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But of the time and hour

— See Matthew 24:36

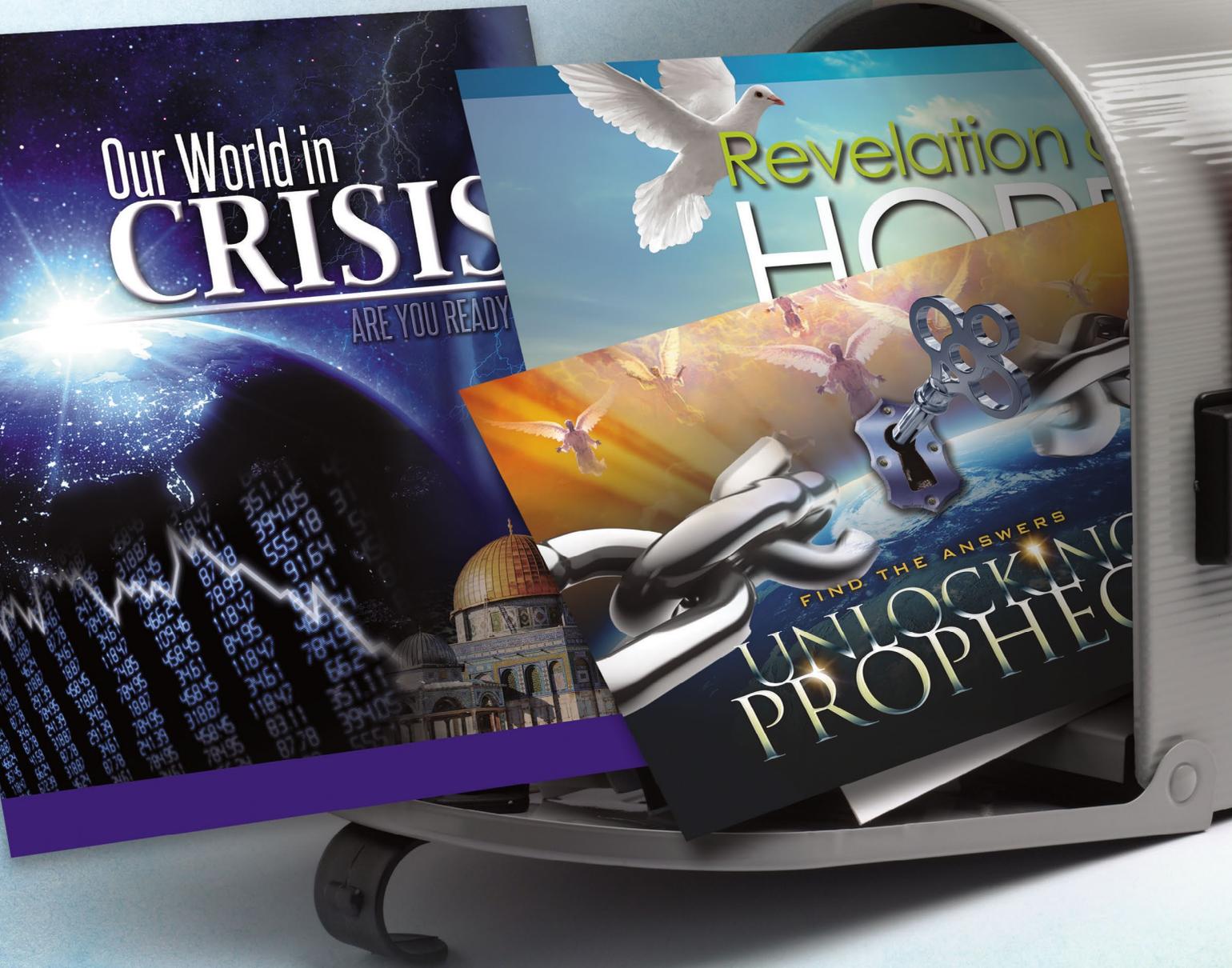
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*“I find it amazing that the world was turned upside down for Jesus in 30 years without a single cathedral or telecommunication device.”*

### Worship—a matter of the heart

Dear Editor, Marguerite Shuster’s article on Christian worship (“Reflections on Christian Worship”—July 2016) got me to thinking. I wish she had actually taken the time to define what worship really is. We often talk about it and around it as if we have a consensus definition. It is not a “worship service” so called. It is more service than anything else according to Paul (Romans 12:1). Our historical template of church having to do with buildings and liturgies (thus spawning the “worship wars” of which she speaks) has given us a false sense of what worship actually is. We have erected opulent edifices, apparently attempting to impress a God who has told us he does not live in houses made with hands, and then we argue about what can and cannot be done within such pavilions. I call this the “edifice rex complex.” We spend far more money on real estate and construction of facilities than we do on missions.

Worship is a 24/7 thing for disciples of Christ. Shuster hinted at that in her article, and I appreciated it. Many, perhaps most, assemblies have become productions that are more or less entertainment in the name of God. We want sermonettes that tickle

our ears and music that makes us want to clap our hands and stomp our feet. I find it amazing that the world was turned upside down for Jesus in 30 years without a single cathedral or telecommunication device. Worship is not a matter of having a “worship service” between 11 o’clock sharp and 12 o’clock dull, but rather a matter of the heart. And, yes, as Sister Shuster pointed out, our purpose for gathering (Hebrews 10) is for us far more than for Him. God knew we needed each other. “‘God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth’ ” (John 4:24). This was the first memory verse my parents taught me as a little boy.

—Steven Clark Goad, California, United States

### State of the dead

I enjoyed the article by Kim Papaioannou on the rich man and Lazarus (“The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and Tales of Revelations From the Afterlife”—July 2016). I would like to add one other point the parable teaches which is very prophetic. In verse 31 Jesus states, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (NIV). This foretells Christ’s own death and resurrection and exactly how so many

people (in His day and ours) deny His resurrection.

—Harry Koops, South Dakota, United States

Kim Papaioannou’s treatment of the passage found in Luke 16:19–31 attempts to answer the question as to why Jesus taught a parable envisioning a conscious afterlife existence. The question is pertinent to the counter-view of the unconscious sleep of the dead held by Papaioannou and, one may reasonably assume, by the publishers of this magazine. Admittedly, I do not share this view, but thought an Adventist treatment of the passage might prove interesting nonetheless. However, in my opinion Papaioannou ultimately leaves the reader with a confusing array of interpretative conjectures. He begins well, stating that this is indeed a parable and should not be viewed as a road map of the afterlife. But his expansion upon this thesis becomes mired in untenable reasoning.

First, he cites examples of extra-Biblical stories from the Mediterranean cultures of the day which may have a loose connection with the Lucan passage. Yet in the end, these tend to come across as more of an attempt at misdirection than an illuminating factor. The extra-Biblical narratives do little to shed light on exactly why Jesus provides this particular parable.

Second, Papaioannou goes to great length to critique an element he reads into the parable, *viz.* that it holds to the motif of a revelation from the dead. In his refutation of this notion, Papaioannou presses a literal meaning of particular words and phrases in the parable to such an extreme that the credulity of his exegesis must be seriously questioned. Instead of seeing descriptions in the parable such as Lazarus being “fed” with crumbs from the rich man’s table, being taken to

Continued on page 9



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# Biblical paradoxes and the way of life

Several interesting paradoxes are found in the Bible. Among the most fascinating ones that have puzzled generations of Bible students are these:

- The Trinity—How can three persons be one?
- Divine sovereignty—How can man be free to choose if God is Sovereign?
- The deity of Christ—How can Jesus be fully God and fully man?
- The Crucifixion—How can God be eternally alive and yet die?
- God's omnipresence—How can God manifest Himself in several places at the same time?

Apart from these theological questions, a cursory reading of the biblical text points to even more paradoxes:

- We find by losing: “‘He who finds his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it’” (Matt. 10:39).\*
- We become great by becoming small: “‘Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’” (Matt. 18:4).
- The first will be last: “‘So the last shall be first, and the first last’” (Matt. 20:16, KJV).
- We are exalted by being humble: “‘Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’” (Matt. 23:12).
- We rule by serving: “‘Whoever would be great among you must be slave of all’” (Mark 10:43).

*There are moments that Jesus' humanity seems questionable but other moments that His divinity seems debatable.*

- We receive by giving: “Give, and it shall be given unto you” (Luke 6:38, KJV).
- Our weakness is our strength: “‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor. 12:9).
- We live by dying: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live” (Gal. 2:20, KJV).

However, one of the most intriguing paradoxes in Scripture relates to the one regarding Jesus' divinity in relation to His humanity. This concept has challenged theologians and scholars for centuries. Despite the threat of Arian theology in the fourth century, orthodoxy has always defended the fullness of Jesus' divinity alongside His humanity. Nonetheless, questions still arise: how are we to balance these two natures of Jesus? Is the language of “nature” even appropriate to address the biblical portrayal of the personhood of Jesus? There are moments that

Jesus' humanity seems questionable but other moments that His divinity seems debatable.

The lead article in this issue, written by Ekkehardt Mueller, examines one of the most challenging verses in the Bible, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matt. 24:36, KJV). Mueller plunges into the biblical text while keeping in mind the theological flow of the book of Matthew, as well as the Bible as a whole. The result is a fascinating glimpse into the complexity of the Trinity and the humanness of Jesus.

May these concepts expand your perspective of the biblical text and the Divinity that works for the salvation of humanity, and most important of all, may you apply these insights to your way of life. The Jesus of the biblical text is coming soon! 

\* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the Revised Standard Version.

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# But of the time and hour no one knows—See Matthew 24:36

Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:36 declaring that He does not know the day and hour of His second coming has long puzzled students of Scripture. Scholars such as R. T. France talk about "the remarkable paradox that 'the Son,' who is to play the central role in that 'day,' is Himself ignorant of when it will be."<sup>1</sup> And Grant Osborne calls it an "incredible statement."<sup>2</sup> Others, too, have wondered about the intent of Jesus here.

How can we understand what Jesus was saying, and why He said it?

## Analysis of the context

This difficult verse is part of the Olivet Discourse, in which Jesus talks about the destruction of Jerusalem and His second coming. In verses 29–31, He focuses on the heavenly signs preceding His *parousia* and on His coming. With the parable of the fig tree and the following admonition (Matt. 24:32, 33), Jesus returns to the issue of the destruction of Jerusalem and encourages His disciples to observe the signs of the times and to understand the nearness of this terrible event. The generation that will not pass away until all these things have happened (Matt. 24:34) would be the first-century generation that has known Jesus and would experience the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

The passage, beginning with verse 36, returns to the Second Coming. Clearly the *parousia* (Matt. 24:39) and

the coming (*erchomai*) of the Lord/the Son of Man (Matt. 24:42, 44) are mentioned. Verse 36, a kind of introduction to verses 37–51, focuses on the fact that a date for the Second Coming cannot be known.<sup>4</sup> This passage deals with the eschatological ignorance and the necessity of being ready and prepared because of this unknown date. Now you will find an outline of the passage:

Verse 36

**Statement:** The ignorance of humans, angels, and Jesus (*day and hour*)

Verses 37–39

**Example:** Noah, the Flood, and the Second Coming (*days, day*)

Verses 40–41

**Examples:** Men in the fields and women grinding with a mill

Verse 42

**Imperative:** Watch because of the coming of the Lord (*day*)

Verse 43

**Example:** The head of the house and the thief

Verse 44

**Imperative:** Be ready because of the coming of the Son of Man (*hour*)

Verses 45–51

**Example:** The faithful or unfaithful servant (*day and hour—v. 50*)

Throughout the paragraph, the theme *knowing* is found. According to verses 32 and 33 in the preceding passage, disciples should know

(*ginōskō*) about the nearness of the predicted event. With our passage (Matt. 24:36–51), the stress is on *not knowing*.<sup>5</sup> Verses 36–51 clearly emphasize that, although signs may indicate the nearness of the Second Coming, this event cannot be calculated. If even the angels and Jesus Himself do not know the precise date, how much less would the disciples know? Instead of computing the *Parousia*, they should always be ready. Thus, the focus centers not so much on the nature of Christ but on the preparedness of humans for the most climactic event of world history.

