ASRS

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PAPERS

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Introduction

The membership of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies includes religion teachers, pastors, church administrators, students and others. The common link between them is their quest for religious understanding and how the theological issues which concern them affect and are affected by the beliefs, practices and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This collection of papers contains the presentations made at the 2004 annual meeting of the society that took place in San Antonio, Texas, November 18-20, 2004. The sessions began on Thursday night and concluded with worship just before Sabbath noon. The conference theme was "The Mighty Acts of God in the World." Papers from biblical, theological, historical and contemporary perspectives sought to understand the ways of God in the world and how the hand of God in the world can be seen. Discussion time of ten to fifteen minutes was provided after most of the papers. The weekend included a video interview with Jan Paulsen, world president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. That video was shown during a joint meeting with the Adventist Theological Society.

Jean Sheldon, the President-Elect last year, planned the program and the society is grateful for two receptions sponsored by the Andrews University Seminary and Ed Zinke (in co-operation with the Biblical Research Institute).

We also appreciate the perennial efforts of three individuals who deserve notice here. Ernie Furness, the society's Secretary/Treasurer, manages our relationship with AAR/SBL and, therefore, arranged the physical site of the meetings. Gerald Wheeler has been tireless in providing newsletters twice a year. And Leona Running, Emerita Professor at the Seminary, once again cast her eagle editorial eye through another year's manuscripts.

I hope this compilation of papers will be useful to you as you contemplate what God is doing in the world. I hope you will renew your membership in ASRS for the upcoming year and join us at our annual meeting in Philadelphia, November 17-19, 2005. I wish you God's blessings until then.

Jon Paulien
ASRS President, 2004
THE POST-MODERN ACTS OF GOD

Presidential Address — Adventist Society for Religious Study — November 18, 2004

Jon Paulien
Andrews University

In the Fall of 2002 I was picked up at Heathrow Airport by an officer of the British Union. I had come to Britain to contribute to discussions of how the Adventist Church could be more effective in engaging the majority culture with the Adventist message. I asked my driver to describe the situation in the British Union. He told me that while Great Britain had experienced massive immigration over the last twenty years, 95% of the population was still English-speaking whites. But only about 2000 of the 20,000 Adventists in the country represented the majority culture. On the other hand, 2% of the country was of West Indian origin, but 85% of the Adventist Church was from the West Indies. Only 100 of the 8000 members in London belonged to the majority culture.

My first reaction to this news was, “Thank God for the West Indians or there wouldn’t be an Adventist Church in Great Britain.” But it soon became clear that most Adventist Brits felt that the statistics indicated a racial problem. Blacks were naturally open to the gospel and whites in Britain were naturally closed. And that was all there was to say about it.

Based on my experience in New York City and extensive research on Western Christianity I suggested a different explanation. In North America the divide of spiritual interest is not between white and black, but between indigenous and immigrant. Recent immigrants from Eastern Europe have been wide open to the Adventist message, as my German forebears had once been. But second and third generation German-Americans are not being reached. Large numbers of blacks from places like Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad are baptized every year in New York City, yet the leadership of the Northeastern Conference is not aware of a single church that is successfully reaching African-Americans (indigenous blacks). The famed Ephesus Church in Harlem is 95% immigrants and 80% commuters, indicating that, in spite of all the churches, the neighborhood of Harlem itself may increasingly house an unreached people group.

Church growth among immigrant Hispanics remains massive, yet we rarely baptize a third or fourth generation Hispanic. Among Hispanics we are reaching immigrants and their children only. And finally, in the Asian community, there are massive defections among second and third generation Korean-Americans. This leads me to the conclusion that the real evangelistic challenge faced by the Adventist Church in the Western world is not how to reach whites, but how to reach the mainstream cultures of North America, Europe, Australia and other developed countries (recent research in Singapore produces similar results even though whites make up less than 1% of the population). When it comes to evangelism, we are not facing a racial problem, but an indigenous problem.

(Let me be clear about one thing before I go on. I am not in any way shape or form suggesting that there are no issues of race in the Adventist Church. Racism remains among us in overt as well as covert forms. What I am protesting here, if anything, is the systematic neglect of the African-American and Chicano communities in Adventist evangelism. Leadership seems to think that if large numbers of dark and Spanish-speaking people are joining the church, we are doing fine in those areas. But reality points to unreached people groups disguised among us. It is easy to “cream off” the hot interests, totally unaware that large segments of the audience aren’t even listening.)

When it comes to evangelism, we are not facing a racial problem, but an indigenous problem. We are not reaching the mainstream culture anywhere in the developed world and certainly not in the Islamic world either.

When I shared these thoughts with the largely West Indian audience of Adventist pastors in South England one pastor raised his hand. “Why are we wasting time talking about hard to reach people? We don’t have time for this. Let’s invest our time and money on people groups that are open. If the majority culture isn’t open to the gospel, it’s not our problem.”

I responded, “Do you care if your children and grandchildren are in the church? My experience as a second-generation German-American tells me that your children and grandchildren will be indigenous Brits, they won’t be West Indians anymore. If the church doesn’t learn how to reach indigenous Brits, it won’t interest your children and grandchildren either.”

My audience was ready for battle now. A white pastor raised his hand. “There’s something here I don’t understand. When the Adventist Church first came to Great Britain (toward the end of the 19th Century) we reached the British mainstream. If that wasn’t so we wouldn’t have any Anglos in the church at all right now. What has changed between
then and now?"

This discussion was one of those magical moments for me. Suddenly a whole lot of things came into perspective that I had never connected before. The opacity of social change and world events vanished for just a moment and I caught a glimpse of the mighty hand of God in the last place I would have looked. While my experience in Great Britain was the key to my new perspective, I believe what I am about to share is even more relevant to the situation in North America. Let me briefly describe how I think God brought us from there to here.

A Short History of Religious Thought

At the risk of superficiality let me begin with a short history of religious thought. The question that will guide that history is, "How do people determine truth? How do they decide what is true and what is not?"

The Pre-Modern Period

In the Middle Ages (the pre-Modern period) truth was thought to reside in privileged groups. The average person on the street didn't think he or she had a clue. Truth could only be found in the clergy or the Church. If you wanted to know the truth, you needed to talk to a priest. Whenever the priests would disagree, truth would be decided by the Pope or an action of one of the Great Councils. Truth was an idea reserved for those who were "in the know."

Christian Modernism

With the Reformation, people's confidence in privileged people and groups began to break down. Truth was no longer seen to reside in the Church or the state, but in logical statements based on careful biblical research. Priests, popes and nobles had no greater access to truth than anyone else. The Bible was seen as the ultimate source and safeguard for truth, not churches or bishops. The search for truth was an act of reason and logic, anyone with diligence and talent could understand the truth for herself through careful study of the Scriptures.

The world view of Christian modernism dominated 19th Century America. It was the milieu in which Adventism got its start and found its logical appeal to the American mainstream. Anywhere in the world that Christian modernism dominates is a place where Adventism still reaches the mainstream with power. But those areas are shrinking rapidly. The spearhead of philosophical change has already moved two generations past 19th Century America. In fact, I suspect that more water has gone over the philosophical dam in the last hundred years than in the previous 2000 combined.

Secular Modernism

With the Enlightenment the world experienced a shift from Christian modernism to secular modernism. While intellectual circles were already making this move in the 18th Century, secular modernism became the dominant world view in North America sometime in the early decades of the 20th Century. The Fundamentalist-Liberal controversy of the 1920s could be seen as a rite of passage, in which conservative Christianity lost touch with the mainstream.

For Descartes and others, the key to truth was methodological doubt. Secular modernists believe that truth is found by applying careful, scientific method to all questions, including religious questions. Truth is not found in the church or the Bible, it is found in a scientific process of careful observation and experimentation. In a sense, secular modernism eliminated faith by default.

The goal of secular modernism was to eliminate superstition by exposing the flaws in all previous thinking. The end result would be a "bomb-proof" minimum of truth in which one could have absolute confidence. With continued application of scientific method these "assured results" could be gradually increased until life could be lived with a fair amount of confidence that we knew what was going on. Humanity could not trust the church or the Bible, it needed to trust in the five senses and the application of human reason. Science would provide the "truth" and technology would provide the power to change the world. Education would spread this new "gospel" and the result would eventually be a paradise of affluence and security.

But reality got in the way of this dream. A hundred years ago relativity and the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics began to paint a very different picture of the universe than the Newtonian foundation upon which scientific modernism had been based. The twentieth century also shattered the dream of a technological paradise. Scientific progress seemed to go hand in hand with an increase in pollution and crime. While the Internet is one of the greatest advances in the history of the world, it is also the basis for a large increase in work-related stress and new forms of addiction. World War I, World War II, the Holocaust and other genocides, weapons of mass destruction and terrorism combined to wring the confidence out of scientific modernists. A new generation proclaims the god of secular modernism to be a false god. Humanity is turning away from the truth of science to look for truth in other directions.
Secular Post-Modernism

Beginning with “Generation X” (born 1964-1980 in the USA) an increasingly pervasive world view distrusts the scientific approach to truth. In post-modernism, truth is not primary found in science, the Bible or the church. It is found in relationships and the telling of stories. Building community becomes more important than the ideas that once held communities together. It becomes possible to conceive of a Super Bowl party as an evangelistic strategy.

For post-modernisms truth has become elusive. Rather than Truth (with a capital “T”) the post-modernism prefers to think of “many truths,” a “variety of truths,” or “truth for me.” It is felt that no one, whether scientist or theologian, has a clear grasp on truth. Everyone has a part of the picture, but it is small bits of expertise in a vast array of ignorance. The building of community, therefore, is a key component of the search for truth. As we each share that part of truth that we are “expert” on everyone benefits.

