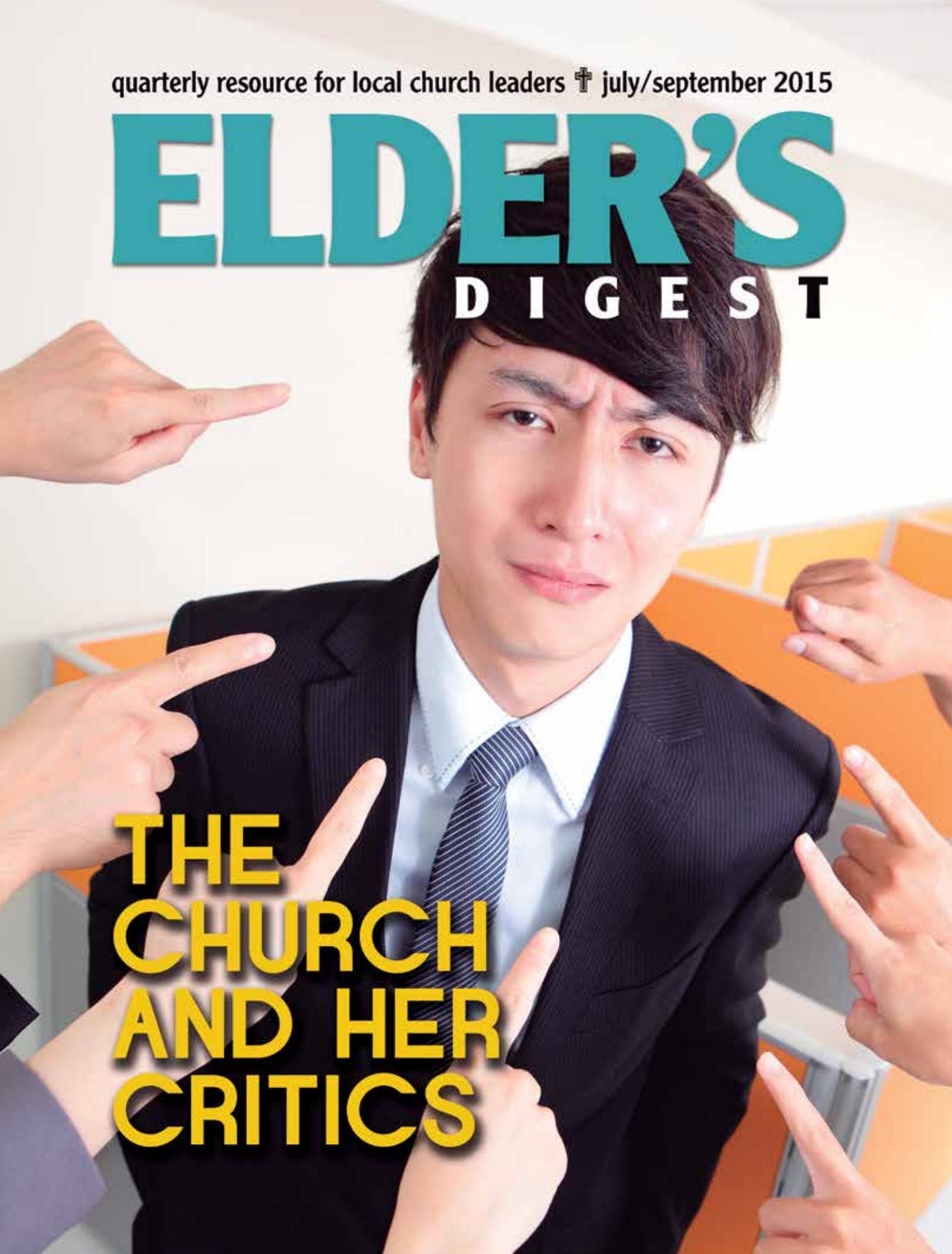


quarterly resource for local church leaders † july/september 2015

ELDER'S DIGEST

A photograph of a young man in a dark pinstripe suit, white shirt, and striped tie. He has dark hair and is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. Six hands are visible, each pointing a finger directly at him from different angles. The background is a bright, modern interior with orange and white geometric patterns.

THE
CHURCH
AND HER
CRITICS

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EDITOR'S NOTES: The articles in this publication have been revised slightly or updated to conform to the intended audience and nature of *Elder's Digest*.

SUBSCRIPTION AND ADDRESS CHANGES: One-year subscription, US\$18.00. Three-year subscription, US\$47.00. Please subscribe at www.eldersdigest.org or send check to *Elder's Digest*, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA. Please send address changes to garciamarenko@gc.adventist.org.

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ETHICS AND THE CHURCH

Making moral choices in our modern world can be confusing and difficult. With so many temptations and influences pulling us in all directions, it is comforting to know that Jesus Christ, through His Word, blessed us with a framework to guide us toward a meaningful life.

It makes perfect sense that our Creator, who made us and designed us to function in a certain way, would know what's best for us. By giving us a roadmap, Christ gave us the ability to be freed from the negative effects of immorality and unhappiness.

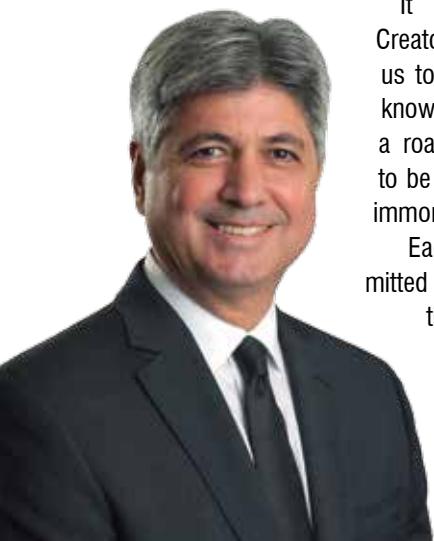
Each quarter, *Elder's Digest* is committed to presenting valuable resources that explain the teachings of Scripture on matters of ethics and morality. Today, Christians of all denominations are caught up in debates about how Christian theology and practice should

address many complex aspects of human life. These debates have a direct bearing on our understanding of how we are—or should be—relating to God and to each other.

For Christians, the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, the first and final authority for faith and practice; however, the believer lives in a pluralistic society which does not formally recognize the authority of the Scriptures. Because we understand the Bible to be a revelation from God, the teachings of Scripture become the primary influence toward the possibility of an ethical and moral lifestyle. Human reason, church tradition, and the natural and social sciences may aid moral reflection, but divine revelation, found in the Bible, constitutes the “bottom line” of the decision-making process. We believe that the Scriptures are the very Word of God, the authoritative and trustworthy rule of faith and practice; consequently, the Bible is the highest authority for doctrine and morals.

I hope the present issue will provide sufficient reasons for giving the Bible a central role in your life.

Enjoy your reading!



JONAS ARRAIS | General Conference Associate Ministerial Secretary



THE CHURCH AND HER CRITICS

We are living in the final days of human history, and Satan is “having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time” (Rev. 12:12). In his battle against the remnant people “who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (verse 17), Satan uses human instruments from among God’s own people as his most effective agents (see Matt. 13:24-30). Claiming to be part of God’s people and demonstrating a superior zeal for the truth, those agents are very successful in bringing into the church the same bellicose spirit that has always characterized “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev. 12:10).

While warning us not to judge people’s inner intentions (Matt. 7:1), Christ also encourages us to evaluate the personal characteristics of the supposed heralds of truth so that we can avoid being misled by them (Matt. 7:15-23). In the book *The Remnant Church*, Ellen G. White admonishes us to be on guard against the accusers of the church. Thus, I am convinced that we should consider in more detail the critics’ characteristics and strategies so that they will not mislead us and divide our congregations.

Throughout this article, I am using the word “critics” to refer not to those who admonish the church positively and try to help her overcome her challenges, but to those who take a negative posture of blaming and undermining the church.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CRITICS

Some critics of the church apparently live normal lives and have no personal problems. Therefore, it would be wrong to attribute the same characteristics to all critics. But many (whom I know personally or through biographical information provided by others) reveal at least some of the following characteristics.

1. Accusing spirit. The critics are usually not satisfied to only discuss ideas and concepts; to receive attention, they feel compelled to accuse influential people and label them negatively. With such a mechanism of self-defense, they can transfer the focus of attention from their own personal problems to the alleged problems of others. In this process, they use falsehoods which are not always identifiable to those who hear them.

2. Personal frustrations. Many critics are also people who are frustrated because they have not been placed in a position of leadership or obtained public recognition or because they have lost a position of social prominence. Unable to endure the grief for such a loss, they project upon others their own personal bitterness.

3. Moral and family problems. A large number of critics have been emotionally affected by the fallout from adultery or traumatized by the loss of a spouse (either by death or separation). Without the stability of a well-structured family, these individuals tend to disrupt other social segments, including the church.

4. Financial difficulties. Some of the bitterest critics are people who used to be economically stable but who fell into financial instability. In many cases, the individual became unfaithful in tithes and offerings. Accusing the church leadership of corruption and misuse of finances, some critics use church funds for their own enterprises.

5. Self-esteem issues. Some people who were molested in childhood or who have a physical or emotional deficiency look constantly for something else to bolster their low self-esteem. Unable to project themselves positively within the local church, they use criticism as a means to compensate for their personal frustrations. Not allowed to preach, they often remain at the back of the church, criticizing the preacher.

6. Selfishness. Almost all the critics I have known are egocentric people who establish themselves and their ideas as the pattern for the spirituality of others. Those who agree with them, they consider good Christians; those who disagree with them are, in the critics' opinion, in apostasy. They see their ideas as the best ones and their judgments as the most reliable.

7. Individualism and an independent attitude. The selfishness of the critics generates in them an individualistic and independent attitude that distances them from the collective thinking of the church. For them, the freedom of individual thinking is far more important than the counsel of the brethren. They usually consider those who disagree with them as inferior and lacking the right democratic spirit.

8. Emotional disorder. Many critics of the church seem to suffer from the so-called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). They demonstrate an uncontrolled aggressive-obsessive compulsion against all those who disagree with them. They consider all who oppose them as enemies to be fought in the name of God.

9. A generalizing tendency. Human beings have a natural tendency to generalize, but critics are masters in this area. They take the misbehavior of a church leader or a small group of leaders and project it as a prevailing characteristic of the entire denomination. Consequently, they make the almost 20 million church members around the world responsible for the misbehavior of one or more individuals (cf. Ezek. 18:20).

The above-mentioned characteristics are frequently found among church critics, and an awareness of these characteristics can help us better understand the profile of the critics. But just identifying those characteristics *per se* cannot explain why such people are able to attract a significant number of followers. Therefore, we should also consider some strategies the critics use to propagate their views.

STRATEGIES OF THE CRITICS

Strategies that critics use to spread their criticisms can vary as much as the characteristics of the critics themselves. Among the most common strategies, one can find the following:

1. A "deeper" knowledge of the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. In an age when many church members lack a deeper knowledge of the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White, the critics promote themselves as the exclusive owners of that knowledge. Once they achieve such recognition, they are not afraid to overemphasize what they like in the inspired writings while simply ignoring what does not interest them.

2. Psycho-social manipulation. One of the most common ways to get attention from listeners is to memorize and publicly recite many texts from the Bible and passages from the writings of Ellen White. By reciting passages that no one else in the audience has memorized, the critics sell the notion that they know more than everybody else and that their knowledge should be accepted as "new light" of divine origin.