Matthew 25—with the parables of the ten virgins, the talents, and the sheep and goats—continues this thought.<sup>6</sup> We should recognize the importance of being ready, when Jesus comes, to enjoy the wedding banquet. In these parables, Jesus also indicates that there will be a delay,<sup>7</sup> an interim between His first and second coming. In addition, the last two parables show that it is not enough to wait passively. Those who truly wait are actively involved<sup>8</sup> in some work for the Master, and they serve others.

## Analysis of the text

*But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone* (Matt. 24:36, NASB).

The Greek manuscripts contain various readings of Matthew 24:36. The most important one seems to be the

omission of the phrase *nor the Son* in the Majority Text and some other manuscripts and versions, while well attested in some earlier manuscripts. We find it quite likely that, in some manuscripts, the phrase *nor the Son* was dropped due to theological considerations, namely the question of how the concept of the Trinity would fit with such an amazing statement.<sup>9</sup> However, no matter which

*hour* “tie down a time . . . together the day and the hour identify the time.”<sup>11</sup> The terms *day* and *hour* are repeated in the next verses. There are the *days* of Noah (vv. 37, 38) and the *day* when Noah went into the ark (v. 38). In verse 42 the *day* of the Lord’s coming and in verse 44 the *hour* of the coming of the Son of Man appear. Obviously, the terms are here used almost as synonyms, and

council, and (3) the Son.<sup>13</sup> Only God the Father knows the date of the *Parousia*. Though most modern interpreters take the text at face value and are willing to talk about limitations for Jesus,<sup>14</sup> ancient interpreters came up with a variety of suggestions concerning the ignorance of Jesus: “Origen, *ad loc.*, wondered whether Jesus was referring to the church of which he is the head.



*Does Jesus’  
limited  
knowledge  
mitigate  
against His  
divinity and  
His place  
within the  
Trinity?*

reading one prefers, in each case “the Father alone” knows the date of the second coming of Jesus. Whether or not the phrase “nor the Son” is included does not make much of a difference but is automatically implied.

As the analysis of the context has shown, *that day and hour* undoubtedly refers to Christ’s second coming.<sup>10</sup> According to verse 36, the date of this coming remains unknown. *Day and*

are joined again in verse 50 to describe the Second Coming.<sup>12</sup> Although not mentioning *day and hour*, verse 48 contains the problem of a delay. So the importance of the *Parousia* and the disciples’ readiness are underlined, and any attempt to calculate the event is rejected.

Three groups do not know the time: (1) all humans, (2) the angels in heaven, who are close to God and the heavenly

Philoxenus, *ad loc.*, asserted that Jesus became one with the Father in wisdom and authority *only after* his ascension. Ambrose, *de fid.* 5, 16, attributed ‘nor the Son’ to an Arian interpolation. Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 3.42–50, suggested that Jesus only feigned ignorance. The Cappadocians thought that the Son did not know the date on his own but only through the Father. . . . Chrysostom, *Hom. on Mt.* 77.2, . . . simply denied

that Jesus was ignorant of anything.”<sup>15</sup> Others suggest that Jesus did not use the term *son* as a self-designation.<sup>16</sup> However, the text is quite clear and shows that Jesus admits openly and frankly that He has limited knowledge in this situation. This also indicates submission to the Father.<sup>17</sup> Yet the sequence of groups from humans to angels to Jesus may indicate a progression. Jesus lives the closest to the Father,<sup>18</sup> even if at the time He spoke these words He did not know the exact timing of His second coming.

## Theological Considerations

The question is, Does Jesus’ limited knowledge militate against His divinity and His place within the Trinity? We do not think so.

1. *Matthew and Jesus’ knowledge.* Although Jesus did not know the exact time of His coming, He knew many other details.<sup>19</sup> Matthew 24–25 reveals that around A.D. 31, Jesus knew the future destruction of Jerusalem and His own coming. He knew that some time would pass between the fall of Jerusalem and the final consummation, and between His first and second comings, filling in for us many details about earthly and heavenly signs and religious confrontations. For instance, in Matthew 25:19 He mentions a *long time*. These chapters are foundational to New Testament eschatology. In addition, Jesus knew about the future persecution of His people (Matt. 10:18), His own suffering (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; 20:19) and betrayal (Matt. 26:34), the final judgment (Matt. 10:15; 11:22; 12:36), reward (Matt. 19:29), and His future glory (Matt. 16:27). But His knowledge was not limited to the future. He knew the Father and revealed Him to whom He wanted (Matt. 11:27). He also knew the thoughts of His audience (Matt. 9:4). This knowledge surpassed that of all other human beings and obviously had to do with His divinity. Yet there were a few elements that were excluded from His omniscience. Matthew 24:36 “is the clearest statement in the New Testament of a limitation of Jesus’

knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that Jesus knew God, humanity, and the future in a very detailed way, even if He did not know everything.

2. *Matthew and Jesus’ divinity.* While the Gospel of John stresses Jesus’ divinity the strongest and contains remarkable statements in this respect, the Gospel of Matthew is not devoid of statements pointing to Jesus’ divinity. Jesus is the Lord/Yahweh (Matt. 3:3; Isa. 40:3). The Son of Man is able to forgive sins, and that is a privilege of the Deity (Matt. 9:6). He sends out prophets, a divine activity (Matt. 23:34–36).<sup>21</sup> Jesus is David’s son and yet also His Lord (Matt. 22:45). All authority is given to Jesus; so He is omnipotent (Matt. 28:18) and also omnipresent (Matt. 28:20). He is also part of the Trinity, who shares one common name (Matt. 28:19). So in Matthew, Jesus is both God and the One whose knowledge is somewhat limited. Therefore, when discussing Jesus’ limited knowledge, one should not deny that He is God. One cannot and should not give up one truth for the other. The Bible knows a number of paradoxes,<sup>22</sup> and here it looks as if we have another one. Both paradoxical statements are true and must be maintained.

3. *Matthew and Jesus as a real human being.* Jesus differs from God the Father and the Holy Spirit, in spite of being part of the Trinity, by the facts that He is fully human and fully God and that He has retained these two natures after His incarnation. Sure, His human nature is now a glorified resurrection nature. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is a real human being, though conceived by the Holy Spirit. He accomplishes this revelation by integrating Jesus in the genealogy of Matthew 1 and mentioning His birth. Because Jesus was fully human, He became hungry as we do (Matt. 4:2). He needed to drink (Matt. 27:48), rest (Matt. 8:20), sleep (Matt. 8:24), and have some kind of home (Matt. 13:36). He was also tempted by Satan (Matt. 4:1–11). As a social being, He had fellowship with others (Matt. 9:10, 11). He felt compassion for His people (Matt. 9:36; 20:34).

He prayed to God (Matt. 14:23) and sang (Matt. 26:30). He felt disappointed (Matt. 17:17), deeply grieved to the point of death (Matt. 26:38), left without emotional support from His disciples (Matt. 26:42, 45), drained, and deserted by God (Matt. 27:46). Finally, He died (Matt. 17:23; 27:50). As a human being, subject to physical, emotional, and mental needs and participating in the frailty of humanity, Jesus had temporarily emptied Himself of certain divine prerogatives (Phil. 2:6–8; Matt. 20:23)<sup>23</sup> and became subordinate to the Father who had sent Him (Matt. 10:40; 15:24).

4. *Matthew and Jesus’ Limitations.* So, as a human being Jesus was limited in various ways.<sup>24</sup> Our text, Matthew 24:36, suggests that Jesus’ omniscience was limited. Reading through the Gospel, we also notice that Jesus’ omnipresence was limited but affirmed at the end of the Gospel, namely after His resurrection (Matt. 28:20). The same seems to be true for His omnipotence (Matt. 26:53). Osborne writes: “Jesus is the God-man and as such is both fully God and fully human. This involves limitations when in His incarnate state. When walking Planet Earth He was not omnipresent and limited Himself in His omnipotence and His omniscience.”<sup>25</sup> Robert Mounce points out that “as the omnipotence of the Son did not come into play in the temptation scene (4:1–11), now His omniscience is veiled in a specific area.”<sup>26</sup> Commentators explain that the ignorance on Jesus’ part during His incarnation should be seen positively, namely as evidence of His genuine humanity.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Matthew 24:36, a difficult verse that mentions Jesus’ ignorance with regard to the date of His coming, was spoken during His incarnation as a human being, and this needs to be understood from this perspective. The Gospel of Matthew stresses both Jesus’ divinity and humanity, even for the time when He lived on Earth, but it shows that, due to the incarnation, certain limitations in Jesus’ life existed that were removed after His resurrection (Matt. 28:18, 19).

Therefore, the text cannot be used to either deny Jesus' divinity or exclude Him from the Trinity.

Yet this observation does not seem to be the main point of the argument, anyway. The focus of Matthew 24:36–51 is on the unknown date of the Second Coming and on our reaction to it. If this date was not known to Jesus, we should not attempt to calculate it.<sup>28</sup> Rather, we should live constantly in a state of readiness, expecting with great anticipation and joy Christ's second coming. ☑

- 1 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 939.
- 2 Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 903.
- 3 See Richard M. Davidson, "What Did Jesus Mean by 'This Generation'?" in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 289–292, versus Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 341.
- 4 See John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 990.
- 5 Verse 36: The angels and Jesus do not know day and hour (*oida*). Verse 39: Most antediluvians did not know (*ginōskō*). Verse 42: The date for the Second

- Coming cannot be known (*oida*). Verse 43: Know that the coming of the thief cannot be calculated (*ginōskō*). Verse 50: The servant does not know the day and hour his master comes (*ginōskō*).
- 6 See David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew, The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1990), 326, 327.
  - 7 See R. T. France, *Matthew, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1990), 351.
  - 8 See *ibid.*, 352.
  - 9 See Alexander Sand, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, Regensburger Neues Testament (Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1986), 498. France, *Matthew, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, 347; David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 589.
  - 10 See Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 991.
  - 11 Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 990.
  - 12 See also Matthew 25:13, where the two terms occur again. They are inclusive. Therefore, the argument that calculation of months or years or smaller units than hours is permitted is mistaken.
  - 13 Some suggest that *Son* stands for "Son of God"—France, *Matthew*, NICNT, 940—while others propose that it means "Son of Man," who actually appears in the same paragraph, namely in verse 44. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33B (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1995), 716.
  - 14 E.g., Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 323, 324; Turner, *Matthew*, 589; Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 427.
  - 15 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew XIX–XXVIII*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 379.

- 16 See Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 324.
- 17 See Davies and Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 378, quoting P. W. Schmiedl.
- 18 See France, *Matthew*, NICNT, 940: "The structure of this saying places 'the Son' on a level above the angels, second only to the Father."
- 19 See, Osborne, *Matthew*, 903.
- 20 France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 347.
- 21 Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 193.
- 22 That is, one God in three Persons, being already saved and yet not completely saved, and washing the clothes in the blood of the Lamb.
- 23 This is called *kenosis*. See France, *Matthew*, NICNT, 940. It "accepts the full divinity of the Son but argues that for the period of his incarnation certain divine attributes (in this omniscience) were voluntarily put aside." See also Hagner, 716. Stanley J. Grenz mentions "temporal limitations," limitations in location, and limitations in strength. *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2000), 277
- 24 Cf. Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121. Thomas C. Oden warns against extreme positions such as to argue "that Jesus knew no more than the average Jew of his time." *The Word of Life*, Systematic Theology, vol. 2 (Peabody: Prince Press, 1998), 89.
- 25 Osborne, *Matthew*, 903, 904.
- 26 Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 229.
- 27 See Turner, *Matthew*, 589; Mounce, *Matthew*, 229; Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Matthew* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 374.
- 28 See Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1970), 221.