At first blush the “truth” of post-modernism seems a self-evident truth. Only an egoist would claim to have a handle on all truth. Human beings have long recognized that “in a multitude of counselors there is safety,” and that we all have a lot to learn. But there is something more than this going on here.

While post-modernism is generally accepting and inclusive, it is quite exclusive in three areas. 1) It rejects meta-narrative, big stories that try to explain everything, like the Great Controversy. It is felt that meta-narratives try to explain too much and therefore promote an exclusivism that leads to violence. It is, after all, faith in a meta-narrative that fuels the terrifying actions of an al Qaeda or the medieval papacy. 2) Post-modernism rejects truth as an institution (church), particularly when that institution thinks of itself as unique or better than others (the true church). Thus the idea of a remnant church is quite problematic in a post-modern environment. The church is widely associated with colonialism and oppression, rather than a source of generosity and benevolence. 3) Post-modernism tends to reject truth as Bible, considering the Bible to be filled with violence, everlasting burning hell, and the subjection of women and minorities. While most of these charges are somewhat misplaced, they can be a significant barrier to casual exploration of the Scriptures.

In most Western countries people under the age of 35 tend to be post-modern. People 60 and above tend to be modern, whether Christian or secular. Everybody in between, including most of us here, are simply confused.

The Hand of God in Post-Modernism

Our topic for this year is The Mighty Acts of God in the World. As I contemplate the above trends it is easy to question whether the hand of God could possibly be seen in post-modernism. Is post-modernism an act of the devil or is it something that God could use? Is it, perhaps, even a necessary stepping-stone to where God wants the human race to go? As a Seventh-day Adventist nurtured in the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation I cannot fathom an environment that leaves God “without witness” (Acts 14:17). I am convinced that God’s hand is behind these changes and that we are heading to the place of His choosing. I have found eight reasons to believe that post-modernism is an act of God in the positive sense.

1) A Sense of Brokenness

Post-moderns definitely don’t share the self-confidence of secular moderns. They are much more likely than their grandparents to think of themselves as broken people. They often come from broken homes, or homes where the conflict and the put-downs are continual. When they share home stories with their friends, they discover that things aren’t any better on the other side of the fence. Post-moderns, as a result, have a keen sense of brokenness, a deep need for inner healing. In my experience this is as true in the Adventist context as it is outside. While brokenness can lead to despair, it can also open the way to the refreshing winds of the gospel. So the hand of God seems to be at work here.

2) Humility and Authenticity

Living in an age where image is king, post-modern individuals place a high premium on humility, honesty and authenticity in interpersonal relationships. It is considered better to be honest about one’s weaknesses and handicaps than to craft an image or “play the audience.” But while true authenticity is prized, post-moderns are usually suspicious of personal claims to authenticity. This principle is closely related to the previous one. Post-moderns not only have a strong sense of brokenness, they are willing to share that sense honestly with friends they consider safe.

Humility and authenticity are, of course, at the root of Christian faith. Confession is nothing else than telling the truth about yourself. In modernism humility was thought demeaning to human value; people were only humble if they had plenty to be humble about. Post-modernism, on the other hand, sees genuineness as a higher value. God is bringing the culture to the place where it values one of the great testing truths of the Christian tradition (John 3:19-20).
3) The Search for Identity and Purpose

An awareness of being broken is closely related to the loss of personal identity. Post-moderns long for a clear sense of personal identity, yet question whether they could ever attain it for themselves. In their experience the identity claims of others often prove to be flawed or self-constructed. With few or no role models, post-moderns tend toward identity crisis. They may try on several "identities" to see which one will fit, but end up with no clue which identity is really theirs.

This state of affairs leaves an opening for the kind of positive identity that can come from knowing that one has been bought with a price. A well-rounded Christian faith helps people know why they are here, where they have come from and where they are going. Post-modernism is associated with the search for identity, the Scriptures, rightly understood and presented, provide the kind of identity post-moderns are looking for.

Related to this is the intense interest in a "purpose-driven life." Post-moderns need their lives to have a sense of mission and purpose, a sense that their lives make a difference in the world. Scripture encourages the idea that each person is the object of God's purpose for his or her life (Jer 1:5).

4) Need for Community

As mentioned earlier, post-moderns have a strong need for community. I have been amazed to watch this generation handle relationships. Unlike my generation, they seem much less likely to pair off. They tend to go out in groups of five (say two girls and three guys) or seven (say five girls and two guys), always with their friends yet somewhat afraid to go deep.

Community (κοινωνεία) is foundational to New Testament faith, whether or not most Christian communities attain it. If Christian communities can learn to experience and express the kind of community the New Testament proclaims, they would find post-moderns quite interested in what they have to offer. Once again, the hand of God seems to be moving the mainstream a bit closer to the biblical ideal.

5) Inclusiveness

There is a refreshing inclusiveness in the post-modern attitude toward others. I don’t remember whether my wife or I said it, but my oldest daughter reacted angrily to a joking comment about homosexuals one day. “You don’t say stuff like that! Even if you don’t agree with what they are doing, they’re people and they should be treated with respect.” I was real proud of her at that moment and her comments seem typical of much of her generation.

When I was doing my doctorate, the intellectual atmosphere of AAR/SBL seemed much more controlled than it is now. One could only read papers and make meaningful comments in relation to the fairly rigid agenda of modernistic historical criticism. People presented their views with a high degree of confidence and cloaked personal uncertainty in technical language and obtuse jargon. But about fifteen years ago I was startled to hear David Barr respond to such a paper with, “I don’t have a clue what he was talking about.” That was my first sense that change was afoot. Since that time the academy has been much more open to a variety of perspectives, including Adventist ones. The inclusiveness of post-modernism has opened the way for Adventist exegetes and theologians (not just text critics, linguists and archaeologists) to share the kinds of insights that we have benefitted from for a century and a half. I suspect the hand of God is in this.

6) Spirituality

I don’t think anyone questions that the younger generation is more spiritual than its predecessor. Even in AAR/SBL, people I would not have expected are becoming more open about their own personal faith and practice. While there is a strong suspicion of traditional institutions and the Bible, post-moderns are open to spiritual discussions with anyone who knows God and can teach others how to know God. I can’t imagine this is only the result of chance. God is at work here.

7) Toleration of Opposites

One of the fascinating characteristics of post-modernism is its ability to tolerate opposites. Philosophically, the Greeks saw the opposite of a truth to be false. Scientific modernism was characterized by clear logic, in Greek Western terms. But Hebrew logic could often see contrasting ideas, not in terms of true and false, but in terms of a tension between two poles. Thus the nature of Christ is not an either/or. He is both 100% human and 100% divine. Similarly, (with a nod to our previous ASRS President) we were reconciled to God in order that we might become reconciled to Him (2 Cor 5:18-20). We are saved entirely by faith and yet no one will be saved without works. With its rejection of
the either/or categories of Greek philosophy, post-modernisms may have an easier time understanding the Bible than previous generations. I can’t help but think that is the way God wants it.

8) Truth as Story

As we have said, for post-moderns truth is found, not in church, Bible (as traditionally understood) or science, but in community and in story. The concept of truth as story provides a powerful corrective to traditional use of the Bible.

I think many Adventists are frustrated that the Bible was not written as a systemaic theology. You cannot open its pages and see the 27 (or is it 28?) Fundamentals clearly stated there. You would think God would have been a little more logical about this truth business. But since I cannot outline exactly what God was thinking when He caused the Bible to be put together the way it was, I can only assume that the result is exactly what He wanted. Rather than forcing the Bible to say what I want it to say, I would rather take what is and seek to understand what that tells us about God. If God chose the Bible to be a collection of stories, then post-modernism might be our best chance to fully explore its implications regarding the character and purposes of God. Perhaps post-moderns will understand the Bible much more clearly than those before them. I can’t help seeing the hand of God in that.

Post-Modernism and the Adventist Church

This fundamental shift in thinking naturally affects the way people approach faith and their relationship to faith-based institutions. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its rigid structures and traditional approach to outreach, will certainly not be able to continue with business as usual in a post-modern world. I believe Jesus gives a glimpse of the Adventist dilemma in Matt 5:13-16. There He articulates two types of Christian community. One is based on the model of a city/city, the other is based on salt.

In the fortress model of evangelism, the saints are safely enclosed in protective walls with strong gates. They avoid undue influence from “the world” and safeguard the integrity of the community. From time to time, however, they will hold a “crusade” by opening the gates, sending out the army, and snatching up a few captives. The captives are brought back to the fortress, the gates are slammed shut and all is well in Fortressland. But we live in a world where the captives are becoming fewer and the casualties larger as a result of this approach.

In the salt model of evangelism, the salt mingles with a dish of food and melts in to the point where one can hardly tell what is salt and what is food anymore. But the result of this process is that the entire dish tastes better. The salt model is an incarnational model. The saints go out into the world and seek to make it a better place by their presence.

While the fortress model worked extremely well in the age of Christian modernism and continues to work well in territories where a large number of Christian modernists can be found, I believe the salt model points the way to a work for post-moderns that will engage the church and society in a productive interaction. I see nine changes in traditional Adventist outreach that will be necessary if we wish to participate in the mighty act of God that we call post-modernism.

1) From Public to Relational Evangelism

Traditional Adventist outreach uses public meetings as the crucial factor in spiritual “regime change.” But post-moderns are not comfortable in such a setting and are not likely to come or to be moved by it if they do come. Post-moderns are best reached on one on one, through friendships and mentoring relationships. Such a shift in strategy should not disturb anyone since mentoring is the heart of the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20). The only finite verb in the Great Commission is “make disciples.” It is not “hold public meetings.”