3. Supposed originality. Many critics ignore or even distort the historical roots of their ideas, leaving the impression that—finally!—someone honest has appeared on the scene to restore truth in its biblical purity and to reveal the deceptions of the denomination. In this way, less-informed listeners do not realize that the supposed "new light" is nothing more than an old doctrinal distortion that the church already faced in the past.

4. Undermining the leadership of the church. Unable to convince the church leadership of their personal views, the critics begin to accuse, trying to get followers to trust them more than the church leaders. The apostle Peter warned that in the last days, there would be insolent and arrogant people who would "despise authority" and "speak evil of dignitaries" (2 Pet. 2:10, NKJV).

5. Autobiographical discourses. Another strategy used by the critics, consciously or unconsciously, is to project on the church and its leadership their own anti-Christian

and anti-ethical profile. Using the mirror principle, the critics reflect themselves on others, accusing them of their own behavior. An attitude of self-despair leads them to project on others their own personal frustrations.

6. *Posing as “saviors” of the church or from the church.* After undermining the confidence in the leadership of the church, the critics put themselves in a position to be recognized as the only heralds of truth and as the true leaders of God’s people. So, they are finally able to assume leadership positions that would otherwise never be entrusted to them by the church.

7. *Martyr syndrome.* When the church decides to apply proper discipline to them, the critics usually portray themselves as victims of the ecclesiastical system, which they consider to be as intolerant as the one that persecuted Martin Luther. With this martyr analogy, they get even more

sympathizers, generated by the natural human tendency to promote justice by defending the victims (those who are being disciplined) and punishing the aggressors (those who apply the discipline).

8. *Dividing the churches.* As attractive and convincing as someone’s speech can be, listeners must evaluate what they hear by asking the following questions: What are the “fruits” of the work of this individual (Matt. 7:20)? Do his or her words strengthen the faith, the love, and the unity of the believers (John 17:21)? Unfortunately, the work of such critics usually generates a strong critical spirit and a great sense of personal superiority, which is in direct opposition to Christ’s religion (see Matt. 5:43-48).

Critics may use other strategies, but those mentioned above are among the most common ones. As members of Christ’s body, we should not allow such strategies to distance us from “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

CONCLUSION

Many critics can be sincere in their claims, but their accusing work neither strengthens the faith nor promotes church unity. Ellen G. White warns that such people will never enter the kingdom of God. She states, “I saw that some are withering spiritually. They have lived some time watching to keep their brethren straight—watching for every fault to make trouble with them. And while doing this, their minds are not on God, nor on heaven, nor on the truth; but just where Satan wants them—on someone else. Their souls are neglected; they seldom see or feel their own faults, for they have had enough to do to watch the faults of others without so much as looking to their own souls or searching their own hearts. A person’s dress, bonnet, or apron takes their attention. They must talk to this one or that one, and it is sufficient to dwell upon for weeks. I saw that all the religion a few poor souls have consists in watching the garments and acts of others, and finding fault with them. Unless they reform, there will be no place in heaven for them, for they would find fault with the Lord Himself.”¹

Throughout history, God’s remnant church has always faced bellicose critics, and this will occur more frequently as we approach the end of time. But the church retains the glorious promise of Isaiah 54:17: “‘No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me,’ says the Lord.”

ED

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:145.

This article was first published as “A Igreja e seus críticos,” in *Revista Adventista* (Brazil), April 2005, pages 16, 17. It has been lightly edited for *Elder’s Digest*.

Alberto R. Timm is an associate director of the Ellen G. White Estate at the General Conference World Headquarters.

ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

We, the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, speak up and join with others to bring an end to violence against women and girls. Global statistics indicate that in all societies women and girls are more frequently the victims of violence. Actions or threats likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering are incompatible with biblical ethics and Christian morality. Such actions include, but are not limited to, family violence, rape, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), honor killings, and dowry murders. Manipulation, denial of personal liberty, and coercion are also acts of abuse and violence. To such behaviors the Seventh-day Adventist Church says, "Let's end it now!"

Seventh-day Adventists recognize that creation in God's image bestows dignity and worth on every individual. The measure of that worth is seen in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ to provide eternal life for everyone. The love and compassion that characterized the earthly life of Jesus sets an example for all His followers in their relationship with others. Christ-like behavior leaves no room for violence against family members or persons outside the family.

The Bible counsels Christians to view the body as the temple of God. Bringing intentional harm to another person desecrates that which God honors and is therefore sinful behavior. Seventh-day Adventists commit themselves to being leaders in breaking the cycle of violence perpetrated against women and girls. We will speak out in defense of victims and survivors through teaching, preaching, Bible study, and advocacy programs.



The Seventh day Adventist Church seeks and welcomes partnerships and collaboration with others in addressing this global issue. The collective voice of many can save tens of thousands of women and girls from the harm and suffering that result from abuse and violence.

See also the "Statement on the Nurture and Protection of Children".

This statement is supported by the following Bible references: John 3:16; Genesis 1:26; Isaiah 61:1-3; Ephesians 5:2-3; 1 John 3:10, 15-18, 4:11; 3 John 1:2; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19; Romans 12:1-2.

This statement was approved and voted by the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on June 23, 2010, and released at the General Conference Session in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, June 24-July 3, 2010.

THE BIBLICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND THE ISSUE OF WOMEN'S ORDINATION TO THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

1. BRI AND WOMEN'S ORDINATION

The issue of women's ordination to the pastoral ministry has been with the Seventh-day Adventist Church for many decades. With the new developments this quinquennium, BRI members were asked to participate in various committees. Some wrote papers; a few addressed the topic publicly. In each case, BRI members shared their personal opinions on the issue of women's ordination to ministry. As of now the BRI as an entity of the Church has not taken an official position on the issue. It has neither opposed nor endorsed women's ordination. The ultimate decision remains with the worldwide Church.

2. CONCERN

The BRI is quite concerned about some fallouts of the current debate. It seems that after the Theology of Ordination Committee (TOSC) finished its work, the dispute reached a new level that, in our opinion, is detrimental to the Church and to church members—that is, those directly affected and those listening to the debate. We have the impression that the discussion is no longer on a biblical-theological and factual level but that individuals and groups are being heavily criticized and condemned by others. In theology we refer to these as *ad hominem* arguments. Here are some potential effects of such an approach:

(1) *Ad hominem* arguments not only hurt people but may also create hostility between the attacker and the attacked, destroy trust, and hinder future cooperation and teamwork. In the end we may have a split within the Church—if not visible, then invisible. This may hinder the unity and mission of the Church for years to come.

(2) Quite likely, onlookers will also be affected. Non-Adventist observers of the debate may be appalled by what they see happening in Adventist circles and what they read on the Internet. Thus the debate may have negative effects on the Church's outreach and on its reputation in the general public.

(3) The same may be true of our church members and young people. The ordination debate has nothing to do with

the Bible's most fundamental teachings. It does not belong to the core of Adventist beliefs. Hence, it is all the more disturbing to church members when they see people involved in the debate avoid, offend, and judge one another because they are on different sides of the ordination debate—and they see little to nothing of the divine love that Jesus wants His disciples to exhibit. This may raise serious doubts about the Church in the minds of church members.

(4) Another major problem is the erosion of biblical authority and hermeneutics. It is perplexing, especially for young people, to see people who hold a high view of Scripture come to different results. As a result, they may conclude



that the Bible is irrelevant to some or all issues that we face today, and that the Church has failed to articulate a methodology that brings us all to the same conclusions. This is very serious because such a conclusion would destroy the foundation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3. RESPONSE

Responding to these challenges, we urge those directly involved in the debate to be extremely careful when presenting their own views as well as those of others. Be gracious and kind. Our pioneers were able to handle different theological perspectives and still work together in mutual esteem. They were even able to live with unresolved issues until an agreement was reached years later. So should we.

We also need to consider the cost of our actions. Persons involved in the debate must look ahead and ask themselves: How could what I present adversely affect the Church and church members, not just here and now but also in the future? What would be gained if my position were accepted but people lose their faith in God and Scripture and their trust in the Church? When the debate ends, healing will be necessary. How can I contribute to that healing process already today? Is the issue of women's ordination really so big that the cost of it does not matter?

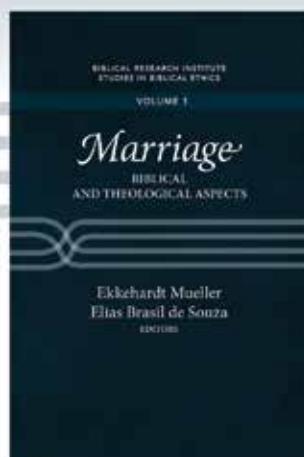
The time has come to stop rhetoric that hurts others. Individuals and institutions should foster peace and refrain from

adding fuel to the fire. All of us need to reach out to others in respect and love, even if some differences remain.

To the observers we would like to say: do not be disturbed. Scripture is the Word of God. The Bible not only speaks to the past but it also speaks to our times. Typically, the problem is not Scripture but the human interpreter. Since all of us are fallible human beings, differences in interpretation will occur. However, there are biblical passages and topics not directly addressed in the Bible that are more difficult to understand and on which legitimate differences of opinion still exist in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For example, this is the case with certain passages in Daniel and Revelation. The Holy Spirit still has some work to do with us, and we must allow this process to happen. These biblical passages and theological topics that are not yet completely clear to us do not affect our fundamental understanding of God and His message for us. That we wrestle with issues is good; that we disagree in some areas is not necessarily all bad either. Still, Scripture is the final authority in all matters of faith and Christian life, revealing to us God's wonderful plan of salvation and of our crucified and risen Redeemer, Lord, Example, and Mediator Jesus Christ, whom all tongues will praise some day.

ED

Ekkehardt Mueller is deputy director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference world headquarters.



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SERVING DURING THE SERVICES OF THE CHURCH

DEACONS AND DEACONESSES AS GREETERS AND USHERS

According to the biblical qualifications required of deacons and deaconesses, they are multi-talented people that are responsible for multifaceted duties. *The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* lists the following duties for deacons and deaconesses: (1) assistance at services and meetings, (2) visitation of members, (3) preparation for baptismal services, (4) assistance at the Communion service, (5) care of the sick and aiding the poor and unfortunate, and (6) care and maintenance of church property.

The instruction given that pertains to the duty of assistance at services and meetings is, “Deacons are usually responsible for welcoming members and visitors as they enter the church and for assisting them, where necessary, to find seats. They cooperate with the pastor and elders for smooth functioning of all meetings. . . . In many churches,

deaconesses assist in greeting guests and members at meetings. . . .”¹ By assigning the duties of greeter and usher to the deacons and deaconesses is particularly consistent with one of the deaconesses’ roles during the early centuries of the Christian church. According to the *Apostolic Constitution in Church Discipline, Doctrine, and Worship*, “During the first five Christian centuries, some of the help rendered by the deaconesses was to assist the presbyter in the baptism of women: greet the women parishioners, direct them to their seats, and maintain order among them.”²

The Church Resources Consortium of the North American Division lists the following duties of ushers:

1. Greet worshippers, making every attempt to help them feel welcome and at ease.
2. Escort members and guests to their seats.
3. Distribute materials related to the service/meeting such as bulletins, hymnals, handouts, etc.



4. Receive certain offerings, delivering them properly to the treasury department of the church.

5. Maintain an alertness for any emergency that may arise, relieving the need or contacting the person(s) needed to provide the proper assistance.

6. Direct individuals out of the service/meeting in an orderly fashion (in most instances row by row), leaving the auditorium or room ready for the next service or meeting.