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## LETTERS

Continued from page 4



"Abraham's bosom" and the rich man "crying out" for Lazarus to be sent and "cool" his thirst with a drop of water as ancillary details to the parable's main point, a detailed analysis is given to show that these are in fact "weird descriptions" which "are not just props" nor "incidental." Papaioannou's answer is that this is an obvious use of sarcasm on the part of Jesus. Amazingly, this suggestion is offered without any evidence of support whatsoever. To even a casual observer, the parable clearly does not read as a sarcastic narrative. In addition, the account in the parable

is not so much a revelation *from* the dead as it is *about the fate of the dead*. After life, there is no "second chance" with God.

Third, and in connection with the previous point, Papaioannou sees the parable as a restatement of the prohibition against necromancy found in Deuteronomy 18:10–12. Though the Deuteronomy passage is indeed divine revelation addressing the godless practice of consulting the dead, to say that it serves as a backdrop to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a bit disingenuous. Such a background

seems foreign to the genre, context, and prevailing implications drawn from it.

Overall, Papaioannou's working thesis that the parable cannot be pressed to teach what the conditions of the afterlife are is quite valid, and one with which I find myself in agreement. Yet his attempt to justify this position veers into strange hermeneutical waters and ultimately fails. Thus to the question as to *why* Jesus would ever share such a parable if there is no conscious afterlife, Papaioannou offers no sustainable answer.

—Jim Long, email

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# Creating healthy habits

Pastoral ministry can be draining even for the most gifted and energetic of church leaders.<sup>1</sup> Clergy are dissatisfied with the pastorate for a wide range of reasons; perhaps we are struggling with pastoral ministry issues ourselves. As Derek Tidball notes, “In spite of the many who genuinely find ministry satisfying, the truth has to be faced that many do not.”<sup>2</sup> While ministers are exiting the pastorate on account of various distresses, one of the leading catalysts behind premature ministry departures portrays a lack of balance in their lives. Simply put, pastors are burning out rapidly. Having served as a full-time senior minister, I speak experientially that we are responsible for our well-being. Creating healthy habits will help protect us from pastoral burnout and enable us to serve God long-term in parish ministry.

## Clergy burnout

Burnout rates are soaring among pastors. Roy Oswald, in his book *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry*, reports, “Approximately twenty percent of clergy with whom I’ve worked in seminars score extremely high on the Clergy Burnout Inventory. Among clergy in long pastorates (ten years or more) the number jumps to fifty percent.”<sup>3</sup> Christine Maslach defines burnout as “a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion marked by physical depletion and chronic fatigue, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and by development of negative self-concept

and negative attitudes towards work, life and other people.”<sup>4</sup>

Burnout, in its varied forms, can be classed as a serious condition but can be avoided if we take the right precautions. The recipe for clergy burnout is rather straightforward. As pastors we are overzealous, overworked, and overly eager to please the masses. We forget to take time for vacation and reflection. We disregard our bodies’ pleas for rest. All too frequently, our congregations take our forgoing of respite as the norm. The result? Burnout waits just around the corner. In order to prevent burnout, we as pastors must be proactive in seeking wholeness in our lives.

This article seeks to offer suggestions about how pastors can create healthy habits and promote balance to guard against pastoral burnout. We will address four crucial habits of life—emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual—that are involved in burnout.

## Emotional habits

Since the pastoral vocation calls for extensive human interaction and the ability to gauge others’ emotions, ministers need a firm handle on their own emotional condition. Doctors and mental health counselors are commonly instructed to maintain emotional distance from human suffering. “It’s not healthy to be on an emotional roller coaster every single day with your patients and clients,” they are told. This advice is not necessarily the best way to deal with emotional stress in the ministry. It remains nearly impossible for pastors to check emotions at the

door when listening to the heartache and pain of those we shepherd. Pushing pejorative emotions under the rug will not help either. There must be a better way to cope.

One way to monitor emotions would be to write down our feelings in a journal. For my seminary graduation, my wife handed me a new leather-bound journal. I was grateful for the gesture, but I never really thought I had to put pen to paper and log my feelings. But writing in my journal, on occasion, became healing water for my soul, especially during rough seasons in my life. In this journal, I released my adversities to God but also praised Him for His faithfulness and goodness.

In the psalms, we get a peek into the true persona of David, a person who left no emotion unspoken. By writing down his emotions and reading them, David repaired his soul and recognized many of his emotional hang-ups. These psalms served as prayers of confession, triumph, despair, and cries for help. Give yourself the opportunity to feel every emotion and give them to God for restoration and healing.

Secondly, laughter centers as a worthwhile emotional habit that I would endorse in the life of any minister. There is a reason why people enjoy watching comedies or television shows or spending an evening listening to a stand-up comic. People like to be amused and enjoy a good laugh. We need to learn how to laugh at ourselves, our failures, and our life circumstances and how to not take ourselves and everything so seriously.

Emotions are God-given. We experience them for a reason. However, we can learn to control our emotions as well as laugh when the moment calls for it. By balancing our emotions, we not only become comfortable in our own skin but also draw closer to our Creator as we experience all kinds of emotions He designed for us to feel.

## Physical habits

God has given us our physical bodies, and He expects us to take care of

decision to select healthier entrees and skip dessert. Will I exhibit self-control? Diet exists as such an overlooked facet of pastoral life. But the way we eat can positively or negatively impact our energy level, mood, self-image, and overall well-being.

What we choose to feed our bodies becomes very important. First, we need to take good care of the bodies God has given us. Therefore, we should eat a balanced diet. Do you remember what you learned in elementary school? Teachers

weekly calendar. Simply getting a gym membership does not ensure that we will work out consistently or at all.

Statistics continue to point out how exercise benefits the overall quality of our lives. David Biebel and Harold Koenig state: "Regular physical activity reduces your risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, and colon cancer. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of developing type 2 diabetes or high blood pressure. . . . Regular physical activity can help reduce stress

*When I do not care for my spiritual health, I am more easily discouraged and decreasingly optimistic about what God can accomplish. Pastors thrive on meaningful time rendered to the Lord.*

them. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17, the apostle Paul gives us a profound view of our bodies: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (NRSV). As we can see plainly, God cares deeply about His creation, and so should we care for ourselves. Here are three simple steps:

*Eat properly.* Pastors are expected to eat whatever is served at someone's home. It is not polite to be "picky." That's where the problem begins. At times, what is on our plates may not be the healthiest option, but we do not have a better alternative. What is on our plates may be fried foods, sugar-filled drinks, potato chips, and cheesecake.

However, on many occasions, we do have a choice. When I find myself in a restaurant, I try to make a conscious

reminded us to eat from the four basic food groups: dairy, protein, fruits and vegetables, and grains. A balanced diet gives us the energy we require to do the Lord's work.

Second, we are setting an example for our congregants and families. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Self-control involves learning the art of self-care. It is not difficult to become overweight. Exorbitant calories can be consumed in an instant. Let us show our church members that we can exercise good judgment in our diet.

*Exercise regularly.* In addition to healthy eating, our bodies need regular physical exercise. Pastors are often forced into a sedentary lifestyle. Aside from the time we stand to deliver a sermon, we are often sitting down in our study. Since we have flexibility to determine our hourly schedules, try to fit physical exercise into the

and feelings of depression and anxiety. Regular physical activity can help relieve or prevent back pain."<sup>5</sup> The list goes on and on. Do not feel remorseful to your church members about going to the gym. Carve out time for regular exercise. You will be glad you did, and so will your parishioners.

*Relax joyfully.* Being a pastor is never a nine-to-five job but a calling that has no set hours. When our members need us, we should be present. Many pastors are stretched for time. After caring for our congregants, is there time for personal rest and relaxation?

In spite of all we have to do each week, take a day off! Go out and explore the beauty of the great outdoors. Play with your children at the park. Go for a swim, or take your spouse for a romantic walk on the beach. Take an afternoon nap. Read

the newspaper while you enjoy a cup of coffee. Bring your children on a play date with some friends. Get your mind off of work, and allow your body to relax while doing a favorite hobby.

When we are not resting enough, our bodies have a way of telling us. We are cranky and brusque with others. We dislike what we are doing. We find ourselves dreaming about a seven-day cruise in the Caribbean. In short, our waking moments can be depressing. So we need to take care of our physical health.

## Relational habits

There are varying notions regarding pastors and friendships. The minority view would be to pursue intimate friendships with church members. On the other hand, I have traditionally been warned that pastors should by no means seek to be close friends with parishioners. If pastors cannot pursue friendships within the confines of their churches, where are they to turn for support? Everyone, including pastors, needs a confidant!

*Make a friend in the ministry.* As Gary Kinnaman and Alfred Ells testify, “Most people in full-time ministry do not have close personal friendships and consequently are alarmingly lonely and dangerously vulnerable.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason, it seems natural that relationships should be explored by befriending other pastors.

Building a friendship with a pastor in your city can feel cumbersome. Several factors impede the pathway to friendship among fellow clergy. Sometimes we cannot agree on particular doctrines or philosophies of ministry. These theological distinctions become our convenient way out of a potential friendship. So we may prefer to be alone.

What is more, pastors battle all types of insecurities when they compare themselves with others. I remember during my first year as a pastor I received an invitation to a pastors’ dinner. The air in the room felt

stuffy and awkward. Questions were flung freely concerning numbers, like “how many couples do you have in your church or what percentage of your offering is given to missions work?” It seemed like the evening’s agenda was to size up the competition in the room.

What we must come to embrace, especially as pastors, is that God blesses each person differently. We must overcome pettiness and cease the territorialism that hampers our effectiveness. Individual churches are not conglomerates. We work for the same Employer, whose name is God. Like a rare gem, there are pastors with whom we can dialogue beyond the numbers. It may take your own initiative, but you will find this worth the effort. Friendships among pastors are possible, but we need to mitigate our insecurities and place value in things that truly matter.

*Have some accountability.* Billy Graham made it a point to seek out accountability to protect himself from compromising situations and licentious behavior. Accountability is critical in pastoral ministry. We find this “a must.” We need people in our lives who will ask us tough questions and do everything humanly possible to prevent us from falling into sin. Proverbs 18:24 helpfully points out that “some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin” (NRSV). That kind of friendship is very rare, but it is possible. To surmount the temptations of life and ministry, we need such a friend and accountability partner; to find someone we can trust and with whom we can bare our souls to one another. We can challenge each other to live a holy life. This kind of friendship develops with much time and sacrifice, but it is critical to our lives.

## Spiritual habits

Exercising spiritual disciplines has never been my forte. Perhaps you can resonate with such feelings. During seminary, the excuse I relied

upon most heavily was a seminarian’s famous last words: “When I become a full-time pastor, then I will be more deliberate about fostering my spiritual life. I don’t have time now, but I’ll have time later on.” As a full-time pastor, the situation did not improve all that much. Spiritual dryness is not unique among pastors. Angie Best-Boss says: “Cultivation of personal spiritual growth is perhaps one of the most neglected areas of pastors’ lives.”<sup>7</sup>

A direct relationship between our spiritual health and how satisfied we are in life is possible. As William Hulme and his colleagues observe, “Those clergy feeling satisfied with their prayer and devotional life tend also to feel satisfied with their marital and family life, their ministry, with the support from the congregation, and with the respect shown them by congregational and denominational leaders.”<sup>8</sup> When I do not care for my spiritual health, I am more easily discouraged and decreasingly optimistic about what God can accomplish. Pastors thrive on meaningful time rendered to the Lord. Be in a continuous relationship with the true and living God. Do not neglect your soul or body for the sake of busyness and doing ministry. 

- 1 A longer version of this article was published in Matthew D. Kim, *7 Lessons for New Pastors: Your First Year in Ministry* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012), 59–76. Used with permission.
- 2 Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 315.
- 3 Roy M. Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1991), 3.
- 4 Christine Maslach, “Burned-Out,” in *Human Behavior* (1978): 17–20.
- 5 David B. Biebel and Harold G. Koenig, *Simple Health: Easy and Inexpensive Things You Can Do to Improve Your Health* (Lake Mary, FL: Siloam, 2005), 47.
- 6 Gary D. Kinnaman and Alfred H. Ells, *Leaders that Last: How Covenant Friendships Can Help Pastors Thrive* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 10.
- 7 Angie Best-Boss, *Surviving Your First Year as Pastor: What Seminary Couldn’t Teach You* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1999), 77.
- 8 William E. Hulme, Milo L. Brekke, and William C. Behrens, *Pastors in Ministry: Guidelines for Seven Critical Issues* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1985), 45.