2) From Short Term to Long Term

Traditional Adventist evangelism is a short term project. A church invests in public meetings, tries to move people to baptism in 3-5 weeks, and then breathes a sigh of relief for the next year or two. A clear lesson in the recent New York Project is that mainstream Americans do not join the Adventist Church in a matter of 4-6 months. It takes a long term investment (at least 3-5 years) to make an impact in the indigenous culture. While Adventists have not shown much patience for this kind of approach, Jesus invested three and a half years in twelve people and even then suffered a dropout (Judas).

3) From Our Agenda to Felt Needs

Traditional Adventist outreach was based on a clear sense of what outsiders need to learn from us. We give it to them the way we think they should hear it, and if they don’t get it, it is “their problem.” Post-moderns have proven quite disinterested in our traditional agenda for their souls. A more successful approach is to listen before we talk, to find out
the felt needs in the mainstream community and meet them in the power of the gospel. And when I say “felt needs” I don’t mean the needs that we think they should feel, but the needs that they themselves feel they have. Paul articulated such a felt-needs approach in 1 Cor 9:19-23. “Become all things to all people in order that you might save some.”

4) From Church-based to Neighborhood/Workplace Based

In the typical Adventist approach, meetings are held at the church building. Even if they begin in a public hall, they are moved as soon as possible to the church venue. But post-moderns are not likely to come to a church, even if they are interested in the topics being presented. Waiting for them there is a losing proposition. On the other hand, mainstream Americans are found in every neighborhood and every workplace. Adventists are located in the same neighborhoods and work places. To be successful in the Western world you need to meet people where they are. So a move toward neighborhood and workplace outreach is a step in the right direction. Paul endorsed this approach when he used his skills as a tent-maker to meet the mainstream people of his day.

5) From One Way to a Multiplicity of Approaches

The typical Adventist approach remains based on a schema that goes all the way back to an evangelist named Simpson in 1902. Though there are variations, the overall approach is fairly consistent. Those to whom it appeals respond very well, but that group seems to be declining rapidly. Post-moderns are as diverse as snowflakes, and need to be met with the kind of variety bequeathed by the Spirit (1 Cor 12-14). Truly Spirit-filled Christians are rather unpredictable (John 3:8). The variety of the Spirit’s gifts will lead to a multiplicity of approaches to meet the various mindsets and felt needs of the post-modern seeker.

6) From Conversion to Process

Traditional Adventist evangelism focuses on conversion and baptism. Imagine a continuum that goes from -10 to +10. -10 designates a person who has absolutely no knowledge of God. +10 designates a fully devoted follower of God. The zero point is the point of conversion and baptism. Traditional evangelism focuses on getting people from minus two into plus territory. But mainstream Americans tend to be far deeper into the minus continuum than the typical evangelistic “interest.”

Salt evangelism occurs not just when there is a baptism, if a person moves from -8 to -6 successful evangelism has occurred. The process I am talking about is related to the idea of centered sets presented at last year’s meeting. The key to the process is to make sure the people we are working with are moving in the direction of Jesus. The idea of process is also relevant to the “plus” side of the spectrum. Jesus illustrates attention to the process in the way He worked with both Judas and Peter.

7) From Community as Church to Community as ?

Adventists have grown accustomed to the idea that a church community has to have a building called a “church.” But post-moderns have been burned by the church idea. In Britain many post-moderns will cross the street rather than walk by a church. The very style of the church building can be a turn-off. A church interested in reaching post-moderns will seek out new models for community. Among the models that have been tried are cafes, health centers, gymnasiums and “house churches.”

Many people are shocked when I point out that the oldest known church building in the Roman World is at Dura-Europus in Syria, usually dated somewhere between 250-300 AD. For more than 200 years the church flourished without church buildings. Our fixation with such structures today is a legacy of Constantine, a character we don’t normally take as a model of sound NT thinking.

8) From Church Controlled to God Controlled

Moving to long-term, relational, and process evangelism that is not closely tied to traditional church structures moves things a little out of our control. The traditional process tracks people from first contact through interest to evangelistic series to baptism. Post-moderns are more likely to go through a process that is difficult to track and to enumerate. The process may include entities not tied to the church or even based in other religions. We will have to work for God with much less control of the process and the outcome. As Paul said, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Cor 3:5-7). Sometimes we will reap a harvest from the work of others, others will reap a harvest from ours. Perhaps in this generation the concept of “sheep-stealing” will lose its opprobrium and will be recognized as the norm.
9) From Exclusive to Inclusive

I have felt for more than a decade that the Seventh-day Adventist Church faces a crisis of identity. On the one hand, we desire a relatively small, focused, doctrinally pure church with consistent standards of lifestyle. On the other hand, we need a more inclusive approach that ties us together on major points of consensus, but allows a lot more flexibility in matters of lesser concern. It is a tension between exclusiveness and inclusiveness, between a focus on pure teaching and the openness of grace. Will we become smaller and more idiosyncratic as a church? Or will we become a “great multitude” from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives united by a common faithfulness to God?

It seems to me that we have, as a group, avoided this question and tried to run a route down the middle, thus losing the potential benefits of both approaches. Based on the philosophical model I have traced in this address, it is a choice between a church that remains totally faithful to where it was regardless of the cost (the Amish provide an excellent model of such a community), and one that seeks to be a dynamic player in what it perceives as God’s mighty act for the End-time. Perhaps God’s ideal is to pursue both sides of this seeming dilemma (and the Hebrew mind often said “yes” to such dilemmas). But if we must choose between these approaches, I would prefer to surf the wave of God’s mighty action in the present. The spirit of the times suggests greater attention to the statement of Jesus, “He that is not against us is for us” (Luke 9:50; cf. Mark 9:40).

Conclusion

Time will tell, but the growing base of evidence that God is doing a mighty work in this world has persuaded me. From now on I want to build bridges rather than destroy them. I want to heal hearts rather than break them. I want to learn from all of you rather than decide in advance which of you is worth listening to. And I hope, when all is said and done, that I will have captured just a little of the spirit of Jesus.

Two Biblical Options for a Post-Modern World

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<td>Community as Church (church = building)</td>
<td>New Models for Community (homes, pubs, cafes)</td>
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<td>Church Controlled</td>
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<td>Exclusive</td>
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THE DIVINE INVISIBLE HAND

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In the Scriptures, the acts of God come in two forms: judgment and redemption. They stand in such a close relationship to each other that they are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Judgment anticipates redemption, and redemption presupposes judgment. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to deliver a message of judgment—in forty days the city would be destroyed, he said. But, as Jonah found out, his message of judgment was only as a prelude to God’s pardon and redemption. Paul also seems to speak from the same paradigm of judgment and redemption when he writes in Rom 5:20 that the law, as an instrument of judgment, slipped in to increase transgression only so as to enable grace to abound and triumph in the end.

The problem is that this paradigm of judgment and redemption is easy to make out on the pages of the Bible and history books, that is to say, in retrospect. The question is whether it is safe to use this paradigm of judgment and redemption to understand current events. Even in biblical times, there was frequent conflict between the biblical prophets and their contemporaries over whether God’s acts of judgment and redemption were taking place in present events. Indeed, it is very difficult and even risky to claim to see God’s activities in current events. Yet it is hard to deny that the hallmark of prophetic spirit has been just this ability to see God at work in the present.

One difficulty we face is that events are not the same as narrative. The acts of God we see in the Bible come to us as complete, self-contained narratives with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. By contrast, the events taking place around us are simply events, because no inspired narrator has yet shaped them into a coherent and self-contained narrative of judgment and redemption.

Still another difficulty is the fact that, in the Scriptures, God’s acts—whether judgment or redemption—often occur in places and experiences in which we least expect to see him. This is a problem because we generally recognize his actions in positive circumstances of life: an A in a difficult class, a job that pays well, a delightful spouse, a day without an incident, a job promotion, and answers to prayers. However, in Scriptures, God’s presence and handiwork are found in unlikely places and events—indeed, often in things we fear and deplore. Isaiah and Jeremiah saw God at work in the advancing armies of Assyria and Babylon. Joel saw God in the catastrophic locust invasion. The apostles in the New Testament recognized in the tragic death of Jesus on the cross the hand of God reaching down to save humankind. These biblical traditions stand in stark contrast to our tendency to limit God’s mighty acts to positive events like prosperity, health, and inspiring worship.

Against the backdrop of these biblical traditions, I ask whether a modern narrative of judgment and redemption could be unfolding in an unlikely place—at the movies. I see in two recent blockbuster movies—Titanic and The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King—presages of God’s climactic work of judgment and redemption, Titanic providing the message of judgment and the Return of the King, the message of redemption. For many Adventists, this would be an unthinkable thought. It appears, though, that God—whose acts of judgment and redemption were seen in ancient tyrants like Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V, and Nebuchadnezzar—is surely capable of surprising us once again. Here I relay my personal experience, which isn’t easy.

After viewing James Cameron’s epic motion picture Titanic one wintry night in January, 1998, I was shaken by the disturbing images of destruction: the stacks of white dishes being thrown from the cupboards as if by an angry hand, the foaming, rushing waters filling the hallways and rooms of the Titanic like the white tentacles of a formless monster, the mighty hull of the ship being broken in two as if by large mysterious hands, people being thrown overboard and drowned like cockroaches. I wondered whether God might be trying to communicate something to the world through these images. Wondering whether the

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sinking of the Titanic might have portended some impending disaster, I consulted the Encyclopedia to discover that the Titanic sank on April 14, 1912, about two years before the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, an event that sent the world reeling into the hellish chaos of World War I. So I wondered—I say this with great embarrassment before this august body—whether the movie, released on Dec 17, 1997, did not portend some great tragedy in about two years' time—the close of the millennium. The end of 1999, and the beginning of 2000 came and went without incident, and I was greatly relieved. Then on September 11, 2001, something did happen that made me recall the terrible images I had seen in Titanic—the 9/11 tragedy: The people somberly filing out of the World Trade Center to safety—a building which supposedly was constructed to withstand the impact of a large jet—the wounded buildings sending out plumes of smoke like distress signals, and the great collapse of the buildings as if swept down by an angry hand.

