything else. We are not our own; we are bought with a price. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." So today and every day hereafter, sing the hymn, "All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give." ED

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THE THEOLOGY OF LIFE

>PART 10

A BIBLICAL THOUGHT – 1

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a *spirit of gentleness*. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. *Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.”
—Galatians 6:1–5 (ESV, emphasis supplied)

In our last biblical thought we discussed the difference between a life of selfishness (flesh) and a life in the Spirit (unselfishness). In our text today Paul continues explaining what a life in the Spirit looks like. Keep in mind that Paul has already taught us in the previous chapters that one of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit is gentleness, and that to love one’s neighbor is the true fulfillment of the law. These elements will be important in understanding today’s text.

Now that we know that a life in the flesh is a life of pure selfishness, and a life in the Spirit is a life

of pure unselfishness, how do we deal with people who fall into sin? How do we treat those who fell into selfish desires and were caught? Paul shows us that we should approach this individual with a Spirit of gentleness. The individual who fell into sin is broken. And how do we deal with our own broken things? With gentleness. Isn’t it interesting how sometimes we end up approaching our broken things (phones, cars, or other goods) with more gentleness than we do when approaching broken people? This would be problem number one—thinking that punishment, distance, or some sort of discipline is a more beneficial approach to those who fell.

But Paul will mention a second problem—a problem we all have faced in our spiritual journey at some point. It is the problem of finding comfort and spiritual pride in ourselves through the fall of the other. In other words, when we see the other fall, we feel, deep down, the good feeling of knowing we did not fall, and therefore, we come to the false realization that we must be in a much better standing before God. And this is only an issue to those who still subscribe to human religion, the religion based on what we do for God (rather than what God does for us). The hu-



**CHURCH IS
NOT A PLACE WHERE
WE CREATE AN
ENVIRONMENT ONLY
APPROPRIATE FOR
THOSE WHO SEEM
TO NOT SIN OR
STUMBLE.**

man religion of human performance feeds itself with comparisons, because if the other fell and we didn't, then, in some way, we are in a better standing than them.

But Paul is not about human religion, or the alternative gospel; he is all about the gospel of grace in Jesus, the only gospel that truly transforms us into spiritual beings. And within this framework, there is no space for comparisons, because we have all sinned and fallen short. While in the human religion of comparison we are unwilling to help the other because the fallen condition of the other must exist so that we might enjoy the pride of our own religion, in the biblical religion we approach the broken with gentleness. The pain of the other is my pain; the joy of the other is my joy.

And here is the irony: only when we “carry one another’s burdens” do we truly keep the law of God. In other words, when we treat our fallen brother/sister with disdain and indifference and believe we are the true “keepers” of the law, we deceive ourselves and become exactly the opposite of what God expects.

Some of us live and do church within the framework of human religion. We treat others unjustly because deep down, we also treat ourselves harshly and unjustly. If we do not perform, or rise to some unattainable standard, we feel horrible and we carry the guilt.

In the same way, if others do not perform, we offer them our silent or even vocal judgment. But Paul’s call for the church in Galatia is a call to all disciples of Jesus today: let us live and walk by the Spirit. When we see a brother or sister who is carrying the heavy load of sin and guilt, let us approach them in a spirit of gentleness and offer to carry their burden. This is what the body of Christ looks like. Church is a place where we assume people will fall, because we are all human, and fragile. Church is not a place where we create an environment only appropriate for those who seem to not sin or stumble.

My dear readers: gentleness, gentleness, gentleness. And as you experience the joy of the relationship with the Jesus who removes burdens, may you also live to remove the burden of the other by carrying it with him.

A BIBLICAL THOUGHT – 2

“One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*”—Galatians 6:6–10 (ESV, emphasis supplied)

In this text Paul compares the work of gentleness and compassion to a field, to a garden. He says that those who sow to their own selfish self will reap corruption. This is not only future (last days) corruption, but present corruption (this life). At the same time, those who sow to the Spirit, in the rhythms of the fruit the Spirit generates, will reap eternal life. And again, this is not only future eternal life (last days), but present eternal life (this life). In other words, those who live by selfishness will experience the consequences of their choices now. They will anticipate their future of death and meaninglessness into the present. But those who live by the kingdom, anticipating the future of love, kindness, and faithfulness now, will also experience the beauty of the future today. They will have a foretaste of the future, now.