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# Worship in the book of Revelation: *Worship as confession and moral identity*

## —Part 1 of 2

Revelation's visions of the heavenly realm consistently portray the offering of adoration and praise to God and to the Lamb. The language of worship pervades the whole book.<sup>1</sup> But what are the implications of the book's vision of worship for everyday life? How do the language, expressions, settings, or focus of worship found in these visions frame or articulate moral realities? What link exists, if any, between Revelation's vision of worship and ethics?

Revelation's "worship scroll"<sup>2</sup> narrative (chapters 4–11) gives the sense "that worship itself is symbolic of bringing life under the control of God."<sup>3</sup> The worship term *proskynein* is used twenty-four times in the Apocalypse in ways that indicate the centrality of this focus. The word often implies the physical posture of bowing down or prostrating oneself before another, a posture suggesting submission and homage.<sup>4</sup> Physical posture indicates the attitude and action of offering one's allegiance to another. Bowing down in worship means yielding one's whole self.

The liturgical elements of Revelation depict the attitude of worshipful reverence to God as bowing

to divine sovereignty in every aspect of human life and every facet of God's sovereign outworking in both personal and corporate life.<sup>5</sup> Worship is the commitment of a whole person to God—a commitment lived out in daily existence.<sup>6</sup> The fundamental question throughout Revelation is, Who is on the throne (of one's life)? The book's competing thrones—the dragon's (2:13; 13:2) and the beast's (16:10)—bring to light created beings (human and demonic) desiring to sit and rule their own affairs without interference from God.

### Worship and morality

This bowing (or not bowing) of self to divine sovereignty in every aspect of life points to both why and how the matter of worship inevitably touches moral life—ethics.<sup>7</sup> Moral matters inevitably converge with those of worship. Worship and ethics become inescapably related.<sup>8</sup> They are entwined in Revelation's apocalyptic vision as confession, character, and conduct. Confession brings to focus questions of who is to be worshiped, how one worships, and what one says and does in worship.<sup>9</sup>

These three themes profoundly interconnect in Revelation's vision of worship,<sup>10</sup> making it obvious that "worship is a constitutive act"<sup>11</sup> forming character and guiding conduct. Eschatologically oriented worship in particular is constitutive, for it frames moral being, identity, and action. The cultural realities of worship ritual both express and engender a worldview. Character and conduct are correlative to confession, and both are shaped by it.<sup>12</sup> But character also shapes conduct and nuances confession. Conduct likewise impacts character and confession. Each becomes a facet of the worship found in John's Apocalypse, and together they express the book's worship/ethics link.

### Becoming what we worship

The sixth-trumpet imagery of unrepentant human beings opens up a window into the profound link between worship and ethics and how confession shapes both character and conduct. The frightening vision includes grotesque hordes of cavalry swarming over the earth with but one assignment—to kill a third of humankind (9:13–16).

Fire, smoke, and brimstone belch out of the horses' mouths like a deadly volcano spews out fire, smoke, and lava (9:17–19). Everything in the path of the fire, smoke, and brimstone perishes. Snakelike tails inflict further injury (9:19). The death toll is unimaginable: a third of humankind (9:18). The two-thirds who survive this sixth-trumpet woe refuse to “repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts” (9:20, 21).<sup>13</sup>

While the visual description of this sixth trumpet scourge unfolds with vividly grotesque and highly symbolic imagery, this sixth trumpet abruptly finishes on a stark note of moral reality. In doing so, its closeness brings understandable meaning to our earthly frame of reference. The passage ends with moral terminology with which any reader can identify—movement from symbol to real, from vision to life. No matter one's interpretation of the sixth trumpet, the bottom line issue is the forceful link between worship and ethics.

The world of the first century A.D. was full of idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood. Here we find the cults of paganism linked with murders, sorceries, immorality, and thefts as an expression of humankind's rebellion against the rule of God, the Creator. So powerful were the forces of natural religion that people would not abandon their immoral values and dehumanizing practices even in the face of God's terrible judgments.<sup>14</sup> The demonic nature of the idols as the transforming influence on the idol worshipers becomes apparent.<sup>15</sup>

### Consequences of false worship

Refusal to worship God as God has its consequences in every form of human wickedness, abuse, hypocrisy, and injustice in human relationships. Within this imagery,

Revelation discloses how false worship and immorality are closely linked.<sup>16</sup>

The list of sins in Revelation 9: 20, 21 should not to be separated.<sup>17</sup> The list is prefaced by a summary of idolatry's spiritual essence: behind the idols are demonic forces, which are worshiped instead of God (9:20).<sup>18</sup> Moral dysfunction is expressed in the context of idolatry.<sup>19</sup> While the language comes as that of “idol worship,” it assumes anything that comes between us and the living God and that reduces God to a tacit nonentity. Our *gods* are things (or persons, ideas, powers, objects, behaviors, or thoughts) before which we bow down with our most sincere and profound respect or commitment. They are what we sacrifice time, money, and effort for. They are the center of our lives, giving us meaning, purpose, and direction.

Sin, generally, comes of two kinds. Verse 20 focuses on sins directed against God (the first four of the Ten Commandments, Exod. 20:1–11). Verse 21 addresses sins directed against human beings (the last six of the Ten Commandments, Exod. 20:12–17).<sup>20</sup> The moral reality expressed in this linkage (idolatrous worship and ethics) is that when human beings worship images (idols), they demonstrate gross disrespect for that which God has made in His image—their fellow human beings (Gen. 1:26, 27). Social disruption and evil are a direct result of false worship. The image of God in humans distorts before inanimate images.

Old Testament moral imagery stands behind Revelation's purposeful worship-ethics link:<sup>21</sup> “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them” (Ps. 115:4–8).<sup>22</sup>

Idol worshipers shape their gods after their own view of reality; that is,

they are “the works of their hands” (Rev. 9:20).<sup>23</sup> Those who make idols and put their trust in them become like them—they can neither see, hear, nor walk, morally. They become morally deaf, catatonic, and insensitive. It is a moral principle: we resemble our ideals, we become like what we worship.<sup>24</sup> We become like our gods. We resemble what we revere, either for ruin or for restoration.<sup>25</sup>

From here worship takes its start. A person's god dictates his or her moral vision and conduct, consciously or unconsciously.<sup>26</sup> The Apocalypse, in this sense, alludes to this moral principle when it refers to “the works of their hands” in conjunction with idols of gold and silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which “can neither see nor hear nor walk” (Rev. 9:20). The “works of their hands” extends beyond the mere material nature of idols themselves to murder, magic arts, immorality, and theft.

This Old Testament principle that *we become like what we worship* is carried on in the New Testament, especially by Paul.<sup>27</sup> Note what the apostle states: “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. . . .

“And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without

understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them” (Rom. 1:21–25, 28–32).

## Worship, confession, and moral identity

Worship as “confession” thus shapes Christian moral identity.<sup>28</sup> Worship as “confession” determines the shape of human life now and defines life in the hereafter.<sup>29</sup> It both orients and orders our lives.<sup>30</sup> “It marks us out and trains us to be a particular people who are citizens of another city and subjects of a coming King,”<sup>31</sup> and worship is a practice of desire that brings inner formation. Worship becomes a pedagogical practice that trains our love—either for God, self, or the world.

Confession (whom and how we worship), then, locates worshipers within an all-inclusive and overarching vision of reality.<sup>32</sup> In worship, the self becomes reconstituted; character is reshaped in direct correlation to confession<sup>33</sup> and responds to the reality of God as disclosed.<sup>34</sup> This becomes a constitutive act, forming character and guiding conduct.<sup>35</sup> Various elements of worship create certain perspectives and understandings about God and specific attitudes and habits of being that affect how we think, speak, and act. They determine who we are.<sup>36</sup>

In the Apocalypse, worship brings moral awareness in the context of the holy character and conduct of God.<sup>37</sup> In the Apocalypse, confession locates worshipers within an all-inclusive and overarching vision of reality where God is all in all.<sup>38</sup> There, worship as confession—in terms of liturgy affirmation—has moral influence. In keeping with these principles, Revelation’s worship centers, various, reveals, and affirms around various moral realities of holiness,<sup>39</sup> truthfulness,<sup>40</sup> covenant faithfulness,<sup>41</sup> reconciliation,<sup>42</sup> and righteousness.<sup>43</sup> There is response to who God is, what

God has done, and what God will do. Revelation’s worship movement gives the hearer words of confession. When one voices them—uses the words of Revelation, that is, “holy, holy, holy,” “righteous and true are Your ways”—the very words will affect their thinking and touch their being.

A study of the Apocalypse thus reveals the true meaning of worship and how believers today should worship God. Those who worship God in Revelation are seen adoring God’s being,<sup>44</sup> declaring the Lamb’s worthiness,<sup>45</sup> celebrating God’s glorious presence,<sup>46</sup> submitting to His authority,<sup>47</sup> and fearing and serving Him.<sup>48</sup>

(Part 2 of this article will consider worship as it relates to conduct in the November issue.)

- 1 David Peterson, *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 261; Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 53.
- 2 David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998), 61.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 4 Revelation 4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4, 10; 22:8, 9.
- 5 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 176.
- 6 J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 710.
- 7 Revelation 1:17; 4:8; 14:1–5; 15:2–4; 19:1–8; 22:3, 4.
- 8 Michael R. Weed, “Worship and Ethics: Confession, Character, and Conduct,” *Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 47.
- 9 The term *confession* is used here to mean “who one worships and how one worships.” It is more than mere declaration of beliefs or doctrines.
- 10 See discussion of these themes in both apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic contexts: Miroslav Volf, “Worship as Adoration and Action: Reflections on a Christian Way of Being-in-the-World,” in *Worship: Adoration and Action*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 203–252; Weed, “Worship and Ethics,” 47–53.
- 11 Weed, “Worship and Ethics,” 53.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 13 Except as otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
- 14 Peterson, *Engaging With God*, 262.
- 15 G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 264.
- 16 Cf., Jeremiah 16:18. David Peterson, “Worship and Ethics in Romans 12,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (1993): 276.
- 17 Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 265.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 264.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 265.
- 20 “The Ten Commandments may have inspired this list, since there idolatry is first mentioned followed by the four sins also here (as most commentators observe).” *Ibid.*, 265, 266.
- 21 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 518, 519; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 242, 243; Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 136, 137; Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 36–49.
- 22 Cf. Psalm 135:15–18; Daniel 5:23. Compare with “They worshiped worthless idols, only to become worthless themselves” (Jer. 2:5, NLT).
- 23 Cf. Isaiah 40:18–20; 44:9–20; 66:3; Jeremiah 10:3–8; Habakkuk 2:18, 19.
- 24 Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 36–70, 241–267; F. B. Meyer, *Gems from the Psalms* (Westchester, IL: Good News Publishers, 1976), 188.
- 25 Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 49.
- 26 William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), 17, 18.
- 27 Fee, *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary*, 137.
- 28 Weed, “Worship and Ethics,” 47.
- 29 Marianne Meye Thompson, “Worship in the Book of Revelation,” *Ex Auditu* 8 (1992): 47.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 51, 52.
- 31 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 154.
- 32 Weed, “Worship and Ethics,” 52. See also Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 133–154.
- 33 Weed, “Worship and Ethics,” 52.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Marva J. Dawn, “Worship and Ethics,” *Dialog* 32, no. 4 (1993): 297.
- 37 Revelation 14:6, 7. As per above, “Worship in the Heavenly Realm,” we noted how God is praised because He is holy (4:8; 6:10; 15:4; 16:5). God is praised because He is sovereign (1:8; 4:2; 15:3, 4; 20:11; 21:5). God is praised because He is moral (15:3, 4; 4:11). Et cetera. The profound epithet “holy, holy, holy” in itself is enough to mold the inner self of one who so envisions and praises God.
- 38 Revelation 1:4–8; 4:1–11. Weed, “Worship and Ethics,” 52.
- 39 Revelation 4:8.
- 40 Revelation 6:10; 15:3; 19:2.
- 41 Revelation 4:3; 5:1; 21:2–8.
- 42 Revelation 5:9, 10; 7:9; 21:2–8; 22:1–5.
- 43 Revelation 15:3, 4; 19:1–6. Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 59.
- 44 Revelation 4:8, 9, 11.
- 45 Revelation 5:9–12.
- 46 Revelation 4:9–10; 7:9–12, 15; 11:16; 19:6, 7; 21:3–7.
- 47 Revelation 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4, 10.
- 48 Revelation 14:7; 7:15; 22:3. See Mazie Nakhro, “The Meaning of Worship according to the Book of Revelation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 158 (January–March 2001): 75–85.