Could the sinking of the Titanic have presaged divine judgment that commenced with World War I? According to Romans 1, with the repeated “God gave them up,” God’s judgment consists of handing humans over to their own inclinations. Both the sinking of the Titanic and World War I could be events in which God was giving up humans to their own self-deceptive hubris. On the day the Titanic sank, it received at least six warnings from passing ships that an ice field laid ahead.\(^2\) When the final message of warning came around 9:40 that night, Titanic had already entered the dangerous ice field. The repeated warning messages were never relayed to the bridge. False security based on self-deception and pride, not the iceberg, sank the mighty Titanic. The events leading up to World War I bear an eerie resemblance to the tragedy of the ‘. Prior to the outbreak of the war, warnings signs were issued again and again. The hubris of false security based on self-deception and pride caused the wildest and the bravest of the age to overlook, ignore, and sometimes even outright falsify the clear evidence to the contrary. I see in these events at the turn of the previous century a judgment of God in which he was giving up humanity to their stubborn bent for complacency and self-deception—the unexplainable bent for ignoring clear warning signs.

There are clear warning signs around us today once again.\(^3\) Could the tragic event of September 11, 2001 also be an act of God’s judgment in which he gave up humans to their self-deception and complacency? According to the findings of the 9/11 commission, warnings and concerns had been raised over the possibility of a major attack by al Qaeda in the United States: the tragedy of 9/11 was the fruit of complacency and self-deception. There are warning signs today that should keep us awake at night. Key government agencies possibly misrepresented the intelligence on the WMD situation in Iraq, as well as the monetary and human cost of the war. Our dependence on foreign oil and the clear signs of global warming are very worrisome. Nuclear proliferation threatens the very existence of humanity. The Chechen terrorists who blew up the two planes over Russia were allowed on the planes without going through the security for a mere $35 a person. Given the stockpiles of loosely guarded radioactive materials in Russia today, the outlook seems bleak. Given all these warning signs and the human penchant for complacency and self-deception, one wonders how long it will be before God once again gives us up to our own desires.

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\(^2\)http://www.titanic1.org/articles/titanicpastandpresent3.asp visited on 11/16/04

\(^3\)After this devotional was read, on January 10, 2005, an article appeared in The Wall Street Journal, vol 245/6, tellingly entitled “His Warning Ignored, Thai Meteorologist Now Plays Key Role: Mr. Smith’s Tsunami Fears Caused Panic, Scorn in ’98; ‘We Thought It Was a Joke,’” A1. It reads: “His [Mr. Smith’s] warning, made first in a speech and picked up by newspapers in the summer of 1998, quickly spread throughout the country, setting off panic—and outrage. Villagers along the country’s western coast thought the threat was imminent and ran into the hills, causing traffic accidents as they fled. Tourists checked out of their hotels. Government officials, fearful of a washed-up tourist season, branded Mr. Smith a dangerous man with a screw loose. Authorities on the resort island of Phuket fastened loudspeakers to pickup trucks to broadcast a mollifying message to beachgoers—and warned Mr. Smith not to come to town.” This article once again demonstrates the pattern of human hubris and complacency on the part of human agencies. Indeed, many lives would have been saved had safety measures put into place in response to Mr. Smith’s warning. But alas! That is not how humans work.
So then, where is the message of redemption? Interestingly, it seems to have come in a rather different movie that burst on the scene in 2003 and took a whopping eleven Oscars: *The Lord of the Ring: The Return of the King*. The movie seems to offer to our world threatened by forces of darkness a rather different solution than armed conflict or political process. In the final scene of the movie, two events take place simultaneously. In the plane below in Middle Earth, the forces of darkness surround the forces of light ready to cut them off from the face of the earth. Up on the hills, however, the hobbits Frodo and Sam journey to Mount Doom to destroy the One Ring.

What is remarkably beautiful about this ending of *The Lord of the Rings* is that the solution to the threat of annihilation results from the love and loyalty shared between two friends high up on the jagged hills of treacherous mountains. Whether this message was actually intended by the movie makers, the way in which peace is restored on earth in *The Return of the King* appears to resonate with the teachings of the Scriptures. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God comes not through political process or armed conflict but through the gathering of two or three who peacefully pray and fellowship together (cf. Matt 18:20). In Gen 18:32, Yahweh tells Abraham that ten nameless righteous living quietly among the wicked denizens of Sodom and Gomorrah will be able to save the cities from destruction. I suspect that the hobbits closely resemble The Inklings who gathered weekly in C. S. Lewis’s room at Oxford to discuss whatever they happened to be writing at the moment.⁴ If so, then according to J. R. R. Tolkien, the hope of the world resides not with soldiers and politicians but people sitting around a table seemingly idly sharing ideas and victuals together in a warm spirit of collegiality and loyalty to each other.

To me a ring represents love. One can think of a wedding ring, which stands for love shared between husband and wife. In *The Lord of the Rings*, however, the ring originates with Sauron, a mighty prince of darkness, and it has the power to enslave and disfigure anyone who chooses to wear it. This symbolism of the ring is significant. Love can be desired or given away. When desired, love turns the seeker into a monster or a slave. But when freely given away, it can save the world. It is significant that, at the very end, Frodo hesitates to throw down the ring into the lava bubbling in the crack of Mt. Doom. And then in desiring the ring for himself, he becomes evil. Only when he succeeds in throwing it away (albeit accidentally) is peace restored in the world. The root of all our problems may be that too many people are given to claiming, as it were, the One Ring for themselves—in the words of William Wordsworth, “the world is too much with us, soon and late, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers”⁵—and are in danger of becoming like despicable Gollum himself. In a world that all too easily confuses love with desire, *The Return of the King* is a powerful reminder that true love is the opposite of desire; it is an act of throwing away the very thing we desire, indeed laying down life itself, for the good of others. In short, the redemption for this world facing doom is to be found in a community that replicates the principle of the Cross by giving up the claim on love and loyalty of others. I see in the final journey of Frodo and Sam a scintillating paradigm of redemption.

What I have written here is what I perceive to be the act of God in current events. There are, however, no lines connecting the dots. I am certain that some in my esteemed audience will be wondering whether my mind is beginning to lose its grip on reality. It is indeed a precarious thing to suggest that there is a line connecting current events that are unfolding before us. But to see the act of God, one has to see a story in the midst of events. Conversely, the failure to see a story unfolding is to miss God’s act.

My suggestions about the two movies are obviously an imagined construction of a story that can easily turn out to be embarrassing. One however wonders whether God’s salvation history must be asserted only in retrospect. If it is, it bodes ill for the prophetic spirit which must see a narrative of God’s act; a story of judgment and redemption—unfolding in the events taking place before our eyes.

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MINIMALIA DEI:
THE MINUTE ACTS OF GOD IN THE WORLD
A Ricoeurian Reading of Ruth

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This session invites us to recognize the mighty acts of God in the world, theology on the grand scale: exodus and exile, incarnation and resurrection. But what of the small scale? What of my life today? Is God only to be known intermittently in the great cruces and crises of history, or is God present in all time, all history? It is in response to these questions that the present paper will consider the acts of God described in the book of Ruth. These acts will be examined through the lens of the hermeneutical theories of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

It is not the purpose of this paper to describe comprehensively the views of Ricoeur, or even to cover his works on biblical interpretation.¹ But the basics of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory must be noted. This is done without the pretense that nothing more could be said about the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, or about the philosophy of hermeneutics: without apology, the present essay deals with a particular subset of both of these fields, applied rather narrowly to a small part of the Bible.

Ricoeur’s Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning describes both his interpretive theory and as a process of interpretation which corresponds to that theory.² The four elements of Ricoeur’s interpretive theory are as follows:

1. the perception of language as discourse.
2. the recognition of the intensification of the characteristics of discourse which occurs when it is no longer spoken, but written.
3. the perception of “the plurivocity belonging not only to words (polysemy), or even to sentences (ambiguity), but to full works of discourse . . .”³
4. the exercise of interpretation as the dialectic of explanation and understanding.

¹Indeed, to do so would be the work of a lifetime. Ricoeur has written widely on phenomenology, structuralism, psychoanalysis, the theory of symbol, the philosophy of the will and human freedom, the function of metaphor and hermeneutical theory. Not only has he written widely, but his works are also prolific. Don Ihde noted in this editorial introduction to Ricoeur’s Conflict of Interpretations (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1974) that Ricoeur’s bibliography has become something of a problem in its own right, with more than three hundred books, essays and articles on various topics—and that complaint was penned in 1973. In the intervening three decades, Ricoeur, despite advancing age, has shown little abatement in his output. Between 1975 and 1981 Loretta Dornish assembled a bibliography of seventy-six items by Ricoeur and an additional seventeen secondary-source items which she considered to have important implications for biblical interpretation alone. (“Paul Ricoeur and Biblical Interpretation: A Bibliography,” Semeia 4 (1975): 23-26 and “Paul Ricoeur and Biblical Interpretation: A Selected Bibliography (II),” Semeia 19 (1981): 23-29.) In addition to the breadth and extent of his works, many critics and commentators have also remarked on their depth and density; there is no loose filler; every phrase demands contemplation. Ricoeur also seems to presuppose on the part of his readers a prior knowledge of those figures in intellectual history with whose works he interacts. One who has not read Hegel, Heidegger and Husserl, Kant, Gadamer and Wittgenstein before considering Ricoeur will be crippled from the outset.

²Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Ft Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). The same concepts presented in the four essays of this book (originally four lectures delivered at the centennial of Texas Christian University in 1973) are offered, singularly or severally, in other places, but nowhere as compactly as here. One hesitates to label as an engrinirion such a dense and theoretical work, but none of Ricoeur’s writings on hermeneutics comes closer to handbook status than this one.

³Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, xi.
The concepts which he articulates here combine in the interpretive structure elsewhere referred to as the "hermeneutical arc." 

Ricoeur informs us first that when we think of language as discourse, rather than a code, we realize that error and truth only become meaningful at the level of the sentence, that is, when the event of discourse occurs. When language is viewed only as a code, it is a self-referential system in which words are related to and defined by other words and grammatical structures and have meaning only in relation to each other. In the sentence, as also in larger units of discourse, language transcends itself and refers beyond itself.

The second element in Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach involves the awareness of the changes caused by textualization, that is, by the fixing of discourse in writing, with the consequent formalization and intensification of the characteristics of spoken discourse. Written discourse is fixed and exteriorized. Its original connection with the speaker and hearer is attenuated, even if not lost.

Ricoeur has written extensively on metaphor. In his work on hermeneutics he stresses the difference between texts whose signification is to be taken literally and univocally and those which possess "a surplus of meaning which goes beyond the linguistic sign." This surplus of meaning derives from metaphor, and more specifically, from the tension between the terms of metaphoric utterance. The absurdity implicit in this tension destroys any merely literal interpretation and demands some other understanding. The surplus of meaning created by metaphor makes impossible

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5 More precisely, truth becomes meaningful at the level of predication, that is to say, at the level of the clause.

6 For his purposes, Ricoeur discards the langue/parole distinction of Ferdinand de Saussure and replaces it with the distinction between langue, the systematic and compulsory code of a language, and discours, the arbitrary and contingent message which is encoded in the language.


8 See, for example, Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 145.

9 Even if one does not concede the semantic autonomy of the text from the author, it still must be recognized that textualization creates the potential for multiple readings and, in a sense, generates the problem which hermeneutics seeks to answer. Ricoeur comments, "The right of the reader and the right of the text converge in an important struggle that generates the whole dynamic of interpretation. Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends" (*Interpretation Theory*, 32).


12 Ricoeur rejects the view, found in traditional rhetoric, that metaphor is a trope which substitutes one word for another on the basis of resemblance, without semantic innovation, that is, without furnishing any new information about reality. On the contrary, Ricoeur insists that "Metaphor has to do with semantics of the sentence before it concerns semantics of the word" (*Interpretation Theory*, 49). Eventually metaphors either fall into disuse or are integrated into the lexicon of the language, thus ceasing to be what Ricoeur calls "live metaphors." But while it lives, "... a metaphor is not just an ornament of discourse. ... A metaphor ... tells us something new about reality" (*Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory*, 45).
the restatement of literary language in simple univocal declarations.\textsuperscript{13} This perception is the third element in Ricoeur’s hermeneutical system.

It is with the fourth element of his system that Ricoeur turns more specifically to hermeneutical practice, the interpretation of texts. Ricoeur defines interpretation as “the dialectic of explanation and understanding.”\textsuperscript{14} In an extremely important statement of his method, Ricoeur says,

For the sake of a didactic exposition of the dialectic of explanation and understanding, as phases of a unique process, I propose to describe this dialectic first as a move from understanding to explaining and then as a move from explanation to comprehension. The first time, understanding will be a naive grasping of the meaning of the text as a whole. The second time, comprehension will be a sophisticated mode of understanding, supported by the explanatory procedures. In the beginning, understanding is a guess. At the end, it satisfies the concept of appropriation... the rejoinder to the kind of distanciation linked to the full objectification of the text. Explanation, then, will appear as the mediation between two stages of understanding. If isolated from this concrete process, it is a mere abstraction, an artifact of methodology.\textsuperscript{15}

As we read texts, we first guess at the meaning. There is no sure way to determine in advance which guesses are best, but our guesses can be critically evaluated (or invalidated) subsequently. All of the conventional tools for the criticism of texts may be used in this explanatory process. But explanation is not an end in itself: it leads us back to a new understanding, to a comprehension which is enriched by the results of our explanatory study. From our “first naiveté” we move, by means of a “hermeneutic of suspicion” toward a “second naiveté,” achieved through a “hermeneutic of recovery.” Thus, the interpretation of a text will appropriate the metaphor of the text and not simply rationalize it in the attempt to appropriate the conceptual framework which supposedly lies behind it. This is necessary because, as pointed out above, conceptual language cannot explain the meaning of metaphor, and, as Ricoeur says, “What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text.”\textsuperscript{16}

It is with this project in view that we turn our attention to the consideration of the acts of God in the book of Ruth.

What does God do in the book of Ruth? In our original naive reading, we may be inclined to respond that God rescues Ruth and Naomi from a desperate plight of isolation and famine and places them in a pleasant situation of kinship and plenty. But let us examine more closely the actions of God described in this book.

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\textit{Theory,} 52-53).

\textsuperscript{13}Obviously, this characteristic of literary language runs contrary to the expectations of language which are usually entertained by the modern world, in which metaphor is rarely valued as anything more than a trope and plurivocity is hardly valued at all for most purposes, including the discussion of religion. In simple terms, our culture frequently attempts to pack meaning—even religious meaning—into a box, with as few bits hanging over the edge as possible.

\textsuperscript{14}Ricoeur, \textit{Interpretation Theory,} p. 74. Elsewhere (with a slight terminological change) Ricoeur says that “. . . explanation and interpretation will confront one another in the act of reading” (\textit{Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences}, 149). Ricoeur contrasts explanation and understanding as follows: “. . . in explanation we ex-plicate or unfold the range of propositions and meanings, whereas in understanding we comprehend or grasp as a whole the chain of partial meanings in one act of synthesis (\textit{Interpretation Theory,} 72).

\textsuperscript{15}Ricoeur, \textit{Interpretation Theory,} 74-75.

\textsuperscript{16}Ricoeur, \textit{Interpretation Theory,} 92.
The name of God is mentioned seventeen times in this book. In addition, God is identified twice as Shaddai, and three times by the divine title Elohim. There are also three predication in which the subject is a pronoun whose antecedent is the divine name, in one case coupled with the designation Eloheyy-Yisrael. In addition there is one clear case of a divine passive and another dubious case, as well as two fatalistic expressions which pious interpretation has usually ascribed to divinity.

These references to divinity are found most frequently in the expressions of the various characters. Naomi is the most vocal in her comments on deity, referring to God ten times. Six of these are assertions about how God has dealt with her, with five of the six being claims of harsh treatment. She tells her daughters-in-law, "the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." (1:13) and subsequently complains to the women of Bethlehem, "... the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (1:20-21). These impetuous accusations against God are balanced against her one positive statement, following Ruth's disclosure of her success in her first day of gleaning. Here Naomi acknowledges that the Lord's "... kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" (2:20). In addition, Naomi also makes several volitive statements, all of which express hope in the beneficence of the Lord. To her daughters-in-law Naomi says, "May the LORD deal kindly with you, ..." (1:8) and "The LORD grant that you may find a home, ..." (1:9). Of Boaz she says, "Blessed be the man who took notice of you..." (2:20) and "Blessed be he by the LORD, ..." (2:20).

Boaz also makes frequent mention of God, though his statements are rarely simple declarations. His only real assertion referring to God is his statement to Ruth that she has taken refuge under the wings of the Lord (2:12). This assertion is thus about Ruth, rather than about God. But Boaz' speeches abound in volitives referring to deity. He invokes the presence of God with his reapers (2:4) and calls for God to reward Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi and her commitment to the God of Israel (2:12). In addition, he calls for God to bless Ruth for her decision to seek a (socially sanctioned) levirate marriage rather than a (socially tolerated) marriage to some other partner than the near relative of her deceased husband (3:10). Boaz also employs a conventional oath formula which includes the divine name to affirm his intention to make suitable arrangements for Ruth's marriage (3:13).

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17 The word Elohim occurs a fourth time (1:15), but in reference to the gods of the Moabites to whom Orpah has returned. The theophoric prefix El (or Eli) also occurs six times, in the occurrences of the name of Elimelech, whose name is, incidentally, the only theophoric name in the book.

18 This is the expression "Blessed be the man..." (2:19), where no active agent of the blessing is indicated within the immediate predication.

19 In 4:10, no agent is indicated for the expression "... that the name of the dead might not be cut off..." The presumed agent might be divinity or death or even the forgetfulness or indifference of human society.

20 These are "... she happened to come..." (more accurately, "... her chance happened...") in 2:3 and "... how the matter turns out..." (more accurately, "... how the matter will fall...") in 3:18.

21 There are six references to the divine name in her speeches (1:8,9,13,21 twice; 2:21) as well as two references to Shaddai (1:20,21). Naomi is the only speaker to use this latter name. She also refers to God once by a pronoun whose antecedent is the divine name (2:20) and uses the divine passive in the expression "Blessed be the man..." (2:19). In addition to these rather clear remarks about God, Naomi uses the fatalistic expression "... how the matter turns out..." (3:18) and makes the only reference to the deities of Moab (1:15). If these were to be included in our consideration, she makes a total of twelve references to divinity.

22 Boaz regularly uses the divine name when referring to God (2:4,12-twice; 3:10,13), once qualifying it with the title Eloheyy-Yisrael (2:12). He also once predicates something of divinity using a pronoun whose antecedent is the divine name (2:12).
Ruth’s references to divinity are considerably fewer. She speaks explicitly of God in only one context, that of her declaration of loyalty to Naomi. Here she declares concerning herself, “... your people shall be my people, and your God my God; ...” (2:16). In addition, she (like Boaz) employs a conventional formula to affirm her intention. In this instance she makes the self-implication, “May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you” (1:17).