But there is an elusive lesson in the comparison between how we live life and with sowing and reaping: the lesson of the importance of patience.

We live in such a fast-paced society. We do not like lines or having to wait; we want fast service, fast food, fast internet, and fast results. And this modern revolution in the way we experience time and social relations affects everything, including spiritual things. We pray and we expect God to answer quickly. We want to see fast signs of growth in life when we learn something new in church. When we are hurt, we expect those who offended us to act on it as soon as possible. But life in the Spirit requires patience. When we plant a seed it does not grow into a tree overnight. And so it is with the things of God.

The religion of the Pharisees expected change overnight. This is so because they expected a formal, external, objective change: be circumcised, follow the laws, appear holy externally, and all will be well. But the work of the Spirit is internal, and takes time.

So Paul’s counsel is: until the last day comes, until we arrive at eternal life, let us do good toward *all* people, especially those who are of the household of faith. Here we find at least two important ideas.



BUT LIFE IN THE SPIRIT REQUIRES PATIENCE. WHEN WE PLANT A SEED IT DOES NOT GROW INTO A TREE OVERNIGHT. AND SO IT IS WITH THE THINGS OF GOD.

The first: do good to all people. The life of those who are born of the Spirit is marked by goodness. As they become attached to Jesus, the source of life, they too will be a reminder of Jesus, a reminder of life, a reminder of goodness. And as Jesus, we are not to determine who deserves this life and goodness; we offer it to all.

The second: do good especially to those who are of the household of faith. How can we invite others into our community if we treat each other poorly? How can we claim to be in Jesus and wait for the coming kingdom of God, where we will have eternal fellowship with God and one another, if we do not live that reality now?

In this last section Paul is just pointing out the problem of having a false community, a community that has the external intention of worshipping Jesus, but that does not live up to what it actually means. We are to extend goodness and love to all, beginning with our brothers and sisters of the faith. This way we will know the Spirit is working in us, and through us.

My dear reader, may you trust in the work of the Spirit in your life, and in our church community. And until we can actually see fruit, may we do good to all people, including those around us. ED

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DEACONS IN THE FIRST-CENTURY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The biblical account of the selection of deacons in the first-century Christian church is recorded in Acts 6:1–8. Ellen G. White gives the background surrounding the selection of these deacons. She states that “the early church was made up of many classes of people, of various nationalities.”¹ This was due to the converting power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2 informs us that the Holy Spirit fell upon many of the dispersed Jews of every nation that had gathered at Jerusalem for this feast day. Among that group were those commonly known as Grecians or Hellenistic Jews. There was a division between the Grecian Jews and the Palestinian Jews. They were divided by their language and culture. One group spoke Greek and grew up absorbed by the Greek culture. The other group spoke Hebrew or Aramaic and grew up in Palestine. Despite the existing differences of these two groups, the Holy Spirit brought them together in harmony and in love. They were of one accord and had all things in common. They sold what they had and divided it among themselves. They visited each other daily, and ate together with gladness and singleness of heart (see Acts 2:1, 44–46).

Unfortunately, this unity of spirit was short-lived, as old prejudices of the past resurfaced. Feelings of distrust, jealousy, and suspicion brought about faultfinding and murmuring. Allegations were made that the Grecian widows were being neglected in the “daily ministration” (Acts 6:1, KJV). The ESV translation calls it the “daily distribution.” Ellen White refers to it as the “daily distribution of assistance.”² However, the Greek word for “ministration” is diakonia. This is the office and the work of a diakonos (deacon). Henry Webb observes,

English Bibles usually translate the Greek word diakonos as “servant” or “minister.” However in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13 the translators created from the Greek word diakonos a new English word, deacon. These passages seem to refer to specific church leaders or officers who were closely linked with bishops (pastors). Apparently, as the number of believers increased and new churches were begun, the congregations formalized the servant role into a more specific church office. The high qualifications for deacons



THEY WERE OF ONE ACCORD AND HAD ALL THINGS IN COMMON. THEY SOLD WHAT THEY HAD AND DIVIDED IT AMONG THEMSELVES. THEY VISITED EACH OTHER DAILY, AND ATE TOGETHER WITH GLADNESS AND SINGLENESS OF HEART.

indicate that the New Testament congregations looked to these church leaders as examples in ministry to persons.³