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# Gaining by denying: An invitation to the discipline of fasting—Part 2 of 2

**T**he first part of this article (July 2016) dealt with the biblical meaning and benefits of fasting and how fasting can deepen one's relationship with God when done in conjunction with close fellowship with Jesus. This part of the article invites you to share in the joys of fasting as we discuss *why* and *how* to undertake a fast.

Fasting is to be done in a spirit of humility and joy. Throughout the Bible, God rebuked Israel for their misplaced views on fasting. Rather than being a way to humble oneself before the Creator, fasting “came to be regarded as pious achievement.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus corrected this view, teaching, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt. 6:16–18).<sup>2</sup>

We find that it was customary during Jesus' time to undertake fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, which were busy market days. To see those who fasted deliberately modify their

appearance in order to play up their piety for the crowds was not uncommon. They did not partake in the usual grooming habits and even used cosmetics to give the impression of paleness; their attempt to exaggerate humility was in fact an exhibition of pride and pretentiousness.<sup>3</sup> Ellen White warns against such pretension: “Fasting or prayer that is actuated by a self-justifying spirit is an abomination in the sight of God.”<sup>4</sup> Just as with any spiritual custom or discipline, fasting, in itself, does not bring one into righteousness; only the opening of the heart and surrendering of the will to God will bring forth a saving relationship with Christ.

## Why fast?

Why should we fast? Below is a list of several instances, biblical and otherwise, when God's people chose to fast. These can help us determine situations when we may benefit from prayer and fasting.

Fasting can be an integral part of one's spiritual journey. Hull calls this type of fasting one that “intensely nourish[es] . . . [the] soul.”<sup>5</sup> We see this in the life of Jesus when the Spirit led Him into the wilderness to prepare Him for ministry (Matt. 4:1, 2; Luke 4:1, 2). Paul also fasted after experiencing

Christ in vision and seeing his need for personal revival (Acts 9:9). Both Jesus and Paul spent a great deal of time in bringing revival to others. One Christian writer describes her prayer and fasting as a way in which to speed up her Christian growth. She says, fasting “tenderizes my heart toward the Lord. My spirit becomes all the more sensitive to his promptings, his voice, his touch.”<sup>6</sup>

Fasting prepares the way for the Holy Spirit to work in us to overcome sin (Matt. 4:4). Says the prophet Isaiah: “‘Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?’” (Isa. 58:6). Fasting can show us things that we have ignored in our lives. “Without our usual comforts, we turn to God with much more honesty and intensity. There we connect with the richness of God, who truly meets our needs.”<sup>7</sup>

Fasting is often undertaken before making important decisions or major life events. Look at Esther. Before she could dare risk her life in her mission to save her people, she turned to fasting and prayer (Esther 4:16). Likewise, we, too, can turn to fasting and prayer when faced with momentous decisions, such as when looking for a new pastor,

when deciding on a building project, or when launching a major evangelistic campaign. Fasting can also be a part of personal decision-making moments, such as when looking for a new job, entering into a marriage relationship, or making a major move.

Fasting can help in facing or overcoming personal challenges and problems. When David was falsely criticized and accused, he turned to God in fasting and prayer. He sought to humble himself and pray for vindication rather than to retaliate (Pss. 35:13; 69:10; 109:24). As a pastor, I felt at times that I was being falsely accused or criticized. I would pray and fast for God to open my eyes to any legitimate criticism and vindicate me against any falsehoods. This brought me much peace and allowed me to stay focused on the mission of reaching people for Christ.

Fasting and prayer can be a means to express our deep sorrow and regret

over the unfaithfulness of God's people, like Ezra did when he sought for the community to repent and seek spiritual renewal (Ezra 10:6). Criticism becomes a common response when we feel slighted or at odds with those around us. James warns against the damage this can cause (James 3:6–10). Instead, we need to spend time in prayer and fasting, not only for those who have fallen away from God but also for us to have a more Christlike attitude. This will help us show love and mercy to those with whom we may differ, so that a new dynamic of Christian relationship takes over the community of faith.

Fasting plays a crucial role in intercessory prayer. Esther asked all the Jews in Susa to fast and pray as she faced the danger of going before the king to plead for her people (Esther 4:16). Nehemiah fasted and sought forgiveness on behalf of God's people (Neh. 1:4–11).

Fasting and prayer were involved in the selection process of early church leaders and their commission to public ministry as evidenced in the ordination of Barnabas and Paul and in the appointing of elders (Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23). I have personally experienced the power of fasting and prayer in the electoral process of the church I pastored. I intentionally spent a great deal of time in prayer and fasting before the selection of the nominating committee and again when the nominating committee started its work. Our congregation had the best possible leadership team, and as a result, we had a healthy and lively church family.

Fasting and praying can open the gates of heaven to save God's people from persecution. Esther's case, as noted above, to save her people from Haman's plot is worth remembering (Esther 4:3). Wherever God's people are threatened, whenever the proclamation of the gospel faces persecution, fasting and prayer should be an appropriate involvement and response on the part of the Christian community.

Thus we may conclude that for people to fast when they are desperate for God to act is biblical. Fasting can bring a note of urgency to our prayers, though fasting does not always guarantee a favorable answer but "express[es] legitimate hope in the mercy of God."<sup>8</sup>

In effect, "Christian fasting, at its root, is the hunger of a homesickness for God. . . . [It] is not only the spontaneous effect of a superior satisfaction in God; it is also a chosen weapon against every force that would take that satisfaction away."<sup>9</sup> Those who combine prayer with fasting are showing God that they are earnest in their pleas. Thus, fasting exists as "an outward expression of the person's inner total commitment and reliance on God's preserving and rescuing power."<sup>10</sup>

## How long to fast

How long should we fast? The Bible presents many examples of fasting for 40 days (Moses in Exod. 34:28, Elijah in 1 Kings 19:8, and Jesus in Luke 4:2).

## How to prepare for fasting

Genuine, Spirit-filled fasting calls for intentional preparation. Such fasting calls for the following as a minimum:

- Examine your motives (Isa. 58:3–7).
- Surrender your life fully to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior (Rom. 12:1, 2).
- Ask God to reveal your sins to you (Ps. 19:12).
- Confess your sins (1 John 1:9).
- Seek forgiveness from those you have offended (Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3, 4).
- Make restitution as the Holy Spirit leads (Matt. 5:23–26).
- Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18).
- Consult with your physician before beginning a fast of any length.

## What to do while fasting

- Pray (Dan. 9:3; Acts 14:23).
- Meditate on the Word of God (Ps. 1:1, 2; Col. 3:16).
- Meditate on the attributes of God: love, grace, wisdom, compassion, sovereignty (Pss. 48:9, 10; 103:1–13).
- Expect God to bless you and reveal Himself to you (Heb. 11:6).
- Do not underestimate spiritual opposition (Gal. 5:16, 17).
- Refuse to yield to your worldly nature (Rom. 12:1, 2).
- Exhibit an attitude of joy (Zech. 8:19; Matt. 6:17, 18).

A normal Jewish fast would cover daylight hours.<sup>11</sup> The corporate fast in Judges 20:26 is an example of a fast that lasted until evening.

Esther proclaimed a full fast for three days (Esther 4:16). We are not told how long Daniel's fast was in Daniel 9:3, but we know of a three-week partial fast undertaken by him (Dan. 10:2, 3). The duration and extent of our fast will often be dictated by the reason for which we are fasting.<sup>12</sup> Some people may fast once annually, while others may opt for one day in a week.

## Revival and fasting

The first book of Samuel provides an example of fasting in order to bring about a revival among God's people. Israel knew that they were in need of a spiritual reconversion, and they turned to God with repentance and fasting. Mere words were not enough; they fasted to show their sincerity.<sup>13</sup> "When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, 'We have sinned against the LORD'" (1 Sam. 7:6).

Following such biblical examples, early Adventists fasted and prayed for revival. Speaking to a group of Adventists in Colorado, Ellen White made this powerful statement: " 'It is your privilege to receive more of the Spirit of God, as you engage in fasting and earnest prayer. You need to accept the promises and assurances of God and walk out on them in faith. You need to learn how to present the truths of the Word to those around you in all their binding force and in all their encouragement, that the unconverted may feel the influence of the Spirit of God upon heart and mind and character.'<sup>14</sup>

In a report to James White, Isaac Sanborn speaks of how fasting and prayer preceded a series of evangelistic meetings, resulting in the establishment of a new congregation: "For some time previous to my meetings here, the brethren observed every other Sabbath as a day of fasting and

prayer, for a revival of God's work in their own hearts, and for the conversion of their neighbors. Their prayers were most signally answered during our meetings. Six were baptized, and a church of twenty-two members was organized. Bro. Wm. H. Slown was ordained elder, under whose faithful watchcare we trust the Lord will build up and strengthen the little band. We had at the close of our meetings a great blessing in attending the ordinances. We also found that much prejudice had been removed from the minds of some, who we trust will soon find their place among the remnant."<sup>15</sup> For early Adventists, fasting brought about an increased sensitivity to God's leading and the desire to share God's love with sinners.

When I was pastoring a small church of about 40 members, I became intentional about prayer and fasting for our church to grow. My wife and I set aside every Monday for prayer and fasting, and I encouraged our members to join us as they could. With prayer, fasting, and active witnessing by both members and church leaders, leading to evangelistic outreach, the church membership grew from 40 to 500 in about eight years. Where there is prayer, active witnessing, and earnest fasting with a focus on church growth, the church will grow.

## Work up an appetite for God

Fasting is no occasion for self-pride—a characteristic of the Pharisees. Instead, true fasting in the biblical sense must lead to humility (Isa. 58:3) and a spiritual life marked with prayer and continual seeking of God's face. "Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that will never happen in any other way."<sup>16</sup> An increased awareness of the greatness of God and His love often accompanies the fasting experience. Worship is heightened, relationship with Christ becomes stronger, fellowship with one another becomes meaningful and

vital. As one author testifies, because of fasting and prayer, "the Word of God has become even more alive to me. My prayers are more meaningful and effective. Fasting has enabled me to experience an increased joy of the Lord and the power of His resurrection in a new way."<sup>17</sup> That is the reward of genuine fasting. 

- 1 Friedrich S. Rothenberg, "Fast," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1975), 612.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all Bible verses are from the New International Version.
- 3 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 235.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 280.
- 5 Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*, The Navigators Reference Library (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 197.
- 6 Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 42.
- 7 Jan Johnson, *Simplicity & Fasting*, Spiritual Disciplines Bible Studies (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 33.
- 8 John J. Collins, *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary series, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 21.
- 9 John Piper, *Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 17, 18.
- 10 Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, "Go Fast," *Adventist Review*, September 13, 2001. <http://archives.adventistreview.org/2001-1537/story3.html>.
- 11 Robert D. Linder, "Fast, Fasting," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 438.
- 12 An in-depth discussion on the various types of food-based fasts, how they affect the body, and how to end an extended fast can be found in Baab, *Fasting*, 90–101.
- 13 Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Quest for Renewal* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 59.
- 14 Ellen G. White quoted in W. C. White, "Mrs. White's Visit to Boulder, Colorado," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 13, 1910, 9.
- 15 James White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 10, 1866, 149.
- 16 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th ann. ed., (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 60.
- 17 Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, eds., *Fasting Can Change Your Life* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1998), 53, <http://pobmt.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Fasting%20Can%20Change%20Your%20Life%20-%20ETowns.pdf>.