The expressions of other speakers generally fall into the category of the expectation or appreciation of divine beneficence. Boaz’s employees return his greeting by the volitive “The LORD bless you.” (2:4). The elders in the gate of Bethlehem express the expectation that God will give children to Boaz and Ruth (4:12). Finally, after the birth of Obed, the women of Bethlehem invoke a blessing on the Lord and indicate that it is God who has provided a protector for Naomi (4:14), though the protector indicated is only a few hours old, and much in need of protection himself.

Apart from these characters in the story, there are three assertions by the narrator which contribute to the picture of divine activity in the book of Ruth. Early in the story, the narrator asserts that “the LORD had visited his people and given them food” (1:6). Near the end of the book, the narrator tells us that “... the LORD gave [Ruth] conception, and she bore a son.” (4:13). And between these two we find the enigmatic and fatalistic assertion that Ruth “... happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz ...” (2:3).

So what does God do in the book of Ruth? Employing a hermeneutic of suspicion to evaluate the material we have just compiled, we may be inclined to say that the works of God in the book of Ruth don’t amount to much. By the narrator’s claim, a famine ended, a woman wandered into the field of a wealthy relative, and later got pregnant. These are hardly great events, “mighty acts,” and we might suspect that they could occur without much divine interference. After all, these sorts of things do happen fairly frequently in human history. Famines do end, people do meet relatives, and women do get pregnant. Apart from this, the book of Ruth tells us no more about God other than some euphoric wishes and unsubstantiated allegations.

We speak—as G. Ernest Wright and his students did—of the magnalia Dei, the “mighty acts of God.” When God engages human history, we do not expect to see only the stolid and unvarying repetition of the seasons, and the unchanging cycles of life, but great events, such as the exodus and the incarnation, events which move outside and beyond the circle of things as they have always been, events which work fundamental changes in life and history.

But if the magnalia of human history are mighty acts of God in the world, what are we to make of the minutia of history? The rains come, the rains stop, the earth dries, we wait eagerly, and at length the rains return. The seed is cast into the ploughed field, it swells with moisture, sprouts, grows, forms blade and stem and head and finally, more seeds, which in their turn may be planted in the ploughed field of the next year. A woman marries, conceives, and gives birth. A child—it may be a girl—is born, grows, reaches maturity, marries and gives birth to another child—this time a boy—who is placed on the lap of his surrogate grandmother, to the joy of all the neighbors. Do these things simply represent our participation in the cycles of nature? Certainly the popular religion of ancient Canaan saw them as nothing other than this, as does much of popular thought in our own culture. And yet, nothing greater of God is asserted by the narrator of the book of Ruth than that “the LORD [has] visited his people and given them food” (1:6), and “the LORD gave [Ruth] conception, and she bore a son” (4:13).

And here we begin our hermeneutic of recovery: we seek to appropriate the text in a second naivete. It seems that, in the mind of the Bible writer, these smallest things are not just matters of chance. They are not just “things as they are,” our sharing in the cycles of nature. They are the minimalia Dei, the minute acts of God in the world. God’s activity, as depicted in the book of Ruth, is (to appropriate the language of another story) not only in the wind, the earthquake and the fire, but also in the still, small voice.23

23If we concur with the writer of the book of Ruth that the lifting of the famine and Ruth’s pregnancy are acts of God, and if we accept his hint that even Ruth’s choice of workplace on her first morning in Bethlehem may have been divinely induced, a question arises. What then do we do with the less desirable events of the book of Ruth? Whom do we hold responsible for the death of Naomi’s husband and her two sons, or with the beginning of the famine in the first place? Allow me hastily to point out that this is not a problem which only arises when we consider the minimalia. We
It is also remarkable that some of God’s mightiest acts are at the same time, at least ostensibly, the most minute. We may consider not only the rescue from death by famine and disease of a few obscure Judeans in the Late Bronze Age, or a naked newborn who is laid in the lap of his surrogate grandmother, but also the naked newborn struggling for his first breath in a barn near Bethlehem, and the hideous death by torture of an obscure Galilean carpenter. These are not great acts: they are minute acts, but mighty ones.

In fact, the *magnalia Dei* are inseparable from the *minimilia Dei*. The conclusion of the book makes this clear. The brief genealogical list in 4:17 and the longer table (perhaps an editorial gloss) in 4:18-22 remind us that by means of the *minimilia* of the famine’s end and Ruth’s pregnancy, the Lord brought about his covenant with David, and the subsequent elevation of ancient Israel to its time of prominence, its greatest historical glory. And the Christian canon, in Matthew’s genealogy of Christ\(^{24}\) recognizes even more extended consequences of these *minimilia*, for by means of these small things, God worked out the salvation of the world, consequences which may praise God for the Exodus, but what do we say when we consider the Holocaust? Indeed, it can be asked whether, in reflection on the Holocaust, we should speak of God at all, and not rather sit in stunned silence. Again, we may see God’s glory in the gift of his Son, but what do we make of his silence when that Son cries out in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Here the book of Ruth offers us three paradigms. The first is that of Naomi. Reflecting on the death of her husband and two sons, she tells her daughters-in-law, “... it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me” (1:13). Later, describing her experience to the women of her town, she says, “... Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (1:20-21). Naomi does not hesitate to hold the Lord responsible for the evil that has befallen her. On the other hand, Naomi is quick to give God credit for good things that happen. Upon hearing that Boaz, a relative of Elimelech, has befriended and assisted Ruth, Naomi exclaims, “[The Lord’s] kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead” (2:20). God, in her understanding, is responsible for everything. Thus, Naomi can bask in the rejoicing of the neighbor women when they say, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next of kin, ...” (4:14), even though she remains convinced that the Lord has also deprived her of her other menfolk.

The second paradigm offered to us by the book of Ruth is that of Boaz, who never actually attributes any action to God. God is the subject primarily of his wishes, not of his assertions. He wants God to do good: to be present with his laborers (2:4), to bless Ruth and reward her for her faithfulness to her mother-in-law and her husband’s family (2:12, 3:10). The only assertion which Boaz makes is not about God’s actions, but about his existence: he lives (3:13). Indeed, this latter claim occurs only in an oath formula. In brief, with regard to God, Boaz claims nothing, but hopes for the best.

The final paradigm offered to us in the book of Ruth is that of Ruth herself: she names the Lord only once, but her self-imprecation on that occasion leaves no doubt about her attitude toward the God of Israel: “... Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you” (1:16-17). It is noteworthy that Ruth makes this statement on the same occasion and in the same formula as Naomi’s accusatory remark that “the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me” (1:13). It is true that the three deceased were not all related to Ruth in the same way they were to Naomi, but they are the same three persons, and they were those upon whom Ruth, as well as Naomi, was conventionally expected to depend for at least the raw materials of food, clothing and shelter, as well as physical defense. But Ruth neither accuses nor praises the Lord. She may well have believed, with her mother-in-law, that the Lord was responsible for the deaths of her three close relatives, but she apparently feels no need to point this out. What needs saying is not whether the Lord has been faithful to us, but whether we will be faithful to him.

\(^{24}\) The reference to Ruth in Matthew 1:5 is the only place in the canon outside of the book of Ruth itself where her name or story is mentioned.
exceed time and history. Thus, just as God performed his minute acts in the life of Ruth, so also Ruth performed her minute rôle in the life of God incarnate, having been, as Matthew tells us, one of Jesus' ancestors in the thirtieth generation, along with some thousands of other persons of whom we know even less.

What then? Would the writer of this book have us believe that in every natural restoration, in every human encounter, in every conception and birth, God is somehow active? In a word, Yes. It is certain that not everything is good. It is left unsaid whether God is the source of it all. But somehow, in everything God works for good.
INCARNATIONAL THEOLOGY AND THE PRACTICE OF MOTHERING

Anne Collier-Freed

Since becoming a mother nearly two and a half years ago, I have attended a select few professional meetings with topics ranging from Theological Education, Women in Leadership in Theological Education, and a gathering for the West Coast Society for Religious Studies. I brought my daughter and a care-giver with me to all but this last set of meetings, in Davis, CA. There, with my family living nearby in Sacramento, I was able to shuttle back and forth to the meetings while my parents watched my baby. At one of the sessions I attended, I noticed a presenter who had her infant in the wings. Watching her with empathy, I felt at the same time relief that I did not have to face this time the challenge of regularly interrupting an intense day of reflection to nurse a baby, as this presenter was doing in the clear view of the other conference participants.

Why would anyone go to such lengths to be included in a professional theological meeting? Have not the halls of seminaries and scholarly meetings been traditionally “off limits” to mothers and young children for good reasons? Should we expect the typical mother, devoted to multi tasking and the constant meeting of demands, to offer anything but fragmented attention and “soft” reasoning abilities to the serious task of theological discourse? In this paper I want to challenge the logic behind such assumptions to which both men and women in the Church, including myself at times, fall prey. Further, I will attempt to illustrate the important contribution that both women and men engaged in the practice of parenting have to make to the practice of Christian theology. In the process a way of doing “incarnational theology” will emerge that takes account of God’s self-revealing activity in the Bible while staying true to Adventism’s “best practices” in engaging the Bible.

In her book *The Story of Discipleship*¹ theologian Elizabeth Barnes reflects on a series of contemporary, fictional narratives, including *Babette’s Feast, Jesus of Montreal*, excerpts from *The Grapes of Wrath* and Flannery O’Connor’s stories, to demonstrate the way the “b”aptist vision, as defined by her former colleague James McClendon, Jr., allows disciples in churches today to hear the gospel anew in such narratives. She uses the term “inter-lacing,”² a consciously feminine term, to describe this method of finding truth that she adapts from McClendon’s work. Both Barnes and McClendon seek to show in their writings the revelatory power of narratives, both fictional and lived, when interpreted in light of the gospel narrative, or the Bible’s Master Story of Jesus.