As we trace the roots of the office of deacons, we discover that they were elected to serve the church by solving problems. Ellen White describes the problem at hand as follows: “Thus it came to pass that as disciples were multiplied, the enemy succeeded in arousing the suspicions of some who had formerly been in the habit of looking with jealousy on their brethren in the faith and of finding fault with their spiritual leaders, and so ‘there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews.’”⁴

From this, it can be concluded that Satan had launched a spiritual attack against the church in an attempt to hinder it from growing and ultimately to destroy it. Therefore, the church needed men of “honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (Acts 6:3, KJV) to look beyond the symptoms and see the real issues, then bring about resolution. The spiritual qualities required of the deacons of the first-century Christian church strongly imply that their calling was a spiritual calling, and their role was far greater than waiting on tables. **ED**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 87.

² *Ibid.*, 88.

³ Henry Webb, *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), 74–75.

⁴ White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 88.

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DESIRE TO SERVE

In the year 2016, I did a survey¹ among a sample of Adventist churches in the Washington, DC metro area to measure the level of member engagement. In the prototype churches, while engagement of regular members in terms of attendance was 85%, engagement in relation to involvement and participation in church ministries was just 21%. The rest of the 64% were classified as “attending disengaged.” By “attending disengaged” I mean that they attend church but are not engaged in additional church activities. At the same time, there are the “absently disengaged”—defined as members who are totally disengaged from

both attending and being involved in ministries of the church.

Another significant factor² revealed through the survey is that when asked how much desire the responders had to be involved in church volunteer ministries, 84% showed interest—36% moderately, 20% greatly, and 28% a lot. The percentage who attended church four or five times per month and the percentage who showed interest in participating in the ministry were close to each other—85% and 84% respectively. However, the gap between the desire for involvement and actual participation is wide, at 84% to 21% respectively. The data indicates that while



the members show a desire to be involved, actual involvement is lacking. This situation is due to two reasons: (1) Though they want to be involved, they do not know what to be involved in. Churches have not done “gift audit” or spiritual gifts assessments so the church as well as the individual knows what they can do (we saw this in detail in the previous article). (2) The churches have not given members the opportunity to get involved based on what they can do.

OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE

Based on the survey results and personal interviews³ with the same group of members, I concluded that it is imperative for the church to provide opportunities to its members to get involved. The disengaged are most impacted when opportunities for involvement are lacking. One of the disengaged stated, “All cannot go to the podium to speak or pray, but church should provide other opportunities according to their abilities.” One of the reasons stated by the disengaged for disengagement is that people did not have opportunities to serve. One of the engaged claimed it is the duty of the church to provide a fair opportunity to serve. The respondent continued to state that if responsibilities are assigned according to their abilities, then there is a fair chance people will agree to participate. Lack of opportunities should not stand in the way of serving.

Peter admonishes, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 4:10–11, ESV). Ellen G. White states,

“All may find something to do. None need feel that there is no place where they can labor for Christ.”⁴

Nelson Searcy advises, “Serving is more important to the spiritual growth of your people than the success of your service.”⁵ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson counsel that churches should not assign more than two responsibilities to an individual, so that others in the church get an opportunity to serve.⁶ Further, churches should create entry-level ministering opportunities that people can involve themselves in quickly and easily.⁷

INVOLVING OPPORTUNITIES

Having identified the spiritual gifts, the church as an organization must plan to provide enough opportunities and connect individuals according to their gifts. I believe when members know their capabilities through the assessment process, they will be more inclined to get involved. The goal is to motivate everyone to be involved, leaving no one behind. Churches have multiple programs in which members can get involved. I suggest dividing the ministries of the church into three parts: at the door, inside the door, and outside the door.

At the door. This involves opening the door; welcoming; greeting; providing name tags; registering newcomers; ushering; guiding the newcomers to the sanctuary and other facilities such as restrooms, Sabbath school classrooms according to their age, fellowship hall, kitchen, etc.; finding seats for the newcomers and the disabled; and connecting members to different ministry booths.

Inside the door. Row hosts can accommodate newcomers and greet them, leading out in song service, prayer, praise, and various talks, and be engaged in different ministries of the church such as teaching, preaching, and arranging fellowship meals.

AS EACH HAS RECEIVED A GIFT, USE IT TO SERVE ONE ANOTHER, AS GOOD STEWARDS OF GOD’S VARIED GRACE: WHOEVER SPEAKS, AS ONE WHO SPEAKS ORACLES OF GOD; WHOEVER SERVES, AS ONE WHO SERVES BY THE STRENGTH THAT GOD SUPPLIES—IN ORDER THAT IN EVERYTHING GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.