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# Martina's choice—and the church that helped her make it

Watching three-year-old Marisa build the walls of her playhouse, you would not think her life was a miracle. Her black hair bounces lightly when she gathers another two or three large plastic blocks, and then she laughs as she puts the blocks in place. This is not the story of a child who survived a risky medical procedure but, rather, the story of a child who survived the process of her mother's choice. An immigrant working to support her family back home, Martina\* found herself unwed and with an unwanted pregnancy, as have so many young women of varied backgrounds.

And the story of three-year-old Marisa would have ended very differently were it not for a caring Christian church.

## The church

Located in an urban fringe neighborhood, the First Baptist Church of Orlando, Florida exists as a thriving megachurch with powerful Christ-centered preaching. But they do not just preach Jesus; they seek to live out His life. The many ways they serve include ministering to those with unplanned pregnancies. Although a difficult and controversial topic, this congregation chooses to listen to

women, provide Christian conversation in the process of their choice, and demonstrate Christ's love rather than dwelling on the controversy itself.

At this working church, volunteers serve the homeless, minister to the poor, help students in inner city schools, empower people by assisting them in obtaining government-issued IDs, help with Meals on Wheels, provide jail ministry, provide a counseling center, serve at the pregnancy center, or involve themselves in other local and international ministries.

## The pregnancy center

On the edge of the church campus sits an attractive, well-lit, modern, neatly landscaped office building—obviously a safe place. The roadside sign clearly announces two tenants: “Counseling Center” and “Pregnancy Center.” Both are identified as ministries of the Orlando First Baptist Church.

No question, First Baptist is a very conservative congregation with strong and clear convictions about abortion. Like so many churches, they promote a pro-life message. But they model their beliefs in a winsome and nonjudgmental way, one that saves lives.

When you enter the glass doors of the pregnancy center, a clean and well-furnished waiting area and two

receptionists welcome you. Behind those receptionists are four or five staff members busily preparing for the steady stream of clients. The artwork has been carefully chosen to celebrate life, relationships, and children. A rack of literature invites browsing; one booklet is titled *Healthy Pregnancy*, and other leaflets that further reveal the mission of the center include titles like *Ten Questions Expectant Mothers Ask About Adoption*, and *What's Best for Your Baby?* and information on House of Hope, community assistance programs, Sexual Assault Treatment Center, and Birthing Cottage of Winter Park.

People in the waiting area are mostly women. Some are far along in pregnancy, others not. Some appear nervous, others more at ease, especially those who came for a parenting class or to pick up baby supplies. Some arrive as a couple. Carmen, fluent in English and Spanish, serves as the director of the pregnancy center, surrounded by a staff of seven full-time salaried professionals, plus nearly 100 volunteers, mostly from the church. The volunteers affirm their commitment to life rather than to abortion, and they affirm their faith in Jesus. They are trained to work with clients in graceful, accepting, and nonjudgmental ways.

Carmen describes the mission of the center with these words: “To bring people to relationship with Jesus Christ.” The center remains owned, operated, and funded by the church. Carmen states that in 2014 they handled nearly 11,000 client visits, with about 8,500 of those being return visits for follow-up. The large volume of client visits is due to those who access the personal counseling, birth classes, and parenting classes and who obtain baby supplies once a week or more for years. They give free pregnancy tests, along with sonograms to determine the child’s approximate month in gestation. People hear about the center through public service announcements, service organizations, the county health department, and word of mouth. The center intentionally nurtures its relationship with the county health department and is well respected for the quality of counseling and service the organization provides. Clients may

be linked with adoption agencies that hold to high values and provide a high quality of service.

At the same time—and this is so important—if expectant mothers, after counseling, insist on abortion, the center endeavors to guide them to medical facilities that will provide further consultation and care in a responsible way. Counseling them in ways that represent the love and grace of Jesus, the staff hopes to help mothers make a choice for life. Most clients do, and the center provides three years of ongoing counseling and services to support the mothers who decide to give birth and raise their babies. They provide support and counseling, as well, for those who do not choose life.

### Martina’s choice

Martina, like many others, felt a great deal of shame about her pregnancy. She feared that her mother, a devout Catholic, would be extremely

upset. When she suspected that she was pregnant, she called the county health department, hoping to get services from a physician. Desperate, she was considering abortion as her primary option. The health department will not provide services without a woman first proving her pregnancy, and for that she was guided to the pregnancy center.

When Martina arrived at the center, she asked whether the testing was actually free and was told it was but that the testing would cost up to an hour and a half of her time. That time is the only thing she was asked to give. An initial intake counselor asked a few questions, nothing too personal. Martina was pleased that the conversation was brief and felt respected. In a few minutes, she was led to a private room and began talking with a professional counselor who is committed to Jesus and to helping women in Martina’s position. Martina mentioned her interest in abortion, and the counselor assured her



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they would provide support to help her get through the decision process.

But first, the pregnancy test. At the center, when a woman tests positive, she is also given a sonogram. That helps the counselors communicate intelligently with those expectant mothers considering abortion. Martina was pregnant, and she had delayed coming to the center for some time; thus, the sonogram test, which Martina welcomed, helped her realize just how much development had taken place.

made the decision for life. Today she is so glad that she did, for she is a proud mother who loves her child, celebrates a newfound relationship with Christ, and is raising little Marisa in the church.

### The ministry

Women served by the pregnancy center can select from three options: motherhood, adoption, or abortion. The center exerts every effort to ensure abortion does not happen. As might be expected, many who enter their

love, not shame. The center will provide, with reluctance, a referral to a medical facility if a woman persists in that decision, holding on to hope they may still choose life. They prefer in such cases to know the women will be safe. The center considers it a loss and grieves over those who cling to that choice.

But the center most dramatically helps women who choose to continue to be mothers. They provide a myriad of services, leading the mother to a joyful parenting experience, one finding

*Counseling them in ways that represent the love and grace of Jesus, the staff hopes to help mothers make a choice for life.*

Some women come determined to abort, and no amount of counseling and prayer will reverse their position. Martina was not one of those, and she was moved when she understood how much happens early in the gestation of an unborn child.

Though feeling shame, she was now unsure what to do. The assurance of the support of the center, administered in the counseling provided that first day, gave her pause. She did not ask for a referral to a physician as she had thought she would; instead, she made a second appointment to meet with the counselor again.

This was not an easy decision. In the first few weeks after the initial visit, she wavered, seriously considering the abortion option. But she always found support from her counselor.

In short, Marisa exists because of the ministry of the pregnancy center. Or more accurately, because Christians love like Jesus loved. Apart from that support, Martina is unlikely to have

doors are fearful, resentful, and full of shame. Before the center administers pregnancy testing, they provide a counseling session to every client, ask about their spiritual life, and pray with them. When the results are communicated, they again pray with them. If the woman is pregnant, they pray God's blessing on the pregnancy. If a woman persists in interest in abortion, she is counseled regarding the current development of the child and regarding the physical, emotional, and spiritual implications of abortion. One of the staff members shares her work with women who are post-abortion and gives them her book, *Journey of Healing: Finding Healing and Hope After Abortion*, asking them to carefully reconsider before proceeding.

The center does not treat women who have aborted as outcasts. Many of their clients are women who are struggling emotionally and spiritually after abortion and become involved in recovery groups. They treat them with

fulfillment in connection with Christ. The mother receives free baby supplies for three years. She also receives counseling before and after birth, and for three years following, if she would like. They have birthing classes, monitoring of proper physician care, and parenting classes. The center organizes Bible classes and relational counseling, and encourages church attendance. All free.

Choices to abort, offer for adoption, or relate as a natural mother are not limited to women of any class or background. However, women who are disadvantaged by poverty are more vulnerable when processing such decisions. Their unborn children are at greater risk. Apart from a ministry such as offered by the pregnancy center, women in poverty generally cannot access the best counseling, support, or medical assistance.

### Three considerations

Martina and Marisa are joyful servants of Christ today, as are hundreds

of others, because of this ministry. Why is the center so powerful in discipling people for Christ? They serve people with a primary purpose to minister, not to evangelize. The staff and volunteers recognize the realities of culture, respond with respect rather than disdain, and consistently live in a countercultural way. They engage the culture with reason and inspire with the love of Christ. They sacrifice in remarkable ways.

Their work is not marked by words of disapproval or political posturing. Their service is incarnational and missional love demonstrated in caring relationships. They do offer Bible study groups. They do invite clients to church. But the testimony of those blessed by the ministry of the center is that they were drawn to Christ by the compassion they experienced before they became interested in biblical teaching.

Readers may wonder how their local congregation can succeed in such a large-scale mission. When considering what might seem too big a challenge, there are three areas for reflection. The first suggests vision. Nothing great in the service of Christ happens without someone first grasping a vision. The second—the power of God. He is able to do great things when we claim His power, moving forward with prayerfully formed judgment one step at a time. The pregnancy center began to serve in a more limited way and experienced blessing as they moved forward. The third reflection would be to consider the many Christians who will sacrifice both financially and in service in unusual ways for such a ministry.

Our faith in the abundant blessing of God is often too small. People and corporations can respond generously when vision and action are present.

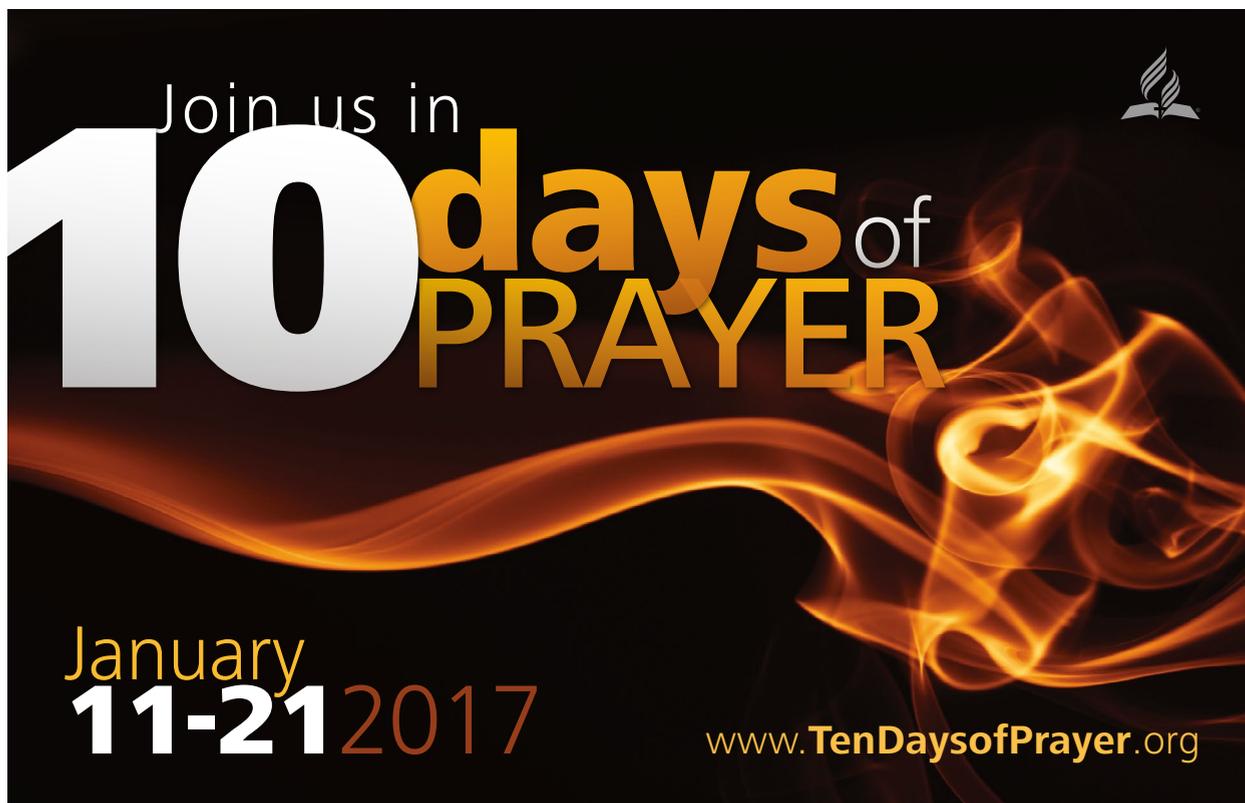
This may mean a nonprofit organization formed to receive contributions and will mean giving people the opportunity to support. People respond generously to big ideas.