Newcomers' first experience with the church is through its welcoming system. Therefore, greeting the worshippers and helping them feel welcome and at ease should begin in the church's parking lot. Deacons, serving as parking lot attendants, are to insure that there is adequate parking for visitors; assist those with disabilities, the elderly, single parents with children, etc. Door greeters should engage the worshippers in friendly conversation while directing them to the greeters at the welcoming station. The usher at the sanctuary door welcomes and opens the door for them, and the ushers inside the sanctuary escort them to their seat.³

In addition to these services, the deacons and deaconesses serving as ushers should view the members and visitors who sit in the pews that they monitor as their parish. They should get to know those individuals, call them during the week to pray with them, call them when they are absent from church, send them cards on special occasions, and offer assistance to those needing help caring for their

children. Seek God's guidance in developing this into small group ministries where Bible studies and fellowship can be conducted from house to house. This could also develop into outreach ministries in the various neighborhoods of the church members and visitors, in preparation for a public evangelistic meeting.

Although in some churches persons other than deacons and deaconesses serve as greeters and ushers, "it is readily apparent," says Robert E. Naylor, "that no one could serve more efficiently as an usher [or greeter] than a deacon [or deaconess]."⁴

ED

¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 2010, 71-73.

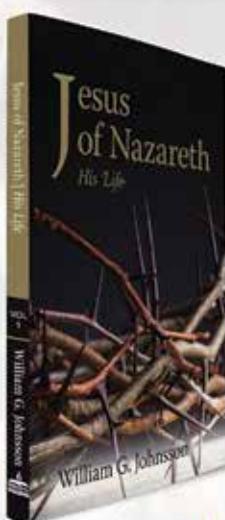
² Maurice Riley, *The Deaconess: Walking in the Newness of Life*, 2nd ed. (Newark, NJ: Christian Associates Publications, 1993), 1.

³ Steven Norman, Quinton Fletcher, and Shakebra Johnson, *Parking Lot to Pew Ministry*, SCC Ushers and Greeters Ministry Department.

⁴ Robert E. Naylor, *The Baptist Deacon* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1955), 84.

Vincent E. White, Sr., D.Min., is a retired pastor and author of *The Twenty-First Century Deacon and Deaconess: Reflecting the Biblical Model*; *The Twenty-First Century Deacon and Deaconess: Reflecting the Biblical Model Workbook*; and *Problem Solvers and Soul Winners: A Handbook for Deacons and Deaconesses*. www.avasbookpublishers.com.

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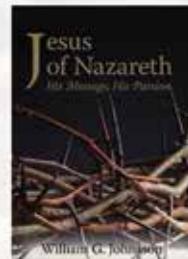
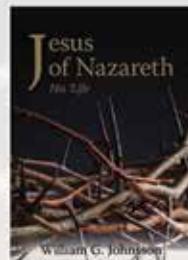


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GENERATION CHANGE: WHY OUR YOUTH LEAVE

The church needs to wake up to the realization that the emerging generation is not just the so-called church of the future—it is the church right now. This generation of young, courageous, and bold Seventh-day Adventist Christians is redefining the very fabric of how we “do church” in our cities, communities, and countries.

Like no generation before, our young people have access to limitless information. They live in a world where social media is redesigning the way people interact. They live in a world filled with innumerable ideas, belief systems, and ways of life. This world certainly does not answer their deep soul questions, but all too often, their church does not offer relevant answers to their questions either. In their book *We Can Keep Them in the Church*, Gary Hopkins and Myrna Tetz note the youth flight in Adventism and the graying of Adventism when they tell us that in 1965, the average age in the local church [in the North American Division] was 35; in 1995, it was an alarming 65.¹

According to the research of Thom Rainer and Sam Rainer, youth who leave the church “don’t completely depart from their faith. Rather, they part ways with the church.”² Their study of American young adults between the ages of 18-30 who attended church regularly for at least one year during high school identified seven reasons why young people leave their churches:

1. They want to take a break from church.
2. They are turned off by judgmental attitudes and hypocrisy in the church.
3. They have moved to another community.
4. Their work responsibilities conflict with their church attendance.
5. They have a busy social life.
6. They are weary of church politics.
7. Their attendance was based only on the desire to please others.

A five-year research project headed by Barna Group president David Kinnaman identified issues that challenge faith development among teens and young adults. In his resulting book, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church and Rethinking Church*, Kinnaman lists six reasons why “nearly three out of every five young Christians (59 percent) disconnect permanently or for an extended period of time from church life after age 15.”³

1. Churches often seem overprotective, making it difficult for them to connect with the world.

2. Teens and 20-somethings have a shallow Christian experience. They claim that church is irrelevant to their daily lives and that there aren’t enough in-depth Bible study or real/in-depth relationships/experiences with God.

3. Churches come across as antagonistic to science. “Research shows that many science-minded young Christians are struggling to find ways of staying faithful to their beliefs and to their professional calling in science-related industries.”

4. Young Christians’ church experiences related to sexuality are often simplistic or judgmental. The modes of teaching that the church uses are not relevant to the sexual exposure and education young people receive outside the church.

5. Young Christians wrestle with the exclusive nature of Christianity. “Younger Americans have been shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance.”

6. The church feels unfriendly to those who struggle with doubts.

These are just a few reasons why this generation is slipping out the back door, and research suggests that these young people are not likely to return later in life. Something, therefore, has to change in the way we do youth ministry. The church needs something that will keep our young people connected with God and the church. Young people need more than a set of rules to feed their faith. They need something that will anchor solid conviction and purpose in their beliefs.

More than anything, our youth need Jesus at the core of their lives. Since the Great Commission commands us to teach and make disciples, we have to ask the question: What are we doing to make true and passionate disciples among our young people?

¹ Gary Lee Hopkins and Myrna Tetz, *We Can Keep Them In the Church* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2004), 39.

² Thom Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2008), 30.

³ Barna Group, *Six Reasons Young Christians Leave the Church* (2011). <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church#.UfHmwcu9KK2>

This article was first published in *Best Practice*, March 9, 2014. It has been lightly edited for *Elder’s Digest*.

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IMPORTANT COUNSELS TO BE CONSIDERED

EXERCISE AFTER EATING

There are men and women of excellent natural ability who do not accomplish half what they might if they would exercise self-control in the denial of appetite.

Many writers and speakers fail here. After eating heartily, they give themselves to sedentary occupations, reading, study, or writing, allowing no time for physical exercise. As a consequence the free flow of thought and words is checked. They cannot write or speak with the force and intensity necessary in order to reach the heart; their efforts are tame and fruitless.

RIGHT USE OF THE VOCAL ORGANS

Careful attention and training should be given to the vocal organs. They are strengthened by right use, but become enfeebled if used improperly. Their excessive use, as in preaching long sermons, will, if often repeated, not only injure the organs of speech, but will bring an undue strain upon the whole nervous system. The delicate harp of a thousand strings becomes worn, gets out of repair, and produces discord instead of melody.

It is important for every speaker so to train the vocal organs as to keep them in a healthful condition, that he may speak forth the words of life to the people. Everyone should become intelligent as to the most effective manner of using his God-given ability, and should practice what he learns. It is not necessary to talk in a loud voice or upon a high key; this does great injury to the speaker. Rapid talking destroys much of the effect of a discourse; for the words cannot be made so plain and distinct as if spoken more deliberately, giving the hearer time to take in the meaning of every word.

PRESERVATION OF LIFE

When a speaker talks in the proper way, taking deep, full inspirations, and throwing out the voice in clear, distinct

tones, the whole being is benefited. The exercise of my lungs in deep breathing, as I have engaged in public speaking, has been a life-preserver to me.

Care is always to be taken not to strain the vocal organs. They are to be kept as smooth as possible. When you are speaking before a congregation, let the abdominal muscles have the hardest part of the work to do. The light given me for you is that you are to do more public speaking, and that you are to be sure, when speaking, to exercise the abdominal muscles. Your brain has been overstrained. Take heed to the things I write you, and you will see that my words are true. As you engage in the work the Lord points out for you, the Spirit of God will impress minds through the words you speak. The spoken word will make a deeper impression on hearts than the printed word.

This article is excerpted from the book *The Voice in Speech and Song*, pp. 198-200 by Ellen G. White.

The image shows the cover of the "ADVENTIST DEACON AND DEACONESS HANDBOOK". Four people—two men and two women—are smiling behind the book cover. Below the book is a graphic with the text "DEACONS and DEACONESES" and the website "www.eldersdigest.org".

ADVENTIST DEACON AND DEACONESS HANDBOOK

DEACONS and
DEACONESES

www.eldersdigest.org

CALL TO LISTEN

People have more ways of communicating and consuming media today than ever before, from video chat or text messages to customized smartphone apps. These tools are catchy and innovative, but the ever-increasing variety can also be a bit overwhelming for the church, as we try to ensure that our message of hope is getting through to as many people as possible.

At Adventist World Radio (AWR), a key part of the ministry's planning process is determining which methods of broadcasting its more than 100 languages are best suited for different audiences or locations. Several years ago, this led to the early adoption of Internet podcasts. (On iTunes, AWR offers content in more languages than any other provider.) At the same time, AWR continues to invest significant resources in traditional media, which serve millions of impoverished or remote listeners.

AWR's latest service may appear old-school, but it is filling a definite need for people who are out of range of its radio broadcasts and also unable to access podcasts.

"Call-to-listen" gives people the opportunity to dial a local-access phone number from their landline or basic mobile phone, and hear a full AWR program in selected languages. The service does not require a smartphone or app, and uses voice minutes rather than data plans.

"Working with AudioNow—the world's leading call-to-listen provider—fits within our core mission to broadcast to the hardest-to-reach people groups of the world in their own languages," says Dowell Chow, AWR president. "Now, diaspora groups can be connected to AWR programs with just a simple telephone call."

AWR's call-to-listen service is currently available in the United States, Australia, and Mexico, where the most popular AWR languages each have their own assigned phone number. More countries will be added over time; the updated lists can be found at awr.org/call-to-listen/.

ED

Shelley Nolan Freesland is Adventist World Radio communication director at the General Conference world headquarters.

CALL TO LISTEN

Away from your computer or smartphone? Still want to hear AWR's podcasts?



Access our most-popular languages on your landline or mobile device.

Dial one of our local-access phone numbers – you'll use voice minutes rather than data plans, and no app is required.



AMHARIC - 712.432.9970
MARSHALL ISLANDS - 712.432.9971
SWAHILI - 712.432.9972
VIETNAMESE - 712.432.9973
KOREAN - 712.432.9974

TAGALOG - 712.432.9975
HINDI - 712.432.9976
SPANISH - 712.432.9977
FRENCH - 712.432.9978
ARABIC - 712.432.9979

Numbers also available in Australia and Mexico, with more countries to come – see complete listings at awr.org/call-to-listen/.

LESSONS FROM THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS

Revelation 2:1-7

If Jesus visited your church, what would He say about it? Would He be impressed by the things that impress others? Would He comment on your buildings? Would He mention the size of the congregation? Would He notice how much money was given last week? What would He think about the church you attend?

Reading Revelation 2–3 is like reading someone else's email. These are real churches filled with real people who are struggling with real problems. Though 2,000 years separate us from them, their issues are not much different from ours.

So what is Jesus looking for when He comes to church? The seven letters to the seven churches provide an important answer.

The first letter went to Ephesus, a major-league city in the ancient world. It was also home to the Temple of Artemis (also called Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The city was a bustling cosmopolitan center, a place where the apostle Paul spent over two years establishing a thriving church (Acts 19). Later, he wrote the New Testament letter of Ephesians to this congregation.