EVERY MINISTRY OPPORTUNITY CAN BE SUBDIVIDED INTO MANY PIECES AND VOLUNTEERS CAN BE ASSIGNED ACCORDING TO THE GIFTS EACH ONE IS ENDOWED WITH.

Outside the door. Other members can be engaging in mission work, evangelizing, disaster response, helping the homeless, job finding and placement programs, hunger and food programs, AIDS ministries, health screening, community health clinics, family counseling, tutoring underprivileged children, refugee and immigration assistance, etc.

Every ministry opportunity can be subdivided into many pieces and volunteers can be assigned according to the gifts each one is endowed with. Though the ministries are done in different locations, all contribute to the church's ministry and mission.

FINAL WORD

Therefore, I recommend every church be an inclusive "village" where people know each other, call themselves "we," address one another by name, be there for one another in spite of differences and diversities, include everyone as their own, be a place where everyone is involved in worship, understand the strengths and the responsibilities that come with a church village, and go far and beyond by serving at the gate, inside the gate, and outside the gate. Such a level of inclusivity will promote member engagement in Adventist churches. The vision of Total Member

Involvement will be real in Adventist churches. Adventist churches will be churches that recapture the early model where "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42, KJV). ED

¹ Paulasir Abraham, "Towards Strengthening Member Engagement Among the Adventists in the Washington D. C. Metro Area" (DMiss thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies, 2019), 100.

² Ibid., 101.

³ Ibid., 120.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 104.

⁵ Nelson Searcy, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2007), 137.

⁶ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 139.

⁷ Ibid., 140.

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10 DAYS OF
PRAYER

Materials by
Mark Finley

THE THREE ANGELS CALL TO PRAYER

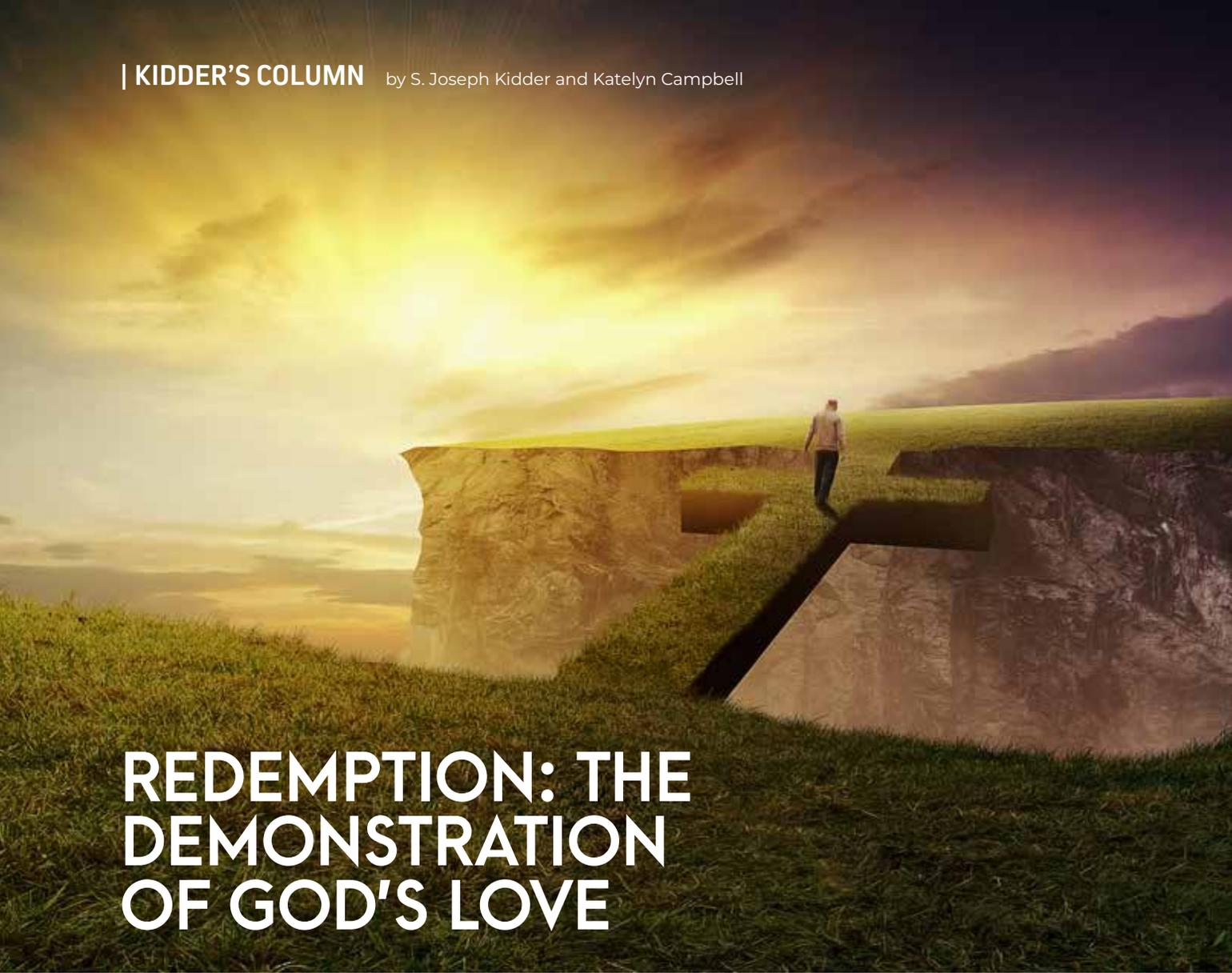
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REVELATION 14:6, ESV