Such ministries may be directly fostered by a church, or by an association of churches, or even by the initiative of one person or a small group in an area church.

Serving Jesus offers unexpected opportunities, perhaps like the unexpected pregnancies women like Martina experience. But in every such circumstance God may transform people and usher them into new life—both spiritually, as with Martina, and literally, as with little Marisa. 

\* The story of Martina and Marisa is based on an actual client's experience, but details have been altered to protect their identity. While their identity has been guarded, the events and facts are very much within the scope of the experience of hundreds served every year by the pregnancy center.

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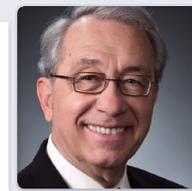
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**James J. Londis, PhD**, retired pastor and professor, resides in Ooltewah, Tennessee, United States.



# The seeking God

God has promised, “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord” (Jer. 29:13, 14).<sup>1</sup> Contrast this promise to what happened in Eden. “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen. 3:8, 9). The Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve suggests that when guilty and fearful, we hide from God. But the good news is that He commits to helping us come out of our hiding place. God knows where we are in the garden but *does not let us know He has found us until we are ready to be found.*

Look at the story of the prodigal son. Abusing his father by demanding his inheritance too early, he ends up penniless, forced to care for pigs in a “far country.” Unable to physically hear his father’s voice calling to him, his memory sparks a longing that forces him to journey back home anyway. Embraced and restored by his father to *full sonship*, he realizes that even though he lost his father; the father never lost him.

Or consider the experience of Saul of Tarsus. Looking for God within a Judaism that encouraged him to treat Jewish believers in Jesus as enemies, Saul encounters Jesus Christ, who finds him on his way to Damascus and turns his life in an entirely new direction.

Finally, think of Job, a faithful believer in deep distress over undeserved suffering. He screams: “Why is this happening to me at the hands of a just God? Come out and face me!” (Job 24:1–7). He feels that God is hiding during his anguish.

Many, too, in the modern world feel that God is hiding from them. Look at some of the recent book titles: *Finding Our Father, Is God Real? Rumors of Angels, The Hidden God, The Death of God, Where Was God in the Holocaust? The God Who Is Absent, The Elusive Presence*. If believers want to help their neighbors experience God—the only route to a lasting faith—we must understand how we hide from God, how God tries to “find” us, and where the seemingly “hidden” God can be found.

## Being found by God

God often finds us in the suffering and disruptions that both seize us and obscure Him. I once facilitated a medical ethics discussion group of first-year medical students at a state university, during which we watched a video depicting how six specialists faced their life-threatening situations. Three of them recovered while the remainder knew that recovery was medically impossible. Lying in bed because he was chronically tired from the ravages of his disease, one of the latter three specialists observed in a quiet, authentic way that this experience had changed him in surprising ways.

First, he now understood what people meant when they spoke about caring for the whole person and not

just for the diseased body. He saw clearly that the personal relationships between caregivers and patients are critical to proper care, especially for the dying.

Second, this specialist was surprised that his disease made him more receptive to the spiritual dimension. “I am not a religious person. That is why this experience comes as a surprise to me.” While tentative and careful in his choice of language, he said: “I really believe I have had an experience with God.” Sitting in the front row, I turned around to observe student reactions to this testimony. They were listening intently to this older man, who might have been one of their mentors.

According to Lewis Wilkins, people who experience God unexpectedly or who sense themselves growing in spiritual ways “talk about [events like] . . . moving from being single to being married—or being married to being single. They talk about what happened to them in moving from being children to being parents, after the birth of their first child. They talk about transitions brought about by the death of a parent or spouse. They talk about what happened to them between pulling up roots in one place and putting down roots in a new place far away. . . . They describe what happened between getting fired from one job and getting hired in another one.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, disruptive events—even those we know are coming—may afford an experience of being found by God. Even if we are not looking for a spiritual encounter, it can happen

anyway. In that sense, we feel “found.” It is no accident that people in prison, people on the battlefield, people in personal and family crises, often feel God touching them when they least expect it.

God may also find us in moments when our *yearnings and longings* seem more than we can bear. While eating together in their local restaurant, Kramer, the zany neighbor on the television show *Seinfeld*, once told George Costanza, his insecure, self-doubting friend, that he had a “yearning” for something.

“Do you ever yearn?” he asked George, who, nonplused by the question, stammers, “Well, I have a craving, but I don’t know if I have a yearning.” We all have deep yearnings. One of them seized the prodigal son: a yearning for home.

Years ago, I attended a family wedding. For the first time in more than a decade, my Greek aunts, uncles, and cousins were going to get a good look at my adult children as well as my daughter-in-law. After the wedding, on our way to the reception, I took our two-car caravan through my old neighborhoods, stopping first at the apartment of my Greek grandparents, where I shared many joyous hours eating Greek food. Next, we slowly drove by my maternal grandmother’s basement apartment, a place that served as a refuge from some difficult childhood challenges. Inexplicably, sadness tightened its grip on me. Lightheaded, I took a deep breath and told my family that this return was more unsettling for me than I had anticipated. My grandparents and my mother were gone. My happiest moments as a child—and some of my most painful—were in these places. It occurred to me that I intentionally left this childhood home when I was 14 years old because I had found in the church the home of my longings. As Walter Brueggemann noted: “The sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in our contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit.”<sup>3</sup>

We long for the familiar and reliable, for a place where we know who we are and where we belong, a place where we are recognized, affirmed, and energized by a depth of meaning. Like Gandhi’s yearning for the Indian village or President Obama’s longing for his father’s home, we want a place where we feel “familiar.”

Elie Wiesel stated, “The Bible begins with the letter bet. It begins with bet, not an aleph, because we are meant to discover that the beginning belongs to God, not to us. But—why a bet, not a gimel or a yod? Bet is a house. Thus we are told that the Book of Books is a shelter, a dwelling place. A place in which men and women laugh and weep, read and write, work and sleep. A place in which people love one another before they start quarreling—or the other way around. In other words, it is a home. In the Bible, as in life, the home precedes everything else. It precedes even life itself. First God created the world. Adam and Eve came later.”<sup>4</sup>

While working at the Kettering Medical Center, I got close to a physician raised in a military family. His medical training, paid by the Air Force, was amortized in his postgraduate service. After completing his service, he joined our staff. When I asked him where “home” was, he could not identify it. “We moved too often to be identified with one place. The military is my home.” That comment stunned me. Yet, I thought to myself, many pastoral and missionary families who move frequently might say the same thing: “The church is my home.” As Robert Frost observed: “Home is the place that when you go there, they have to take you in.”<sup>5</sup> For believers, it is the fellowship of the church.

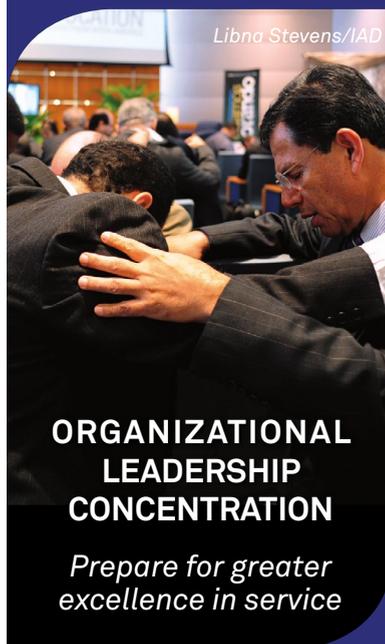
### Finding a home with God

So in certain situations, God does find us. But how do we find God? To begin with, we find God in preaching and human manifestations of divine love. In Romans 10:20, Paul argues that the rejection of Yahweh led to the creation of the Christian community.

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He quotes Isaiah 65:1: “ ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.’ ”

Paul attaches the power of preaching to the power of the good news of Jesus’ life, crucifixion, and resurrection. Beyond preaching, however, when the gospel manifests its power in the new lives of those baptized into Christ’s fellowship, believers are further persuaded that they are home. The message and experience *together* are the “power of God” unto salvation.

New Testament scholars agree that seeing the faith-experience of fellow believers becomes critical to our own. “According to Paul, the *center* of our experience is *in other people*.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, “it is only through other people that we can be in relationship with God, and then . . . [recognize] manifestations of God in our experience.”<sup>7</sup>

God speaks to us and finds us in loving and being loved by each other. When Paul urges us to “consider others better than ourselves” in Philippians

2:3, he does not urge upon us a false humility as much as a *focus*: If we are looking for God’s reality in others rather than in ourselves, we are more certain to find it. Faithful witnesses to God’s faithfulness in sending Christ as our Redeemer, they are the “living sacrifices” mentioned in Romans 12:1, 2, whose lives reveal the God of Jesus Christ.

A danger always exists, however. “Once again, the church is a precious gift from God, but we are easily so devoted to the work of the church, to the activities of the church, that we are not free to recognize God’s activity beyond the church. Indeed, the church . . . is a precious gift from God, yet it should not be viewed as an absolute that we should serve, but rather as a means to help us serve God in the world where God is also at work.”<sup>8</sup> If God is at work in the world, not just in the church, we must acknowledge that the world can bear witness to God’s will for us, as it did in the Civil Rights movement.

We find God in the “other” and in the “fellowship.” We find God where sinners are being converted from death to life, where fellow believers are faithful in the midst of their suffering for the gospel, and where God manifests his power in the world through people and movements devoted to reconciliation and peacemaking.

We seek for God; God seeks for us. Truly, we should be found of each other. 

- 1 All Scripture quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version.
- 2 Lewis Wilkins, unpublished paper, “Eucharist and Growth: Theological Strategies for Nurture,” in Daniel Patte, *Preaching Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 18.
- 3 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place As Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 1.
- 4 Elie Wiesel, *The Longing for Home*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1996), 17.
- 5 Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man” in *North of Boston* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915), lines 122, 123.
- 6 Patte, *Preaching Paul*, 37.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, 77.

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## Every member a minister, totally

My son was sitting next to me in church when the nominating committee report was being distributed. As he looked at the report with the various ministries and names on it, he turned to me and asked, “So what’s *my* job?”

He had just been baptized a few weeks earlier. As a newly baptized member of the church, he wanted—expected—to be part of the workings of the church. Quickly, God impressed me, and I reminded him of a job that he has been doing for the past three to four years. This cannot be called a glamorous job, but it is an important

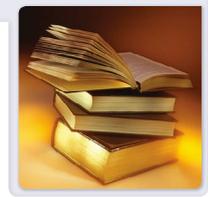
one. He changes the sermon title on the sign in front of the church each week. If he did not do it, people would notice. He is involved, and our church is better for it.

Once a member becomes baptized, he or she should be affirmed as a participating member in the body of Christ and given a responsibility in the church. Every member, young or old, is a minister, and every member can do something to contribute to the mission of their church, whether the job includes changing lightbulbs, changing the sheets in the mother’s room (my first job), or changing the church

sign. Total Member Involvement is an initiative focused on empowering each church member to unite our gifts and ministries to share God’s last-day message of hope with the world. For more ways you and others can be involved, go to [TMI.Adventist.org](http://TMI.Adventist.org).

—Jackie Ordelheide Smith serves as an assistant director in the Sabbath School Personal Ministries Department, General Conference, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.