Both scholars look to Christian bodies with roots in the Radical Reformation to identify a type of theology and method of Bible-reading that emerges from “the Bible’s own linking devise, the Bible’s tricropic way of holding its great story together.”³ While Barnes uses the term “inter-lacing,” McClendon refers to this prophetic or typological approach with the terms “this is that, and then is now.” Arguing that this approach to Bible reading has commonly been practiced within “b”aptist communities, he summarizes this constitutive vision or practice “by which a people shape their life and thought as that people” as follows: Scripture . . . effects a link between the church of the apostles and our own. So the vision can be expressed as a hermeneutical motto, which is shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community.”⁴


² Ibid., 9.

³ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 45. While McClendon clearly referred to so-called “Believers’ Churches” such as the Mennonites and Brethren as “b”aptist churches, he sought to include other groups that might also find their roots in the Radical Reformation, such as Southern Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists.

⁴ McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 31. This prophetic use of Scripture within Baptist communities is closely tied to their reliance on the literal (or “plain”) sense of Scripture. McClendon argues that the plain sense of Scripture has been given principal place throughout the history
For disciples schooled in Baptist communities of faith (even those whose education compels them to take account of historical-critical interpretations of the Bible) reading their own stories into the biblical stories happens naturally (i.e., skills or virtues acquired in the course of practicing this Baptist type of Bible reading give them a tacit knowledge of how to go on with their practice). Biblical interpretation is a self-involving process taking place in the context of communities of faith, rather than a detached or individualistic process. Further, disciples seek to know Jesus, the central character in the Bible’s “Great Story,” to understand him in relationship to oneself, one’s community, and to God, in terms of the biblical narrative that ascribes to him a particular historically-situated identity (as opposed to being interpreted as a symbol for authentic human experience). Finally, church teaching (or doctrine) becomes the task of the whole community of faith as particular groups of disciples seek to live out their understanding of the call to faithfulness before the watching world.

McClellon emphasizes the central role of narrative in the Baptist method of Bible reading. In particular, biblical narratives engage disciples in an exploration of characters, plot, and setting that give rise to discernment (through the power of the Spirit) of the identity of Jesus Christ, God, and the people of God in the course of articulating church doctrine. This engagement, then, allows contemporary communities of faith to read and interpret their own stories in light of the Great Story found in the Bible. In The Story of Discipleship Barnes shows that not only can we, as contemporary disciples, find our identities in biblical narratives of the apostolic and eschatological communities of faith, but we can find guidance for living out the call to discipleship in vital fictional of Christian Bible reading. This way of engaging Scripture leads readers to view the text as speaking about real people and real history. But it also teaches them to look for a point, often called the spiritual sense, in biblical stories. This sense “was not abandonment or discarding of the plain sense, but its appropriation into the whole story of divine and human relations...” In this context allegorical and typological ways of reading the Bible can best be understood as “bridges” between the literal sense and the point of the passage (Doctrine, 36-37). McClellon gives an example of the spiritual sense by citing the way that Augustine saw the literal description of creation as signifying a spiritual creation in which God’s words “let there be light” pointed to humankind’s creation as seekers and contemplators of God. McClellon also gives examples of the way the typological sense may inform our Bible reading: when Paul identifies Adam as “an example beforehand” of Christ in Rom 5:14, and when Hosea sees in the Exodus a foreshadowing of God’s plan for renewing his unfaithful people, the writers show the way in which biblical history becomes ours, the way the plain sense and the spiritual sense are linked. While encouraging readers to follow such examples, McClellon is careful to warn against replacing the plain sense with a strictly metaphorical understanding of types, as do Sally McFague and others.

McClellon’s discussion of the link between the plain sense of Scripture and “b”aprist uses of it clearly is intended as a challenge to hermeneutical theory based on phenomenological approaches adopted by writers such as Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy. McClellon appreciatively adapts Hans Frei’s account in “The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?” in The Bible and the Narrative Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press,1986), extending Frei’s discussion by defining a specific context, viz. the local, often “b”aprist church as the primary locus of prophetic Bible-reading and showing the integral nature of hermeneutical practices and other practices of particular ecclesial interpretive communities. Therefore, with Frei, McClellon would reject the idea that, in reading the Jesus story, the consciousness of Christ, not events such as the resurrection, really matter. Neither would he suggest that the story primarily discloses a “mode-of-being-in-the-world” that is grasped by the understanding that encounters the “re-presented” consciousness of Jesus the Christ in the text. Frei, 44-46.

This witness constitutes the church’s primary theology. For McClellon, convictions shape the practices of church communities (primary theology), while formal church teaching (doctrine) plays a secondary role of “declaring what the church must teach to be the church” (secondary theology). McClellon, Doctrine, 46-48.

Ibid., 40.

McClellon offers examples of the ways this is done in Christian communities in a book of his sermons entitled, Making Gospel Sense: to a Troubled Church (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1995).
narratives that are “interlaced” with the Bible’s Great Story. I will use Barnes’s method of “interlacing” to begin a dialogue between theology and the practice of mothering in what follows.

The recent HBO movie “Wit,” though neither explicitly a story about mothering nor about the gospel, when “interlaced” with the gospel narrative, offers a compelling lens through which to discern contemporary challenges as well as gifts of those engaged in the practice of mothering in the Church and Academy. Emma Thompson co wrote the screen play for and plays the lead role in this movie. We meet her character, Vivian Bearing, at the beginning of the film, as she learns that she is dying of advanced-stage ovarian cancer. After being informed of her diagnosis in a matter-of-fact way by the head researcher of the institution where she will be treated, she receives his charge to “be brave” and consider the contribution her experimental treatment may make to the advancement of knowledge. Vivian, herself an academic of some reputation, dutifully listens to the doctor’s instructions without a hint of emotion crossing her face.

In the second scene, Vivian addresses the viewers of the film directly to begin an increasingly intimate conversation that lasts almost the entire film. Vivian shares a very personal story of spiritual transformation despite her intention in this monologue to document her experience of invasive cancer treatment in a detached, objective way. Suffering becomes inescapable as she is treated as a specimen for medical students and interns to study and as her body breaks down and torments her. Yet after experiencing the “hell” of losing her identity, she emerges at the brink of death, for those who have eyes to see, as one blessed, even saved, by the loving embrace of those schooled in the practice of wise mothering.

If you have already seen this film, this statement may be surprising since Vivian’s friends and relatives are conspicuously absent as she undergoes treatment. She suffers alone the humiliation of a pelvic exam by Jason, one of her former English Poetry students, now a medical fellow part of the team studying her. There is no mother present. Vivian, an unforgiving, uncompromising teacher and scholar, does not even know how to be a good mother to herself. Only strangers and intruders stand by as she loses her hair, vomits stomach acid, and bloats. But one of these strangers, a young African-American nurse named Susie, mediates grace to her through practices of care that may be closely associated with the social practice of mothering.

Before looking further with me at this character through a gospel lens, let me clarify the sense in which I am using the term “mothering as a social practice.” In her book, Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace, SaraH Ruddick relies on a philosophical framework shaped by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and other “practicalist” philosophers to define a particular type of thinking or reasoning that emerges from the practice of mothering. Grounded in a continuous interplay of action and reflection, this “concrete,” embodied way of engaging the search for reasons and truth grows out of mothers’ commitments to and engagement in the tasks that constitute the practice of mothering. According to Ruddick, the “universal need [for protective care] of human children creates and defines a category of human work,” which Ruddick identifies as maternal practice. While Ruddick takes into consideration the wide diversity of mothers and the cultures in which they are situated, she argues maternal work demands at least three things from all mothers: to attend to the preservation, the growth, and the social acceptability of their children. According to Ruddick, “to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training.” These tasks and the goals toward which they aim constitute the social practice of mothering.

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9 The original script was written for a play by Margaret Edson, a kindergarten teacher in New York, who won the Pulitzer Prize in drama for this work.


11 Ibid. 17. On p. 23 Ruddick gives further examples that clarify the relationship between these core maternal tasks and the thinking that emerges from it: “... a reflective mother can separately identify each demand, partly because they are often in conflict. If a child wants to walk to the store alone, do you worry about her safety or applaud her developing capacity to take care of herself? If you overhear your son hurling insults at a neighbor’s child, do you rush to instill decency and compassion in him, or do you let him act on his own impulses in his need to overcome shyness? If your older child, in her competitive zeal, pushes ahead of your younger, smaller child while climbing a high slide, do you inhibit her competitive pleasure or allow an aggressiveness you cannot appreciate?
Using this working definition of the practice of mothering, I want to take another look at the character of Susie, the nurse in "Wir." I see her engaging at different points in the story in all the core maternal tasks. First, she protected the body of Vivian. In fulfilling her duties as a nurse, she sustained Vivian's life by performing routine tasks such as measuring and disposing of her "out-put," adjusting or applying lotion to her body, and providing medications, etc. (We might think here of Jesus feeding his disciples and washing their feet.) In a more direct way Susie protected Vivian's body by standing up to Jason, the medical fellow monitoring Vivian's response to treatment, after he ordered a "code" when noticing she had no pulse. Despite the physician's protests, Susie, who was determined to honor Vivian's Do-Not-Resuscitate (DNR) request, demonstrated her moral authority stemming from her intimate connection as a care-giver with Vivian by stopping the code that invasively threatened to disrupt her body. (This scene can be "interlaced" with the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. As Jesus exerted his moral authority to drive away the merchants and money-changers seeking to profit from their desecration of the Temple, so Susie demonstrated her moral authority over the doctor who sought to gain further "knowledge" and notoriety by carelessly disregarding the sanctity of Vivian's body and her choice to die with dignity.) Second, Susie participated in Vivian's training when, earlier in the film, she personally engaged Vivian in a conversation about her imminent death, asking whether or not she wanted to declare a "DNR." Coming down to her level by sitting next to Vivian in a chair by her bed, Susie offered her a Popsicle before engaging her in this difficult but necessary conversation. Finally, Susie nurtured Vivian's emotional and spiritual growth in the same conversation by helping her to face the mystery and overwhelming nature of death. Her ability to act both as a teacher and mother in this situation did not require a graduate education. The situation did not demand that she present profound concepts about death, such as those articulated by Vivian's intellectual hero, John Donne. It did demand, however, for Susie to display the motherly and Christ-like virtues of simplicity, sensitivity, truthfulness, and love in the face of impending chaos and immeasurable loss. (Think here of Jesus warning his disciples of what both he and they would have to suffer in the future.)