I. A WORD OF COMMENDATION

The letter from Jesus opens with a reminder that Jesus is fully qualified to write because He "holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands" (Rev. 2:1). The seven stars are the angels sent to the seven churches. The seven lampstands are those seven churches (1:20). This is a good word for beleaguered pastors and other church leaders who feel like they are constantly under the microscope. Never fear. God knows you, He sees you, and He has not forgotten you.

There was much to commend about the church at Ephesus: "I know your deeds" (verse 2). The Ephesians had great zeal for the Lord. Theirs was a busy, hard-working, service-oriented congregation. They didn't just sit around patting each other on the back; they were eager to serve the Lord. They had a church calendar filled to overflowing with events, programs, meetings, and a whole variety of outreach initiatives to the community.

But that's not all. They would not tolerate false teachers (verse 2).

We might call that an "Ephesians' faith" because it's exactly what our Lord commands in His message to this church.

What a great church it was! Hard-working, Bible-centered, courageous, filled with folks who could take the heat and never give up. Who wouldn't want to be part of a church like that?

II. A WORD OF REBUKE

When Christ looks at a church, He peers beneath the surface to see the underlying reality. In this case, all the good the church in Ephesus was doing was overshadowed by a sad reality: They had lost their first love (verse 4). They didn't love Jesus very much anymore. Somehow in the midst of all their godly busyness and all their standing for the truth, somehow, somewhere along the way, they had left Christ out of their church. Is that possible?

It must be possible because that's what happened at Ephesus. One wonders if Paul sensed this problem 30 years earlier when he wrote to the Ephesians and prayed that they, "being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph. 3:17, 18). How easy it is to substitute knowledge for a warm heart toward Jesus!

In verse 5, He gives them a simple yet deeply challenging prescription that can be summarized as follows:

- *Remember* how it used to be.
- *Repent* and turn from your wicked ways.
- *Repeat* the first works.

This strikes me as an eminently sensible prescription because it assumes an important spiritual truth: You don't regain your first love overnight. Ask any couple that has gone through a marital crisis. A marriage doesn't deteriorate overnight, and it is not restored overnight. Healing takes time.

Jesus' words remind us that while healing is possible, it must begin in the heart and in the mind. Do loving actions and loving feelings will soon follow. In counseling, we often tell unhappy spouses to "act as if you love your spouse even when you don't feel like it." We say that because it's easier to act yourself into a new way of feeling than to feel yourself into a new way of acting.

III. A WORD OF WARNING

We must not skip the solemn words of Jesus in verse 5: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from

its place." The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* says, "The church would forfeit its status as an accredited representative of Christ. The church [of Ephesus] had 'fallen,' but divine mercy patiently provided an opportunity to 'repent.'"¹

Let me ask a question for which I have no answer: How does a church know when its lampstand has been removed? I suggest that the church itself would never know because, in one sense, nothing would change in the sight of a human being. God would take His hand off the church, and everything would continue as usual. The preacher would preach, the choir would sing, the lights would shine, the sound system would work, the Sabbath School classes would meet, the deacons would collect the tithes and offering, and the worship teams would lead. And yet, God would not be there. It would be religion without reality, preaching without power, and church without Jesus.

It is a sad fact that the church at Ephesus eventually ceased to exist. It simply was no more. But perhaps that was better than to continue as a church when Jesus was absent.

IV. A WORD OF INVITATION

And so we come to the ultimate question: Are we listening to what God is saying? Each of the seven letters includes this sentence: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7). Do we have ears to hear or are we already too distracted by the noise of the world? The Christian faith is a religion of the ears—of hearing the Word of the Lord. God is speaking. Are we listening?

The message to the church at Ephesus ends with this promise to the overcomers: "I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7). The word "paradise" refers to the personal presence of the Lord Jesus.

CONCLUSION

To those who are faithful, Christ promises continued, intimate fellowship in paradise, sustained at the "tree of life" throughout eternity. May your ears hear and positively respond to the words of commendation, rebuke, warning, and invitation from the word of God.

¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:745.

LESSONS FROM THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

Revelation 2:8-11

We often face situations in life that buffet our faith in the Lord. We or our family members face injustice. We experience health problems. Our non-believing family members die suddenly. When we encounter such situations, we often wonder, "Does the Lord really love us?" How does the Lord feel about these types of situations?

There are times when life goes bad for all of us. The letter from Jesus to the church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11) helps us think biblically about life's struggles, especially those struggles that come because of our Christian faith.

The letter to the church at Smyrna tells us something about this church and much more about the Lord Himself. Through these brief words, we will find much to encourage us in our own struggles.

I. JESUS KNOWS YOUR TROUBLE

"I know your afflictions" (verse 9). The word "afflictions" does not describe the ordinary troubles of life; rather, it refers to what we might call catastrophic pressure. In another context, it was used to describe a man being crushed by a massive boulder. When the sky falls around us, when all hope is lost, when darkness surrounds us and the enemy closes in, Jesus says, "I know your afflictions."

II. JESUS KNOWS YOUR POVERTY

"I know . . . your poverty—yet you are rich!" (verse 9). These words are literal, not metaphorical. Christians in Smyrna evidently came from the lower rungs of the economic ladder. If they once had been rich in worldly goods, those days were long past. No doubt many had lost their jobs in the trade-guilds because they would not say, "Caesar is Lord."

To these poverty-stricken Christians, Christ says, "But you are rich!"

Is He mocking them? It depends on how we value time versus eternity. If this life is all that matters, then the words of Jesus are nothing more than pious nonsense. What good is it to say, "You are rich!" to people who are starving?

III. JESUS KNOWS YOUR ENEMIES

"I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9). Who are these people who are called a "synagogue of Satan"? This fearful description applies to those Jews in Smyrna who

had joined forces with the pagans to accuse the Christians of treason against Rome. In taking sides against the church of Jesus, they were taking sides against the Lord Himself.

Because Christians did not worship idols but instead worshiped God, who is invisible, they were sometimes considered atheists.

Never be surprised when religious people hate you. They hate Jesus, too. And religious people crucified Him.

IV. JESUS SAYS, "DO NOT FEAR"

"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days" (Rev. 2:10).

We find much to instruct us in this verse. First, our Lord has perfect knowledge of all that is about to happen to us. What surprises us does not surprise Him. Second, the Lord sometimes allows the devil to attack us severely. Third, the Lord limits our sufferings. Jesus tells the church that the severe persecution will last for "ten days." Some of us may think, "That doesn't sound so bad." But how will you feel after you have been fired from your job, beaten senseless, your house plundered, your spouse abused, and your children physically attacked? Will 10 days seem so small to you then?

I cannot explain why some people seem to suffer more than others. While it is true that "into each life some rain must fall," some folks seem to have a perpetual monsoon pouring down upon them. After pondering this for many years, I have concluded that all our speculations are just that—idle speculations that do not help us much at all. But let us rest our soul in this: We cannot be tempted beyond that which we are able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13). Think of it this way: If Jesus says you will suffer for 10 days, no force on earth can make your suffering last 11 days! It won't end early, but it won't go longer either. The Lord has determined the time limit on our trials—whether for 10 days, 10 weeks, 10 months, 10 years, or 10 decades.

That is why He says, "Fear not." The Lord knows what He is doing, and He is doing it. He will accomplish His purpose concerning us.

V. JESUS SAYS, "BE FAITHFUL"

"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death" (Rev. 2:10, 11).

There is one important fact we must not miss: Jesus never promises to remove the trials of life. He never says to the church at Smyrna, "Just believe in me and everything will get better." Jesus was not a "prosperity gospel" preacher. That heresy has infected the church around the world and created a generation of Christians who are materialistic, worldly, and spiritually anemic. Because they have no theology of suffering, they are not ready when suffering comes, so they have no strength to face the terrible struggles of life.

Jesus never says, "Believe in me, and I will give you an easy life." He says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

No doubt many of the believers in Smyrna paid the ultimate price for their faith. Having followed Jesus in life, they now wait for Him in death. It is against that backdrop that we see the importance of Christ's title for Himself in Revelation 2:8: "These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." These are the extremes.

Death itself has no power over the believer who remains faithful (John 11:25).

We may die—indeed, we will die someday! That's not the question. Will we be faithful no matter what? Fear not! Be faithful! Death may come, but it cannot take from us what God has given us. The world gives fame, and the world takes it away. So be it. We are rich today and poor tomorrow. We have a job and then we don't. We are healthy and then cancer strikes. We have a happy family and then it falls apart. Our friends say they love us and then they disappear.

CONCLUSION

To those who stand strong in the midst of trials, the best is yet to come. We will receive the "crown of life" and reign with Jesus forever.

Be encouraged, child of God. Buckle up your chinstrap and get back in the game. Don't run from the troubles of life. You are richer than you think.

Jesus is coming soon! Jesus knows your troubles. He knows your poverty. He knows your enemies. Jesus says, "Do not fear. Be faithful, and I will give you the crown of life." Are you willing to be faithful to the Lord?



LESSON FROM THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

Writing to the church at Pergamum in Revelation 2:12-17, Christ confronts a congregation that had become too open-minded for its own good. What do we learn when we read this letter from Jesus?

I. NO CHURCH CAN LIVE ON ITS PAST

The church at Pergamum certainly had a great heritage. During days of intense persecution, a man named Antipas had paid the ultimate price for his faith (Rev. 2:13). We know nothing more about Antipas than what is said here. What matters is that Jesus knows his name and knows that he would not give in to the pressure around him. Though forgotten on earth, he is remembered in heaven.

So it is for all the brave martyrs, most of them unnamed and unknown to the church at large. Their blood has become the seed of the church worldwide. But where there is heroic virtue, great danger lurks. A church with such a great past may assume that it is meeting the challenge of the present. Was the church at Pergamum guilty of honoring Antipas while neglecting to follow his godly example? It is right and good for a church to honor those who came before, but where are the heroes like those of the past?

II. NO CHURCH CAN LIVE ON COURAGE ALONE

We should not miss the good words Christ has to say about this church (Rev. 2:13).

Pergamum was located 65 miles north of Smyrna. As the ancient capital city of Asia Minor, it was filled with beautiful palaces and pagan temples. Taking center stage was the massive altar to Zeus, the god of all gods. Pergamum combined a toxic mix of political power, pagan ritual, Greek philosophy, and the worship of Caesar. Once a year, every citizen was expected to offer incense and declare that "Caesar is Lord." No Christian could do that in good conscience. Thus the stage was set for all-out spiritual conflict.

When Jesus says that Satan had his "throne" there, He meant that Satan had found a place where he could exercise diabolical influence over an entire region. Through some combination of idol-worship and sensual pleasure, Satan held sway over that city. It was a region covered with a dark cloud of evil.

I believe Satan still has his "thrones" today. It was not easy to be a Christian in Per-

gamum, and it is not easy in many places to be a Christian today.

A great battle rages between the god of this world and the God of the Bible. In that battle, the believers at Pergamum had not yet yielded ground. What, then, was their great failing?

III. NO CHURCH CAN LIVE WITH ERRORS IN ITS MIDST

In Revelation 2:14 and 15, Jesus points to the great weakness of this church: They would not practice church discipline. In the misguided name of love, they refused to cast out those who held the "teaching of Balaam" and the "teaching of the Nicolaitans." Both phrases evidently refer to the same general tendency. There were some in the church who advocated a loose doctrine and an even looser morality. In the name of being "open-minded," they held that the Christian church should be an exceedingly broad fellowship.