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REDEMPTION: THE DEMONSTRATION OF GOD'S LOVE

Worldviews

seek to make sense of our reality. As we look around and see the hurt and suffering in the world, besides asking why this experience exists, we also tend to ask: What now? How are we to respond to the plight around us? How are we to cope with the condition of the world, and where can reprieve be found? Worldviews simply seek the solution to the problem of suffering. Different worldviews provide different answers to this. A biblical worldview will point to Scripture and the redemptive work of Christ. In the previous article, we discussed worldview concepts as seen in the fall. Here we will explore a worldview through the great controversy's third act: redemption.

"For the wages of sin is death," writes Paul, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our

**"FOR AS IN ADAM
ALL DIE, SO ALSO IN
CHRIST SHALL ALL BE
MADE ALIVE."**

1 COR 15:22, ESV

Lord" (Rom 6:23, ESV). Even before Adam first drew breath, a strategy had already been determined to save his life. "The plan of salvation had been laid before the creation of the earth; for Christ is 'the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' (Revelation 13:8)."¹ God was

not thrown by the entrance of sin into the world. Rather, He followed through with His plan of reconciliation and redemption, anticipating to save as many people as He could from the ultimate fate of sin.

CHRIST REVEALS GOD'S CHARACTER

With this compassionate act of sending His own son to die in the place of sinners, God also refuted all the false claims that Satan had leveled against Him. Did God unfairly lord Himself above others? Was He unjust in dealing with His creations? Was He heartless

and uncaring towards them, selfishly using them for His own twisted purposes and ego? Jesus' incarnate life and death answered all these accusatory questions with a loud and resounding "No!" Rather, God's true character was revealed. "The Teacher from heaven, no less a personage than the Son of God, came to earth to reveal the character of the Father to men, that they might worship Him in spirit and in truth. . . . He presented to men that which was exactly contrary to the representations of the enemy in regard to the character of God."²

With the character of God demonstrated for the whole universe to see, the true deceiver could be seen for what he was. "Not until the death of Christ was the character of Satan clearly revealed to the angels or to the unfallen worlds. The archapostate had so clothed himself with deception that even holy beings had not understood his principles. They had not clearly seen the nature of his rebellion."³ But with the love of God laid bare upon the cross, Satan's character was made evident. He is the father of lies and corruption; God is the Father of mercy and justice. Satan is the father of misery; God is the Father of peace. Satan is the father of death; God is the Father of life. This stark contrast could only fully be seen upon Christ's coming to earth and dying upon the cross. Ellen G. White captures this thought quite well.

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man . . . it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe. . . . The act of Christ dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan. It would establish the perpetuity of the law of God and would reveal the nature and the results of sin.⁴

At the cross our sins are forgiven, we are given access to the heavenly Father, we receive salvation and a new life, and we see the true loving nature of who God is.