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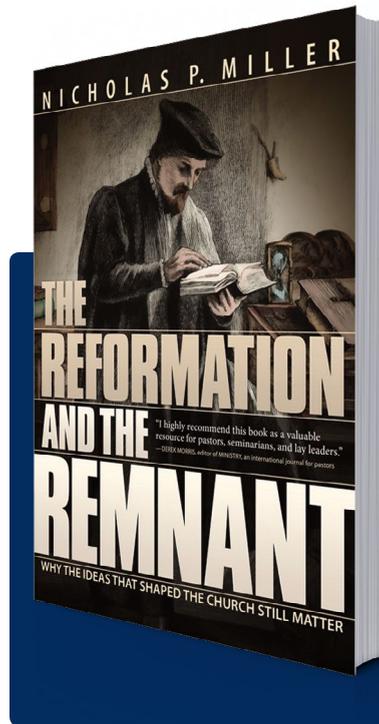
## The Reformation and the Remnant

by Nicholas P. Miller, Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2016.

Nicholas Miller's *The Reformation and the Remnant* addresses popular controversies in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, following works like Martin Weber's *Adventist Hot Potatoes* and George Knight's *If I Were the Devil*. While Knight's work was generally scholarly with a bit of passion and anguish, Miller's cooler style emphasizes his legal training. As the latest book to address "hot potatoes," this book seems to be, thus, the most relevant. Concerns over jewelry and the nature of Christ have given way to gay marriage, women's ordination, and conspiracy mongering. Miller tackles these issues through principles gleaned from the Protestant Reformation.

Miller handles each topic carefully, though not exhaustively. On women's ordination, the author essentially popularizes and updates the position that he championed as a member of the church's Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Rather than assail entrenched positions, he argues that women's ordination is a not a salvation issue and should be seen as an area of "Christian liberty"; that is, something we must tolerate.

Nicholas Miller's most significant contributions are not his updated stances on the current popular controversies but the principles he uses to arrive at those stances. *The Reformation and the Remnant* is a demonstration of moderate Adventism, which seeks to avoid the ditches of liberalism and conservatism. Knight, in his introduction, proclaims that Miller continues his (Knight's) own tone of "broad-based openness that seeks the middle ground between extremes" (11). Miller sees the "primary ideological struggle" in American Adventism as "between fundamentalism and modernism," which has breached the Adventist psyche,



he argues that children are most successful when raised by their biological parents. But this attack hits traditional adoptive families and step-families just as squarely as same-sex ones. Besides, one might argue, would not children

*Miller handles each topic carefully, though not exhaustively.*

causing a crisis of identity. This can be resolved, Miller argues, but recognizing that the Adventist church was originally evangelical and emphasized justification by faith, Miller declares that "only a rediscovery of our holiness heritage will enable us to resolve the identity crisis" (138) of the church. This rediscovery happens not just by examining the views of the Adventist pioneers but from examining the spiritual heritage of the Protestant Reformers.

Nevertheless, there are a few weaknesses. The reading level required for the book can be assessed as tuned for those with some higher education. Words like *propositionalist* and *prima traditionis*, though helpfully defined, may stand as an obstacle to easy reading. Second, Miller's argument against same-sex marriage could be stronger. Using "moral reasoning,"

in a same-sex home be better off than in an orphanage? Miller's overall argument represents a more satisfying way of approaching this explosive topic, called "moral reasoning," a method of moral persuasion based on the common good. The application of this method might be flawed in this case, but the principle becomes a creative way to avoid stale dialog over issues of public morality.

Thinking Adventists need to pick up *The Reformation and the Remnant* because Nicholas Miller tackles navigating ever-changing social waters. It just so happens that understanding the Reformational context of the Adventist pioneers yields timeless principles.

—Matthew J. Lucio, MDiv, pastors in the Iowa-Missouri Conference and resides in Mason City, Iowa, United States. 

## ► Baptisms Reach 100,000 in Rwanda

**Gisenyi, Rwanda**—A total of 100,135 people have joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a result of the May 13–28, 2016, evangelistic meetings at 2,227 sites across Rwanda.

**Duane McKey**, a key coordinator of the event, who oversees the Adventist Church's Total Member Involvement initiative, said, "The Rwanda experience is nothing short of a wonderful miracle." Rwandan church leaders have credited Total Member Involvement, along with much prayer, for the record number of baptisms. Members and newly baptized members alike were asked to bring at least one person to Christ, and many reached out to their communities with Bible studies and donations of new homes, livestock, medicine, and health insurance.

The Adventist Church is working with Adventist-laymen's Services & Industries, a church-supporting ministry, to build 1,000 One-Day Churches for the new members.

**Ted N. C. Wilson**, president of the Adventist world church, said the

"unbelievable achievement" in Rwanda "is nothing less than the power of the Holy Spirit in helping us see that the latter rain falls soon. The key was to have a joyful and combined effort between pastors and lay members under the Holy Spirit's guidance." Wilson, who led a series of meetings in Gisenyi, Rwanda, during the campaign, went on to say, "Let everyone, everywhere, humbly participate through God's power in

Total Member Involvement. World events on a daily basis tell us that Jesus is coming soon. Let's fully commit ourselves to the Lord, the proclamation of the three angels' messages, and His soon return."

The next major evangelistic campaign, scheduled to be held in early 2017, will be held across Romania and much of the former Soviet Union. [Andrew McChesney/*Adventist Review*]



Photo credit: East-Central Africa Division

## ► 1,000 Adventists March Against Violence in Washington

**Washington, DC**—More than 1,000 Seventh-day Adventists gathered in Washington, DC, to pray, mourn, and acknowledge the killings of two black American men and five Dallas police officers. The march came after a series of deaths made international headlines over the course of three days.

Church members marched from the Lincoln Memorial to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial on the evening of July 9, 2016, in what **Debra Anderson**, one of the event organizers, called an effort to combat the silence, confusion, and lack of empathy that many felt following the deaths. "This is not a protest. This is a coming together of

people of like minds to join hands in like faith and like purpose to pray for our nation," Anderson told the crowd of church members. "We are in perilous times. . . . We are going to pray today more than anything else. This is about human dignity, human life."

Several Adventist Church leaders, including **G. Alexander Bryant**, executive secretary of the North American Division, denounced the killings during the Washington gathering. "Many are now asking the question, what should we do? What should the church do? What would Jesus do?" he said. "Jesus . . . left us a formula, and the formula is love your enemies, bless

them that curse you, do good to them who spitefully use you."

Division president **Daniel R. Jackson** stated, "The church cannot afford to stay behind its walls of comfort. We must reach out to our world. We must be the agents of hope, and compassion, and healing in a fractured world."

**David Franklin**, pastor of a Baltimore church, said, "You cannot afford to wait for the organizers of this march to pull together events and activities for you to participate in so you can resolve the issues in your community. The key to solving our issues is everybody realizing the power that you



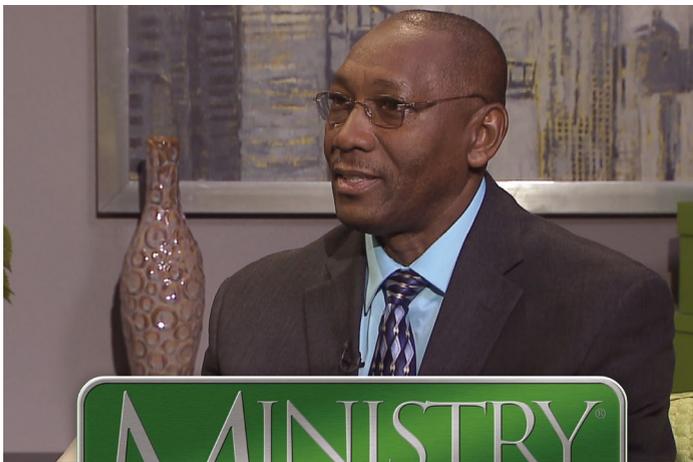
Photo credit: David F. Turner

communities to enhance the quality of life for our neighbors, attend workshops by local law enforcement agencies on executing the proper response when stopped by law enforcement, and address the issue of voter apathy with voter education forums and voter registration.

“We will not find political solutions to these problems. Jesus says, ‘My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid,’” Jackson said, citing John 14:27. “We must make personal determinations—we personally will commit to the ideals that Jesus taught. The effect of Christians must be felt.” [V. Michelle Bernard with North American Division staff/*Columbia Union Visitor*] [V](#)

have in your own hand. You need to go home, get in your prayer closet, figure out what you can do, and then move out and make a difference.”

Looking ahead, event organizers devised a three-point plan that they are encouraging churches in the area to take: engage in a day of service in local



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Mervyn G. Hardinge, MD, DrPH, PhD, was director of the General Conference Health Ministries Department prior to retirement. This is a posthumous column.

# Man—God’s masterpiece of creation

“You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb.

Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!

Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.

You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.

You saw me before I was born.

Every day of my life was recorded in your book.

Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed”

(Ps. 139:13–16).<sup>1</sup>

When God created each of us in His own image, He lifted us above all other animal creation. When the early astronomers were attempting to count the sparkling stars, they were forced to change their estimates by ever-increasing scales. This has been a similar experience for the “microastronomers” of the human body. Every part they have examined has revealed more and more complexity and detail! Even the most complex circuitry designed by large teams of humans today is rather simple compared to the marvelous systems of our bodies.

We all should heed the words of God to Job: “Pay attention to this, Job. Stop and consider the wonderful miracles of God!” (Job 37:14).

When we purchase an automobile, computer, television—or even a new pet, we take great care to get the manufacturer’s instructions on its care and upkeep. Amazingly, we pay careful

attention to the care and upkeep of these purchases. Yet, how careless we often are with the bodies and minds God has given us. If it were not for the tremendous adaptability of our bodies, many who are alive today, enjoying varying degrees of health and strength, would long since have been buried beneath the sod.

Beginning in Genesis and continuing throughout Scripture are revealed detailed instructions on the care and maintenance of God’s gift to us—our bodies and minds. Each aspect of the care and maintenance of ourselves is included. These are summarized in the words of Paul: “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Pastors have a special responsibility to be knowledgeable about the laws of health. “The ministers in our land need to become acquainted with the science of physiology. Then they will be intelligent in regard to the laws that govern physical life, and their bearings upon the health of mind and soul. Then they will be able to speak correctly upon this subject. In their obedience to physical laws, they are to hold forth the word of life to the people, and lead up higher and still higher in the work of reform.”<sup>2</sup>

Too often we take our health for granted. We may pray earnestly to be protected from sickness. “God will not work a miracle to keep those from sickness who have no care for themselves, but are continually violating the laws of health, and make no effort to prevent disease. When we do all we can on our part to have health, then we may expect that the blessed results will follow, and we can ask God in faith to bless our efforts for the preservation of health. He

*God longs for each of us to experience excellent physical health.*

will then answer our prayer, if His name can be glorified thereby.”<sup>3</sup>

God longs for each of us to experience excellent physical health. “Dear friend, I hope all is well with you and that you are as healthy in body as you are strong in spirit” (3 John 2).

Today, our world is filled with so many false suggestions as to how we can transgress the basic laws of health and still have a perfectly operating body! Yet we, who are entrusted with the greatest message for this time, should keep our bodies blameless and in perfect health, that we can carry forward the message of salvation in a soon coming Savior to the best of our abilities.

We each must ask God for strength to demonstrate our faith by our actions in heeding the “still small voice” that always speaks to us in clear and certain terms, “This is the way, walk ye in it” (Isa. 30:21, KJV). May we each offer our bodies and minds to God as “a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable” (Rom. 12:1). 

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is quoted from the New Living Translation.

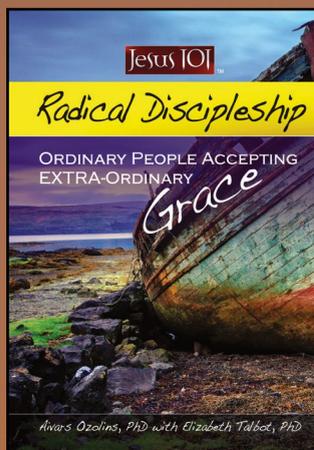
<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Healthful Living* (Battle Creek, MI: Medical Missionary Board, 1898), 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

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