It is very seductive. We all like the idea of the "church of the open door." Come one, come all, come just as you are. But when that is pressed too far, the church becomes a mixture of truth and error, purity and impurity, and sooner or later, evil tends to spread so that sin no longer seems very sinful. The end result is a church that receives both a commendation and a harsh warning from the Lord.

IV. NO CHURCH CAN LIVE IN A DIVIDED STATE FOREVER

That brings us to the Lord's call in verse 16. Christ takes personal offense when His church harbors immorality in its midst. He threatens to pay a personal visit to Pergamum and fight against the evil teachers.

This verse raises an interesting question. Who exactly is supposed to do the repenting? Certainly the false teachers need to repent.

In the name of "open-mindedness" and "toleration" and even "building common ground," many churches have subtly compromised the gospel. I believe the Lord Jesus is speaking more to the church itself than to the false teachers. Pastors, elders, deacons, and each one of us must repent.

The church must decide what it wants to be. Jesus warns that if the church doesn't take strong action, He will do it Himself. The same Jesus who says, "Come to me" also says, "Depart from me."

It's a frightening thing when Jesus says, "I will fight against you."

V. NO CHURCH CAN LIVE WITHOUT A WORD OF HOPE

Christ's message ends in a series of wonderful promises to those who overcome by faith (Rev. 2:17). In contrast to the pagans who offered hidden mysteries, Jesus offers something much greater to those who follow him. Hidden manna speaks of personal communion with the Lord. Jesus is saying, "I am greater than all the allurements of the world. Those who eat the Living Bread and drink the Living Water will never hunger or thirst again."

The white stone speaks of acquittal and purity. But what is the "new name written on it, known only to him who receives it"? No one knows for certain because no one living has ever received that white stone with the new name on it. That awaits us in heaven.

Our text offers us a wonderful assurance. Jesus will call us by a name that only we will know. In heaven no one will ever be lost in the crowd. Despite the great throngs, we will say of the Lord, "I am my beloved's, and He is mine."

CONCLUSION

It is not enough to be orthodox in our theology. It is not even enough to have courage in the face of community opposition. We must go beyond that to say that we will not tolerate in the church those who threaten the purity of its testimony to the world.

We cannot help sinners by saying that sin is not sinful. Christ came to save sinners, but if the church no longer believes in sin, we have nothing to offer to the world. Where sin is winked at or renamed or where the church turns a blind eye to moral compromise in its midst, precisely to that extent, the church commits spiritual suicide.

This is the message of our Lord to the church at Pergamum, and it is His message to our church today. If people call us narrow-minded, let us take it as a compliment and stay the course. Let's be as narrow as God's truth is narrow and as broad as God's grace is broad! May God help us to stand strong for the gospel in this age of moral compromise!

LESSONS FROM THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA

Of the seven cities of Revelation 2 and 3, Thyatira was the least important. The city was known for its high-quality bronze used to produce weapons that, when properly polished, gleamed like gold. It was also known for producing cloth dyed red or purple. Acts 16:14 tells of Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira, who met Paul when he came to Philippi. Economically, the town was dominated by various trade guilds that mixed their trades with paganism and immorality.

I. JESUS KNOWS THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CHURCH

The message begins with a description of Jesus Christ (Rev. 2:18). This is the only time in Revelation where Christ is called the “Son of God.” In our pluralistic society, this is the most divisive claim we can make. We believe that from all eternity, God has existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To say Jesus is the “Son of God” means that when we worship Him, we are truly worshiping God Himself. So this is God speaking to the church at Thyatira.

II. JESUS PRAISES THE GOOD IN THE CHURCH

But first, we get the good news. In many ways, Thyatira is the best of the four churches we have studied so far. Look at what Jesus says about it (verse 19). This church has the good works of Ephesus along with the love Ephesus lacked. It has the perseverance of Smyrna and the good theology of the majority of the church at Pergamum. Whatever else we can say about Thyatira, the Lord clearly says that it was still making progress spiritually. It’s wonderful to be part of a church that is growing in love and knowledge and zeal for Christ. So our Lord has high praise for this church that was advancing for the gospel in an unlikely place.

III. JESUS EXPOSES EVIL IN THE CHURCH

And it is that high praise that makes the rest of this passage so unsettling. Somehow, in the midst of their growth, the believers at Thyatira had allowed an ungodly woman to rise to a place of enormous spiritual influence (Rev. 2:20).

There are many mysteries here that the text does not explain. Who was this woman and how did she rise to prominence in an otherwise excellent congregation? Our Lord clearly refers

to a real person even though the name Jezebel is likely not her real name but rather an allusion to the wicked wife of King Ahab (1 Kings 16:29-33; 18:13; 19:1, 2; 21:5-16, 23-25; 2 Kings 9:30-37). The crafty Jezebel became a symbol for a seductive form of evil that not only allowed for idolatry but promoted it; not only allowed adultery but encouraged and rewarded it. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* says, “It would appear that, as Jezebel sponsored the worship of Baal in Israel (1 Kings 21:25), so in John’s days some false prophetess was attempting to lead astray the church at Thyatira.”¹

But how could such a woman come to power in the church at Thyatira? I think the answer is in the word “prophetess.” By claiming to speak for God, she gained credibility with gullible, untaught Christians. One could imagine that such a woman combined a powerful personality with persuasive speech, a seductive smile, and withering scorn for her critics. She was no doubt clever, quick on her feet, slick in her presentation, and extremely dangerous.

And she did it all under the guise of being a “good Christian.” No doubt her followers filled the pews at Thyatira. It worked for the first Jezebel in the Old Testament, and it worked for her namesake in Thyatira.

IV. JESUS JUDGES EVIL IN THE CHURCH (REV. 2:21-23)

When Jesus says, “I gave her time to repent,” He perhaps means that the church leaders had confronted her about her sinful behavior, and she did not respond. While it is true that the patience of God is meant to lead us to repentance, it is also true that God’s patience has a limit.

In this case, the judgment is spelled out. First, there will be intense suffering (Rev 2:22). Second, her followers will die (verse 23a). Third, all the churches will know that God is serious about sin in the church (verse 23b).

Be sure your sin will find you out. What you do in secret will be shouted from the housetops. What you do in the darkness will be seen as if it had been done at midday.

V. JESUS ENCOURAGES HIS FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS (REV. 2:24, 25)

The phrase “so-called deep secrets” gives us a clue about what was going on. Jezebel enticed her followers by promising them knowl-

edge and experience that came through some combination of pagan ritual, Christian symbolism, and sexual experimentation, all under the banner of learning “deep secrets” that other people do not know. Note that in this case, Jesus doesn’t tell them to cast the woman out of the church. Evidently Jezebel was so deeply embedded in the life of the church that Christ dealt with her personally.

VI. JESUS PROMISES TO SHARE HIS VICTORY WITH US

Here is the promise Christ makes to those who hold on in Thyatira (Rev. 2:26-28): Those who remain faithful will one day reign with Christ. If we are faithful, we will share in His victory.

- If you are willing, you can be changed.
- If you are willing, you can be made clean.
- If you are willing, you can have a new start.
- If you are willing, your sins can be washed away.

We are all saved in the same way: by the free grace of God. To those who are scarred by wrong choices in the past, you can be forgiven and made clean—if you are willing. You may still live with certain consequences of your past, but you can have the burden of guilt lifted from your heart.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

CONCLUSION

Think of it this way: You can have Jezebel or you can have Jesus, but you can’t have both. Which do you want? If you want Jesus, you must turn your back on Jezebel and turn your heart over to the Lord. Give to Him all that you are, including the sins that stain your past. Trust in Him as your Lord and Savior. Come to Christ just as you are, and He will never turn you away. He loves you. He came from heaven to save you. He died on the cross for you. He invites you to come to Him.

A new life awaits those who say “Yes” to Jesus, but you must come to Him to receive it.

¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:751.

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ELDERS AND THE LOST

A story is told of a father who had three sons. Ripe with years, the father called his sons together to divide his possessions. All he had was 17 camels, an asset of priceless value in those times. To his youngest son, the father allocated two-thirds. To his second son, he gave one-sixth. And, to the eldest, because he was able to fend for himself, the father gave one-ninth. Shortly after their father passed away, the three brothers gathered again to divide his possessions. But when they tried to follow their father's nonsensical mathematical formula to divide the camels, they were astonished and horrified. How could they split the animals? Had their father erred in his calculation? Then they remembered an old friend of their father's who lived not far away. They decided to seek his counsel. Perhaps he could make sense of their dilemma! Being an old man with many years of experience, their father's friend possessed the wisdom they sought. "Take one of my camels," he said. "Add it to your 17 camels for accounting purposes. And, when you have finished dividing your camels, return mine." Now, with 18 camels, their father's formula worked perfectly. The youngest, who was allotted two-thirds, had 12. The second son, who was given one-sixth, had three. And, the eldest, who was given one-ninth, had two. Having added up to a total of 17 camels, the one remaining camel was returned to their father's friend. Their dilemma was resolved, and everyone was happy.

What made the difference in this story? It was the one "missing" camel. Without that camel, the mathematical dilemma the three sons faced could not be resolved. In a similar way, the value of the missing is the point taught by Jesus in Luke 15. In God's kingdom, one missing sinner is of priceless value. And elders have a solemn responsibility toward lost souls.

THE MISSING SHEEP

Notice the parable of the shepherd and his sheep in Luke 15:4-7.¹ Only one sheep from the shepherd's flock went missing. The one missing sheep in the parable represents not only the lost sinner but also the lost world. In God's universe, where everything was created in perfect harmony with God's divine purpose, one planet had gone astray.² Adversity had entered the world (see Gen. 3:6, 7), and the human race was taken hostage to sin and death (see Heb. 2:14, 15). Like the one missing sheep that was utterly lost, the earth and its inhabitants were plunged into a desperate predicament. Tainted by sin, everyone born on this earth was doomed to die (see Rom. 6:23). Engulfed by sin and its consequences (Rom. 1:29-31;

5:12), human beings became alienated from themselves (see Gen. 3:7, 11-13), from creation (verses 17-19, 24), and from God (verse 10). Had it not been for the divine initiative (see Luke 15:4), the sinner and the world would have been lost forever. But the good Shepherd sought the lost sheep, and when that sheep was found, there was much rejoicing (Luke 15:6).

Consider for a moment the exponential population growth of the world today. In the first three months of 2014, there have been approximately 30.2 million births worldwide and about 12.4 million deaths. This means an approximate world population growth of 17.8 million during this period.³ The total world population currently stands at about 7 billion people, and 41.7 percent of the world's populaces are unreached people. In the 10/40 window alone, which has a population of 4.7 billion people, 63.4 percent of people living in that area have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴

What role do church elders play in seeking the lost? Like sheep, all of humanity has gone astray (see Isa. 53:6) and needs to be sought out by the loving Shepherd. Even if you were the only sinner in the universe, Jesus, your loving Shepherd, would still have come down in search of your salvation. Many souls in this world long for something better, and they respond to the Spirit of God as He speaks to their consciences. These individuals sense their need for God and are searching for answers to questions of salvation. Multitudes in different countries of the world and of different religious persuasions, perhaps even in our own neighborhoods, may realize their need for God but do not know what to do. For such people, pastors and elders need to work together to seek and find.