CHRIST IS THE MEANING OF LIFE

It is God's redemptive work that brings the light of hope into our worldview. If there was no prom-

AT THE CROSS OUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN, WE ARE GIVEN ACCESS TO THE HEAVENLY FATHER, WE RECEIVE SALVATION AND A NEW LIFE, AND WE SEE THE TRUE LOVING NATURE OF WHO GOD IS.

ise of salvation through Christ, ultimately all of life would be meaningless, each day spent in suffering under the curse of sin with no purpose for something more. John MacArthur writes, "As far as the way of salvation is concerned, there are only two religions the world has ever known or will ever know—the religion of divine accomplishment, which is biblical Christianity, and the religion of human achievement, which includes all other kinds of religion, by whatever names they may go

under."⁵ Christianity celebrates the accomplishment of Christ saving us and reconciling God and man. Any worldview outside of this celebrates the achievements of humanity. But as previously mentioned, a sinner's accomplishments will never be great enough to save himself. Alone, man's achievements do not bring any meaning or purpose to life, ultimately just leaving an emptiness and ache within the soul which he cannot escape.

This is why we see a particular assumption held prevalently in many nonbiblical worldviews: we must seek as much pleasure as we can each day while we still live, because all else is suffering as we march each day closer to our ultimate demise. Nihilism,⁶ hedonism, existentialism, and humanism all have roots in this same belief. Even though suffering on earth is undeniable, none of these worldviews truly offer hope for a better life. They do not provide deep, lasting joy, nor do they give satisfying meaning for all the pain we go through.⁷ However, because of Christ's sacrifice, there is far more to life than the suffering we see and experience.

Through Christ we experience *joy*: "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet 1:8–9, ESV).

Through Christ we experience *hope*: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom 15:13, ESV).

Through Christ we experience *meaning*: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6, ESV).

Through Christ we experience a *new life*: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came

that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, ESV).

The third act of the great controversy narrative clearly demonstrates this joy, hope, meaning, and new life. Jesus’ redemptive work offers us joy, hope, and meaning in a life that is unattainable otherwise. Embodied in Christ is the ultimate way to view reality. In Christ is the antithesis to all other worldviews, because in Christ we receive what no other can give.

CHRIST IS THE MEDIATOR TO ALL THINGS

Within a biblical worldview, we have access to the throne of God through Christ. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16, ESV). Other worldviews do not offer this privileged opportunity, as many of them do not even acknowledge a god—or at least not a merciful god. But we know that with Christ, we gain a true mediator. This means that through Himself, Christ creates a way—the only way—of access between ourselves and our heavenly Father. Ellen White writes of this holy work,

This Saviour was to be a mediator, to stand between the Most High and His people. Through this provision, a way was opened whereby the guilty sinner might find access to God through the mediation of another. The sinner could not come in his own person, with his guilt upon him, and with no greater merit than he possessed in himself. Christ alone could open the way, by making an offering equal to the demands of the divine law. He was perfect, and undefiled by sin. He was without spot or blemish.⁸

This divine mediation is something only Christ can do for us. “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5, ESV). It is only through Christ’s mediation that we have such a wonderful opportunity, and it is His desire to be our mediator for everything. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, Jesus wants to stand between us and all other elements of life:

[Christ] wants to be the medium; everything should happen only through him. He stands not only between me and God, he also stands between me and the world, between me and other people and things. *He is the mediator*, not only between God and human persons, but also between person and person, and between person and reality. Because the whole world was created by him and for him . . . he is the sole mediator in the world. Since

Christ there has been no more unmediated relationship for the human person, neither to God nor to the world. Christ intends to be the mediator.⁹

This is the position Christ wishes to fill in our lives: to save us from our sin and stand between us and all else. He desires to be our everything. In our next article, we will discuss how this work of Christ creates a new life within us. ED

- ¹ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1890), 63.
- ² Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1923), 177.
- ³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 758.
- ⁴ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 68–69.
- ⁵ John MacArthur, *The New Testament Commentary of Romans* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 199.
- ⁶ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Nihilism,” by Alan Pratt, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>, says, “Nihilism . . . is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy.”
- ⁷ George Barna, *Leading Your Church Forward* (Ventura, CA: Barna Research Group, 2003), 11–13; James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997); and “Existentialism,” *The Basics of Philosophy*, accessed September 10, 2021, https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_existentialism.html.
- ⁸ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, December 17, 1872.
- ⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 93–94, emphasis original.

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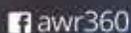
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