THE LOST COIN

Like the parable of the missing sheep, Christ spoke of the lost coin in Luke 15:8-10. In contrast to the sheep, however, those represented by the missing coin are unaware of their lost condition. Like the lost coin, the sinner is helpless and in desperate need of salvation. Again, this parable reminds us of the stark reality of the human plight. But, unlike the missing sheep, the coin is lost in the home. The very place that should have been the safest and most secure has become the arena for spiritual lostness. This parable strikes a sensitive and personal cord. Are there some among us, even within the comforts of our church, who are lost and do not realize it? Is it possible for churchgoers to be lost? Do some people show up at church merely to meet friends or to see and be seen? Are our children sincere about going to church each Sabbath or do they go



simply to please when, deep in their hearts, they lack a vibrant connection with the Life-giver?

Benjamin L. Corey underscores 10 reasons why people leave church:⁵

1. When they don't find Jesus
2. Because they feel lonely
3. Because they are looking for something authentic
4. Because they are tired of being told how a "good Christian" will vote
5. When they feel like they need to become a carbon copy of an individual or ideal in order to be fully included and appreciated
6. Because they get turned off by social climbing, cliques, and nepotism
7. Because of controlling leaders and unskilled teachers
8. Because of unresolved conflict
9. Because they need less drama in their lives
10. When they can't find community

Elders of the church have a responsibility to seek these people out. Like the woman in the parable, God takes the initiative to seek and save those represented by the lost coin. The divine initiative may also represent the importance of spiritual guidance. Just as the woman in the parable searched the house for the missing coin, so parents, pastors, and elders have a solemn responsibility for the salvation of their spiritual children. No obstacle to the salvation of souls in the home, church, or school should be left unaddressed. Every stumbling block to salvation must be removed. Our members need an environment conducive to Christian growth and development—a place where purity and love for God are nurtured. The rejoicing over the repentant one who is saved (see Luke 15:9, 10) is again in stark contrast to the unforgiving attitude of the spiritual leaders Jesus was addressing.

THE PRODIGAL SON

The parable of the prodigal son is a startling revelation of divine grace. Jesus' purpose in telling the three parables was to illustrate to the Pharisees and teachers of the law (see Luke 15:2, 3) the contrast between themselves—unforgiving and unaccepting—and God's forgiveness and acceptance of the sinner as manifested in Jesus' own ministry. This man, they said of Jesus, "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Christ responded to these accusations through these three parables. The focal point of the parables was not so much the "repentance" of the sinner but rather God's love and forgiveness for the sinner who repents. Unlike the first two parables, the father in the third parable did not go out in search of his son. When the sheep was missing, the shepherd left the 99 to search for the one. When the coin was lost, the woman sought it out earnestly until it was found. Yet, in the parable of the prodigal son, the father simply waited—and waited. This parable hits at a core issue in the salvation of humankind. While God seeks to save all people, He will not save individuals against their will; He gives them the freedom to choose salvation. The son had access to all the blessings and comforts of home but chose otherwise. He decided to leave, and he had to choose to return. And it was not until he was in the stench of sin that he came to his senses and decided to return to God. This story reminds us of the danger in taking God's grace for granted. We need not separate ourselves from God. Today, He says, "do not harden your hearts" if the spirit of God speaks to you (Heb. 3:15). For if we do so, what excuse will we be able to give in the day of reckoning for ignoring God's great offer of salvation (see Heb. 2:3)?

While God's love is the focal point in the parable of the prodigal son, the story does not end with the wayward son's return. Instead, it ends with the elder son, who thought he had

remained faithful to the father (see Luke 15:25-32). After all, the parables were told in response to the Pharisees, and the real contrast is between the Pharisees (as depicted by the older son) and the loving and forgiving Father, who embraced both his wayward son and his rebellious son.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

The common thread in these three parables is the priceless value of one person to God. God's mission in the world contrasts with modern business principles. Business leaders will shut down any project that does not have an economic gain. If one project threatens the financial stability of the organization, it must be eliminated. Managers will not waste time on unprofitable enterprises. In this way of reckoning, to pursue one lost sheep, one lost coin, or one lost son may not make economic sense. The one that was lost may be better left alone so as not to drain the resources that could otherwise be diverted to more worthwhile projects. Why waste time, energy, and resources looking for one when there are 99 others to care for? If you lost one coin but had nine remaining, would you turn your house upside down just to find that one small coin? But God's enterprise operates on heavenly principles. And, in heaven's accounts, one person is of priceless value. The purchasing value of each life is the precious life of Jesus (see Rom. 5:8). Here the gospel becomes individual: Christ

died for each person. If I were the only sinner, Christ would still have come to save me. If everyone else is righteous and I am not, I am not beyond Christ's saving grace. If I were the vilest person, God's love would still yearn for my salvation. Even if the whole world hates and rejects me, Christ loves me so much that He came to save me (see John 3:16).

How should elders in our local churches emulate the love of Christ in extending His grace and salvation to others? ED

¹ Bible quotations in this article are from the *New International Version*.

² See Ellen G. White, *Highways to Heaven*, 164.

³ See <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/> (accessed on May 11, 2014).

⁴ See http://joshuaproject.net/global_statistics (accessed on May 11, 2014).

⁵ Benjamin L. Corey, "10 Reasons Why People Leave Church" in <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/10-reasons-why-people-leave-church/> (accessed on May 11, 2014).

A version of this article was featured in the South Pacific Division Record, August 4, 2007, under the title "The Value of One." It has been lightly edited for *Elder's Digest*.

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CHOICES FOR LIFE: AVOID UNNECESSARY USE OF SUPPLEMENTS

Are you a big believer in nutritional supplements? If so, you're not alone. According to *Forbes* magazine, one of the fastest growing industries in the world is the nutritional supplement business: vitamins, minerals, fish oils, probiotics, and antioxidants.

In addition, among the world's aging populations that are struggling with health issues characteristic of increased longevity (problematic eyesight and mobility, for example), the market for targeted supplements is growing rapidly—glucosamine to improve joint mobility, lutein to promote healthy eyes, and probiotic supplements to enhance digestion.¹

However, the Federal Trade Commission's Bureau of Consumer Protection, warns that, unfounded and exaggerated claims for dietary supplements have proliferated. False advertising claims cause people to believe that these supplements will have a positive impact on their health.

According to a recent 2015 Wellness Report on Nutritional Supplements,² half of Americans use dietary supplements on a regular basis to improve their health, spending \$28 billion per year. Global spending on these products is around \$68 billion annually. This money is spent on herbs, vitamins, minerals, hormones, and other pills, all bought without a doctor's prescription. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), there are more than 29,000 different nutritional supplements in the U.S. market alone.

Nutritional-supplement marketers and the pharmaceutical industry seem to be at war, often due to billions of dollars in revenue from the sales of pills. On one side, it is true that pharmacological companies seldom highlight the importance of healthy lifestyles or healthy nutrition in the fight against disease. On the other side, advertising from the dietary supplement industry often portrays the pharmaceutical industry as an "evil empire"—accusing them of raking in billions by poisoning consumers with expensive, dangerous chemicals they shouldn't be taking—when, in fact, medicines can sometimes save lives when used with a prescription and with careful follow-up.

Here are some myths and half-truths that the expensive advertising in favor of nutritional supplements has implanted in the minds of the public and many Adventists:

Myth #1: Dietary supplements are far safer than prescription drugs because they are "natural."

Reality: The fact that a supplement is derived from an herb



or other plant and is therefore "natural" doesn't necessarily make it safe. If everything that was made from plants was safe, we wouldn't be told to avoid eating certain berries or mushrooms while hiking in the woods. And would you consume arsenic or hemlock?

Myth #2: Dietary supplements are rigorously tested, and their effectiveness is backed by all sorts of studies and scientific proof.

Reality: To gain FDA approval, any new prescription drug has to pass a series of strict clinical trials. But dietary supplements are sold without FDA approval. Worse, they either undergo no testing at all—or the "testing" to which they have been submitted typically does not meet the standards required by the scientific community. For example, supplement advertisements frequently boast that a particular herb has been used for 1,000 years in Asia. In reality, some Chinese herbs can cause liver damage and have other dangerous side effects.

Myth #3: Supplement makers are knights on white horses riding to our rescue, while the pharmaceutical industry is "evil."

Reality: Both the pharmaceutical and the dietary-supplement industries spend millions of dollars trying to get us to buy their products.

Think twice before spending the resources God gives you on bottles of supplements. The Bible reminds us that the original diet is plant food from its natural source (Gen. 1; 2). The best advice is to get your nutrients—including vitamins—from plant food sources if available. Sometimes a supplement is needed when vitamin levels are low. Vitamin B12 supplementation is necessary for vegans; for people with low levels of Vitamin D, appropriate supplementation as prescribed by a health professional is also critical.

So the question comes down to this: Who—and what products—do you trust?

ED

¹ BCC Research report. <http://www.reportlinker.com/ci02037/Vitamin-and-Supplement.html>

² The 2015 Wellness Report: Dietary Supplements. Retrieved February 2015 from <http://www.berkeleywellness.com/supplements>



Katia Reinert is director of the Health Ministries Department for the North American Division.

SEX CHANGE SURGERY

IS THERE ANY DOCUMENT
PREPARED BY THE BIBLICAL
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SEX CHANGE SURGERY?

SEX CHANGE SURGERY - A CURRENT POSITION
BRI Ethics Committee, October 2014



The rise of transgender issues to social prominence raises important questions for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In particular, the question of sex-change surgery (also called sex reassignment surgery) challenges the Church with sensitive questions. Although the transgender question is important, the scope of this document is limited to provide some guidance regarding sex change surgery. We acknowledge that questions related to sex change surgery are not merely clinical, but involve human beings who are experiencing deep emotional distress as they try to grapple with their personal gender identity. These people need our love, prayers, support, and guidance.

There are two areas of questions for believers in reference to sex change surgery. The first is whether those who are already members of the church but experience gender identity tensions should have sex change surgery? The second regards those who first have had sex-change surgery and then come to Christ and the Church.

BELIEVERS AND SEX CHANGE SURGERY

Gender identification usually aligns with one's birth sex. Sometimes, however, genetic, chromosomal, hormonal, and intrauterine influences may result in ambiguity of anatomical sexual differentiation. In these situations anatomical development of genitalia can result in a spectrum of disorders spanning the gamut from definitely female to overtly male. Those born with ambiguous genitalia may well benefit from corrective surgical treatment.

There is another group of persons whose anatomical gender identity is clearly male or female but who identify with the opposite gender of their biological sex. Such indi-

viduals sometimes request surgical intervention to change their genitalia into that approximating the opposite sex. They are the focus of the following considerations.

1. While the struggles and challenges of those identifying as transgender have some elements in common with the struggles of all human beings, we recognize the uniqueness of their existential situation and the limitation of our knowledge in such issues.

2. As Christians we look to the Word of God for guidance. First, from a biblical perspective the human being is a psychosomatic unity. This means that sexual identity cannot be entirely independent from one's body as is frequently asserted. In fact, in Scripture, our gender identity is, to a significant extent, determined by our birth sex with God being the author of gender identity (Gen 1:27; 5:1, 2; Mark 10:6; Ps 139:13, 14). Second, the Bible reminds us that each person with his/her mind and psyche is part of the creation that is corrupted by sin (Rom 3:9; 7:17; 8:20-23; Jer 17:9; Gal 5:17) and needs to be renewed by God (Rom 12:2). Our emotions, feelings, and perceptions are not fully reliable indicators of God's designs, ideals, and truth (Prov 14:12; 16:25). We need guidance from God, through Scripture, to determine what is in our best interests (2 Tim 3:16).

3. A human is meant to be an undivided sexual entity. The claim that some individuals experience a psychological sexual identity incompatible with their biological sex reveals a serious type of psychological dichotomy. Such psychological disturbance or brokenness is an expression of the damaging effects of sin on humans. It remains unclear, however, if this disturbance or brokenness can be overcome through

sex change surgery. Such treatment may disturb the patient even more.

4. So far, sex change surgeries are irreversible. Persons undergoing these procedures have to use hormones for the rest of their lives, which indicates that an integrated sexual identity is not achieved through surgery. Surgery does not solve the problem completely. What aggravates the situation is that while surgery is irreversible, people may change psychologically as they grow and mature, seeking again a new identity.

5. In some cases, sex-change surgery may be motivated by a sophisticated desire for homosexual activity. Undergoing sex-change surgery in order to satisfy the homosexual urge to have sex with a person of the same sex would violate the ethical and moral biblical principle of sexual activity being limited to heterosexual marriage.

6. The Scriptures call humans to manage their emotions and passions by bringing them under the Lordship of Christ (Gal 5:24; James 4:7). Sexual drives and identities are not to be satisfied on the ground that, since they are considered to be normal or natural, we should let nature run its course. Sin and evil have corrupted human nature including gender identity and sexuality. While self-discipline is indispensable in bringing both into harmony with biblical values and principles, God has promised the Holy Spirit to help us face our sinful impulses and our attraction to sin.

7. Since surgery does not solve the situation, a person is more likely to find wholeness and healing by learning to live with his or her sexual condition of a real or perceived dichotomy in sexual identity while leaning on the Lord for constant help.

For these reasons the BRI Ethics Committee strongly cautions against such a radical and irreversible procedure and urges pastors and church members to demonstrate care and regard toward those who struggle with this challenging issue. Should individuals seek to use sex-change surgery as a way of circumventing biblical principles addressing human sexuality and the proper way to satisfy such desires, they would be acting against God's revealed will. The Church must remain loyal to its commitment to the will of the risen Lord as revealed in the Scriptures and therefore display love for all.

NEW CONVERTS WITH PRE-CONVERSION SEX-CHANGE SURGERY

The situation becomes even more complex in the case of persons who underwent sex change surgery before coming to know Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord. How should the Church deal with them when they ask to become members of the community of believers? To answer this crucial question we make the following recommendations:

1. That we treat these persons with love and respect, demonstrating our serious interest in their wellbeing. Those involved in the conversation should do their utmost to avoid aggravating the new converts' emotional condition. Adding

pain to persons who have been hurting most of their life is not an expression of Christian love.

2. That we recognize that God called them to salvation in the state in which they were found by Him, lacking wholeness, and that they accepted the call to salvation.

3. That we do not coerce these persons to reverse their surgery. It could be argued that although the Lord finds us in a state of fragmentation, He wants to transform and restore us and that therefore new believers should begin a process of medical reversal that will take them back as close as possible to their pre-surgery physical condition. Such an attempt would create significant problems because complete surgical reversal remains impossible, and even a partial reversal may seriously endanger the health of the persons involved.

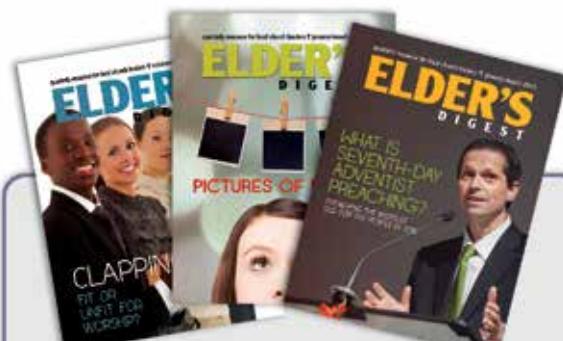
4. That we do not deny church membership to persons that have undergone sex change surgery but are committed to the Lord and his will. The only thing that we can biblically require is what the Bible requires from all of us: to allow the Spirit of the Lord to bring inner healing to us and to live a life of moral and sexual purity while looking forward to the moment when the Lord will restore wholeness to all of us.¹

The irreversible nature of sex-change surgery, the fact that the Lord touched the hearts of transgender persons and accepted them as His children, as well as the recognition that all of our bodies have not yet been redeemed (Rom 8:23), makes us very cautious when interacting with them. Our respect and care for these persons follows Christ's example of serving others while being fully committed to God and His revealed will.

ED

¹For a discussion of the issue of transgender and marriage see the related BRI Ethics Committee's opinion.

If you have a question about church policy or procedure, let us know! Every quarter we address these issues in our "Question and Answer" column, and we would love to hear from you! E-mail us at garciamarenko@gc.adventist.org.



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LESSONS FROM DANIEL 2

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I. DISCUSSION OF THE CHAPTER

A. The king's dream cannot be interpreted

1. **Verse 1**—During his reign as king of the Babylonian Empire, Nebuchadnezzar receives a special revelation from God.
2. **Verse 2**—Daniel and his friends are not invited with the wise men to interpret the dream.
3. **Verses 3–12**—*How does the king contrast with the wise men?*

The king:

- He does not tell them the dream.
- He is distrustful and afraid of a false interpretation.
- On one hand he pressures them; on the other he offers honor and gifts.
- His distrust increases.
- He succumbs to wrath and issues a death decree.

The wise men:

- They demand to know the dream.
 - They exhibit only human wisdom and a seemingly arbitrary interpretation.
 - They make a second demand to be told the dream, exposing their insecurity and trickery.
 - They refuse to meet the king's request on the grounds that it is humanly impossible to fulfill.
4. **Verse 13**—Although they are not present, Daniel and his friends are affected by the king's decree.
 5. **Verses 14, 15**—Daniel gets more information.
 6. **Verse 16**—*Why does the king grant Daniel's request for additional time when he had denied the wise men's request in verse 8?*
 - The king is still disturbed by the dream and may be glad for another interpretation of the dream.
 - Daniel was not with the other wise men when the king first asked for an interpretation. Possibly, the king considered it fair to allow Daniel to try.
 - The wise men demanded to know the details of the dream. Daniel requests only time and not the details.

- God is involved behind the scenes.

B. The prayer and its fulfillment

1. **Verses 17–23**—What do we learn about Daniel's devotional life, especially his prayer life (see also Dan 6 and 9)?
 - Daniel approaches God for help. He trusts God. Therefore, there is no need for him to lament and complain.
 - He has a season of prayer with his friends.
 - He does not forget to express his gratitude. He praises God.
 - Daniel is intensely, and on a daily basis, involved in prayer.
 - He even risks his life for his desire to seek God regularly in prayer.

What does Daniel know about God?

- God is omnipotent and omniscient.
 - God is the Lord of history.
 - God is associated with light (e.g., John 8:12)
- Daniel considers himself to be a servant and steward. He remains humble.

C. Daniel before the king

1. **Verses 24–30**—*What about Daniel's character and philosophy of life can be derived from verses 24–30?*
 - Daniel does not care only about himself. He attempts to help the wise men and his friends too. He supports the statement of the wise men in verses 10 and 11.
 - He points to the true God and is a witness of God while being involved with the ruler of the Babylonian world empire (see also v. 37).
 - This takes faith and courage.
 - Daniel does not boast but regards himself a tool in God's hand.

Daniel became a “man of God” because of his prayer life and his determination not to compromise

but remain faithful to God's will. This commitment allowed him to have great experiences with God.

2. **Verse 29**—Nebuchadnezzar's dream is about the future.

D. The dream

1. **Verses 31–35**—These verses contain a record of the dream. Even without the details, one notices that earthly things are transient and do not last.

E. The interpretation of the dream

1. **Verses 36–45**—*What is the time frame of the dream?*

- It starts with Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom.
- It ends with the kingdom of God.

The dream describes world history from the Babylonian time till the end of the world. The image consisting of different metals represents earthly kingdoms/empires.

Gold	—	Babylon (606–539 BC)
Silver	—	Medo-Persia (539–331 BC)
Bronze	—	Greece (331–168 BC)
Iron	—	Rome (168 BC–AD 476)
Iron-clay	—	Empires of Western Europe (AD 476–end of the world)

Some people have identified the following iron-clay nations:

Alemanni	—	Germany
Anglo-Saxons	—	Great Britain
Burgundians	—	Switzerland
Franks	—	France
Herulians	—	destroyed
Lombards	—	Italy
Ostrogoths	—	destroyed
Sueves	—	Portugal
Vandals	—	destroyed
Visigoths	—	Spain

The last part of the dream, which deals with the stone, is described in great detail.

What statements are made about the iron-clay mixture?

- It is a divided kingdom, and no longer a world empire.
- It still contains some of the hardness of iron. To some extent Rome continues to live on in the subsequent nations.
- All attempts to unify these nations fail. European politics of intermarriage between the royal houses did not work. Attempts to unify Europe under Charles the Great (eighth century), Charles V (sixteenth century), Louis XIV (seventeenth and eighteenth century), Napoleon (nineteenth century), Emperor Wilhelm II (twentieth century),

and Hitler (twentieth century) were not successful.

Today the European Union struggles to survive.

The climax of the prophecy is the stone. In the Old and New Testaments the stone is an image for God/Jesus (2 Sam 22:2; 1 Pet 2:4–8; Matt 21:42, 44). Our destiny depends on how we relate to Jesus Christ. He will return soon and establish His indestructible and eternal kingdom (Rev 11:15).

F. Reactions of the king and Daniel

1. **Verses 46–49**—Because of Daniel's faithfulness and trust in the Lord, Nebuchadnezzar paid attention to the true God. Daniel again cares for his friends.

II. APPLICATION

- We do not fully understand world history. We do not see what happens behind the scenes. We are tempted to regard history as a purely human enterprise in which God is not involved.
- Yet history has a goal and is moving toward Christ's Second Coming and the establishment of His kingdom.
- God is involved in human history. Even though humans make their free decisions, God still pursues His plans.
- As God guides human history, He is willing to guide my personal history and life and bring it to a good conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Because God is the Lord of history we commit our lives to Him. We trust Him, and are looking forward to a marvelous future.



Ekkehardt Mueller is deputy director for the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference World Headquarters. This article has been reprinted, by permission, from *Reflections*, the BRI Newsletter, edited by Elias Brasil de Souza.

MINISTERIAL RESOURCE CENTER
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IT'S OUR MINISTRY



Do you remember the last

church you visited that wasn't your home church?

You pulled into the parking lot and were already impressed. The landscaping was tidy and the building was nice, but neither of these was remarkable. Inside you were greeted and found your way to the sanctuary. Perhaps the service spoke to your heart or maybe it didn't, but you still left with a feeling that there was something right about that particular church. What made this impression?

Consider another church visit. This one does not leave a positive impression. There is grass growing in the parking lot cracks. The bushes surrounding the church are overgrown, and the inside is equally disorganized. The exit lights are dated, and some do not have lights in them. Extension cords are stretched across walkways, and the hallway also serves as a storage area. You've been to that church, too.

What is wrong at this church? This church needs an individual to step up and care for the neglected details. Someone needs to care.

A number of intangibles can affect how a person feels during a visit to a church. These can range from the friendliness of the members to the small details of the upkeep of the church. Although these things are sometimes hard to identify, they can make a large difference to regular members and visitors alike.

Have you ever noticed how much more pleasant it is to visit an organized and well-maintained facility? There is a reason for this reaction. Our brains recognize (whether we realize it or not) the clues that indicate whether we are in a safe place or not.

In many churches there is a designated Safety Officer tasked with keeping the church building a safe place to be, but all church leaders can help make the church a safe and inviting place to be. Here are a few target areas to consider.

1. THE CHURCH ENTRANCE

Is the space clean? Are all the exterior lights working and in good order? Are the bushes trimmed so visibility is not an issue? Are handrails and railings secured? Is the signage easy to read and up-to-date?

2. PARKING LOT

Are there cracks and potholes that can cause members and visitors to trip? Are the far corners of the area well lit as to discourage intruders and illegal activities? Are storage units and church vehicles parked off to the side to give clear access for cars to maneuver?

3. INTERIOR ROOMS

Are facilities well lit and clean? Are cleaning supplies locked away and air fresheners kept where children cannot access them? Are vision panels installed in all Sabbath School classroom doors and a current fire evacuation plan posted inside each room?

4. THE SANCTUARY

Do the carpets have wrinkles or tares? Are cords taped down and marked to prevent trips and falls? Are all exits clear and marked?

These are all indicators that someone is looking out for the safety of the location and those who come there. Someone cares.

When my father was teaching me to do a task, he used to tell me a principle that I should always keep in mind. His words of wisdom were that no matter what we are asked to do we should do it diligently and to complete it with the best job possible. He told me that I should consider each task as if it was from God and my effort and completion of the task as a ministry. There is no job for God that does not deserve our best effort.

If we apply this principle to the ministry of the safety officer, we may not see a direct result, such as when an evangelist gives an altar call or a Bible worker giving Bible studies. After all, the best result for an effective safety officer is when an accident doesn't happen.

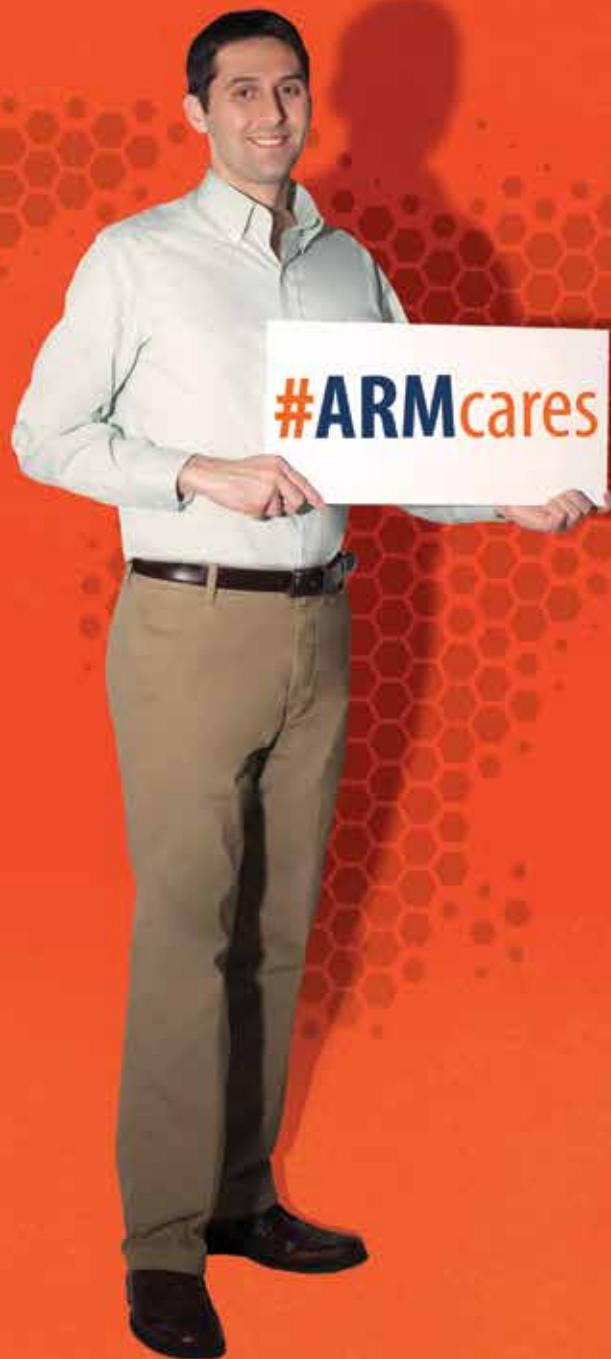
If you know of someone who serves your church in unseen ways, take a moment to thank them. Maybe that person is you! If so, thank you! Your work does much more than maintain a tidy atmosphere. It keeps people safe and makes them feel secure. Your faithfulness to your responsibilities shows visitors that your church takes its mission of reaching the world seriously. Those who visit our churches will see that we care.



David Fournier is manager of Client Care for Adventist Risk Management, Inc.



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Carlos cares

My name is **Carlos Cordero** and I am the health benefits services liaison coordinator for Adventist Risk Management Inc. I ensure you **get the most** out of your healthcare benefits.

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NEEDED: MORE LEADERS



Today, as never before, the church needs more leaders. Leaders totally consecrated to God and His cause. Leaders trained with the Christian philosophy of leadership to contrast with the politics and philosophies of labor unions and other secular organizations (see Matt. 20:25-28).

We need spiritual leaders loyal to God, to His church, and to the brethren. We need leaders with backbones, leaders who are able to stand firmly in defense of truth and justice, no matter what. We need cheerful leaders with vision and faith who are ready to move forward with the gospel message and defend God's interests in spite of difficulties, obstacles, and opposition. We need leaders with spiritual discernment who are willing to defy any corruption, injustice, or abuse in our ranks in order to preserve our church "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Eph. 5:27, NIV). We need leaders who do not fear losing popularity while defending the interests of the Lord and His church with firmness and gentleness.

Now as never before, as we face last-day events and the rapidly approaching return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we need leaders who will be bold enough to defile the ease of a permissive, postmodern society while standing loyally on the principles of God's kingdom. We need leaders of integrity who can exert a positive influence over our society and especially over children and youth—no strings attached. We need leaders who—no matter their age—will become role models for our youth and will inspire them to follow the greatest Leader of all times, Jesus Christ!

With the apostle Paul, we may ask, "And who is equal for such a task?" (2 Cor. 2:16). Paul himself—a leader worthy of emulation—says, "Not that we are competent in ourselves . . . but our competence comes from God" (2 Cor. 3:5). The requirements are high, but everyone who is willing to consecrate himself or herself in service to the Lord and His church will find the way to reach that competency from God. The following are some of the requirements:

1. A personal encounter with God and an intentional desire to do His will.
2. A sustained relationship with God through prayer, Bible study, and daily supplication for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

3. A personal commitment to the call through genuine revival and reformation.

4. A deliberate pursuit of excellence through self-motivation and professional training.

5. A correct attitude to accept ever-present leadership challenges, "never [to] be lacking in zeal" but serving "wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord . . ." (Rom. 12:11; Eph. 6:7).

6. A dependence on the Lord and a determination to support His church—no matter what.

7. A willingness to face opposition with a right attitude, keeping God in the loop and discerning everything through a prophetic lens.

Yes, we need more leaders with courage, integrity, and commitment. May we catch a vision from above as we read the following inspired thoughts for Christian leaders?

"God calls for cheerful co-workers, who refuse to become discouraged and disheartened by opposing agencies. The Lord is leading us, and we may go forward courageously, assured that He will be with us, as He was in past years."¹

"To stand in defense of truth and righteousness when the majority forsake us, to fight the battles of the Lord when champions are few—this will be our test. At this time we must gather warmth from the coldness of others, courage from their cowardice, and loyalty from their treason."²

Leaders are wanted. We need more leaders like Jesus—with the vision of Jesus, the philosophy of Jesus, and the spirit of Jesus—to lead His church accordingly. Are you ready to accept His highest call and invite others to this kind of leadership?

ED

¹ Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, 265, 266.

² ———, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 136.

Alfredo Garcia-Marenko has served as elder, pastor, administrator, departmental director, and editor, and is an international speaker with wide experience in youth leadership and family life. He is editorial assistant for the *Elder's Digest* magazine in the General Conference Ministerial Association. Alfredo was trained as an associate trainer for the Million Leaders Mandate of John C. Maxwell and EQUIP®.

LIFE-CHANGING STORIES: THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER - PART 1

When people think of the role of the elder, certain tasks come to mind: preaching, planning, supporting the pastor, and attending meetings. And yet, the role of an elder can be much more. Each elder should embrace his or her spiritual gifts and find ways to use them in the service of the Lord. Paul states that the diversity of spiritual gifts is for the benefit of the church (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Are you the elder who reaches out to missing members? Maybe you are the elder who coordinates training and equipping. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to be used—find out how yours can best benefit your church and community.

We collected inspiring stories gleaned from interviews with numerous elders who saw ministry as a part of their daily lives. We will be sharing their stories in three articles and hope you will be inspired and encouraged as you continue to grow in your role as an elder.

GROWING IN THE LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST

All the elders we spoke to felt that this “is truly a position of great spiritual responsibility.” Elders genuinely want to see a revival in their churches. They want to see an impact for the kingdom. I recently received an email from Tom, an elder who attended a prayer conference I conducted. After the first day of prayer and fasting, he had a life-changing experience; his stony heart was replaced with a heart that was open. He repaired and strengthened his relationships at work and at home, and he knows that he will never be the same again. A tangible sense of an indwelling of the Spirit of God now governs his life. Tom later called me and shared his desire for his whole church to have the same experience. He understands that in order for such a revival to take place, the leaders of the church must model what it looks like to walk with Jesus daily.

CARRYING THE PEOPLE OVER YOUR HEART

One of the most impactful things you can do is pray for your people. Pray for individuals as well as the membership as a whole. We talked to Stan, an elder at a church that holds morning prayer meetings from 5:30-7:00 a.m. every weekday. This elder-led small group, usually 2-8 people, takes time every day to pray for each name on the church membership list. Every time they finish with all the names, they start over. Stan mentioned that he has noticed a “remarkable” unity present in the church where there was once dissension because of a large building project. He credits this prayer time as one of the factors contributing to this change.

One church was without a pastor for nine months. During

that time, the elders met to pray and discuss church needs. They put the needs and desires of the church before God, claiming the promise of Proverbs 3:5, 6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths” (NKJV). This became their pastoral search model. Three calls were extended but rejected. Their trust in God’s leading sustained them during this trying time. They ended up with a pastor who was not on their original list. He was humble yet confident, and he was intentional about spending time listening to and getting to know his church. Now, more than a year later, the congregation can see that God provided them with the pastor they needed.

Troubled by the state of their declining church, one elder felt a burden to pray with his pastor. They met weekly for two hours to pray and seek the Lord. Soon, more elders joined them. In time, their struggling church of about 125 people grew to one with over 500 in attendance. Time spent in prayer is powerful.

Elizabeth, a head elder, shared the example of the High Priest in the Old Testament. God had specially designed a breastplate with the names of the tribes inscribed in stones that were over the heart of the High Priest (Ex. 28:29). Therefore, he would always carry the people over his heart and before God in prayer. In Acts 14:23, the elders of the church regularly prayed and fasted for the people and “committed them to the Lord.”

REMAINING FIRM

An elder must first be firm in his or her own spiritual walk. Paul encourages leaders to “keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28, NIV). The role of the elder is to exhort others, but how can you do that if you are not grounded in the Word and open to the Holy Spirit? An elder is a living example for the congregation. Daily quiet time with God, regular church attendance, family worship, and Bible study are all ways in which to continue your journey of spiritual growth. These will help you to become a tangible representation of what it looks like to have Christ living in you.

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¹ To avoid confusion, we will refer to S. Joseph Kidder with the pronoun “I” and refer to Kristy by name.

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