Should her younger brother learn to fight back? And if he doesn't, is he bowing too easily to greater strength? Most urgently, whatever you do is somebody going to get hurt? Love makes these questions painful; it does not provide the answers. Mother must think.

Since the publication of Ruddick's book in 1989, her definition of maternal thinking and practice has been challenged, e.g., by feminist writers such as Nancy Naples. In her article "Activist Mothering: Cross-Generational Continuity in the Community Work of Women from Low-Income Urban Neighborhoods," in From Race, Class, & Gender: Common Bonds, Different Voices, ed. Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, Doris Wilkinson, and Maxine Baca Zinn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), Naples argues that "Ruddick's analysis remains bounded by a limited definition of family-based work." Naples's study successfully seeks to demonstrate the integral nature of "family-based labor, unpaid community work, and paid work" among activist mothers whose mothering activities extend beyond the nuclear family to include oppressed communities in which their families are or have been embedded. While Naples suggests that Ruddick's analysis is limited by confining mothering practices to that which happens within the nuclear family, she may fail to appreciate the way in which her own thesis is an extension of Ruddick's basic argument. Since Ruddick intends to show the congruency between a commitment to the basic practices connected to maternal thinking and practices connected with peace (and justice) activism, and since Naples' study highlights particular cases where mothers demonstrate their commitment to their unique understanding of what "mothering" and justice entail, (i.e., it involves in some way commitments to protect, nurture, or train in the public sphere through activism), Naples' study seems to me to support Ruddick's thesis.

It is unclear from the film whether this character is actually a mother who cares for her own children. However, as Carolyn Wilbur Treadway notes in her article "Two Views of Mothering: Becoming a Mother" in In Her Own Time: Women and Developmental Issues in Pastoral Care, ed. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 171, "most women, even if they have not given birth, have been mothered by women and identified strongly with them. So the practice of mothering significantly affects <all> women's experience and sense of identity." Agreeing at least in part with this assumption may lead one to believe that Susie, even if childless, gained a deep sense of knowing what was called for in the realm of nurturing and care, not only as a result of her training as a nurse, but as a result of being mothered, particularly in the context of an African-American community.

In discussing this story with a member of my community of faith, Don Martinez, he emphasized that it was after the disciples had become the intimate friends of Jesus that he confided in them about these things. Jesus
Another character appears in this story as a mother figure and Christ figure to Vivian—her former professor and mentor, “the great E. M. Ashford.” This thin, wrinkled, wispy-haired woman had gained both the experience and wisdom that comes from being a mother and grandmother, as well as the ability for high-level abstract reasoning developed through graduate education and scholarly research. Though a renowned academic, she clearly possessed the kind of concrete, in-the-moment reasoning described by Ruddick as emerging from reflectively engaging in the practice of mothering. So when Vivian struggles for her last breaths, this woman knows when to lay aside John Donne (as she had encouraged Vivian to do as a student, urging her not to go back to the library, but to spend some time outside with her friends). Instead she picks out a book purchased for her five-year-old great-grandson to read to Vivian. This simple act is the most poignant and powerful of the film, quietly yet clearly announcing the power of maternal thinking. The professor’s response appears to be second nature when she hears Vivian’s child-like protest against a recital of Donne, thinly veiling a desperate plea for an embrace of love that might liberate her from her need to control her pain, her life, and her death. As she begins slowly to read, the wise mother-professor explains off-handedly that this story, *The Run-away Bunny*, is “an allegory of the soul. Wherever it hides, God will find it.” Listening to the simplest of words about a mother bunny who promises to follow her little one no matter where he runs, Vivian, now cradled in her teacher’s arms, at last hears the truth of God’s eternal embrace.

Through a maternal act of reading a story of love, the old professor participates in “incarnational theology.” She *enacts* the work of Christ by opening a way for Vivian to enter into the story of love and into the arms of God. Here we find no separation between text and lived reality. Transforming truth has come to Vivian, saving her in her death by uniting her with her Creator.

Clearly, fictional mothers or care givers are much easier to cast as Christ figures than most real mothers engaged in the trial-and-error process of learning their craft. (Even Ruddick admits that most mothers seldom consistently display the virtues entailed in the practice of mothering.) Nevertheless, I am convinced that mothers commonly engage maternal practice in ways that make likely fruitful “interpractice criticism” between the practice of Mothering and the practice of Christian Theology. For example, in her article “Birth and Mothering as Powerful Rites of Passage,” Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore seeks to “present the complex problems and amazing possibilities of birthing and parenting as powerful religious rites of passage.” She emphasizes that churches often focus on family ministry in a general sense, but seldom present the sacred as residing in everyday passages of women’s lives, especially the physical event of childbirth and the concrete demands of rearing children. Reflection on such “possibilities” on the part of both mothers and non mothers in the context of theological education may arguably be seen as a crucial responsibility for those seeking to prepare lay and professional ministers for their ministries.

Inter practice criticism between mothering and Christian Theology might involve professors in a college or university religion department, along with administrators, in the process of “interlacing” the gospel narrative with the *institutional* narrative they are co creating as they take account of colleagues’ needs to avoid “working themselves into the ground” in order skillfully to fulfill the demands imposed by commitments to the practice of mothering (perhaps leading to more part-time appointments). Such reflection might include consideration of ways this colleague might be encouraged to bring maternal thinking into the classroom and teach others to model maternal practices of love in their classes. If, as McClendon argues, primary theology consists of *lived* convictions, theological education must emerge to some extent from the kind of in-the-moment, embodied engagement in concrete realities that constitutes maternal thinking. How sad if our students wake up at some point in their lives to did not remain detached in addressing the “cancer” of sin, as did Jason in relating to Vivian’s disease. In a similar way, Susie did not focus on her cancer, but engaged “Vivian’s personhood and her suffering, which led to Vivian’s confiding in her, which led to Susie’s authority.”

15 Ruddick, 25.

say, as did Vivian Bearing shortly before she died, "I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. I fear I have been found out."\(^{18}\)

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\(^{18}\) This story of Vivian's spiritual transformation, in conclusion, may be read as a gospel parable revealing the superiority of a way shaped both by maternal practices and the Jesus story, in which the last are first and the first are last, where the wisdom of God is foolishness to the wise. As my friend Don Martinez noted, "while not directly stated, in the end, when it came to the ultimate things—suffering, meaning, death—theology developed in the abstract, theology disengaged from the day to day experience of life, has the effect of the "treatment"... Vivian suffers (and ultimately dies) not from the cancer, but from the treatment, or more specifically, from the doctors' idolatry of a certain kind of knowing, a knowing that Jason confides to Susie as just being an endless categorizing of further complications of the puzzle that in the end is unknowable. What brings death is the pretense that this knowing has the power to overcome the cancer, and ultimately death."

In chapter three of his book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 99-166, Miroslav Volf gives his perspective of the crucial role that Christian theology needs to play in providing for a "non-final reconciliation based on a vision of reconciliation that cannot be undone." In this context he argues that "reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the narrative of the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in light of the other's alterity." The narrative of "Wit" read through a gospel lens, I believe, highlights ways that the practice of mothering may serve the purpose of Christian pedagogy that trains both the "mother" and "child" to receive the alterity of the other, thereby paving the way for a "reconciliation that cannot be undone."
CREATING UNITY IN ADVENTIST CORPORATE CULTURE

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Twentieth century Adventism began with reorganization and the Kellogg-Jones schism, and its corporate culture—in reaction to the latter—has often featured uniformity rather than unity as pluriform oneness in Christ. Now corporate Adventism, in perhaps its most significant and strategic act of the twenty-first century, has unveiled the three values of its corporate culture. "Quality of Life," "Unity," and "Growth" are being proclaimed in press releases, speeches, study groups, interviews, and large headquarters posters. Jesus did pray that his followers would be brought to "complete unity" so that the world might believe (Jn 17:20-23 NIV). But what sort of unity shall we espouse? And how can we create unity in the world church and its groups today?

I decided to study unity after experiencing ethnically diverse church employees trying to work together in Japan, Indonesia, Korea, and Southern California. I went to Singapore and studied the dynamics of unifying at the Far Eastern Division headquarters. My three-month qualitative research there involved participant observation, extensive interviewing of all personnel, and the examination of pertinent documents. I was collecting data in order to develop a "grounded theory" and write a dissertation on the basic social process of creating unity in multicultural Christian organizations. Later I had the privilege of pastoring in Yonkers, New York, where the congregation of two hundred was 35% Black, 31% Asian, 22% White, and 10% Hispanic. People speaking some twenty languages from about thirty countries were there—including both Arabs and Jews.

During the course of my research at Far Eastern Division headquarters, I noticed employees gathering together most mornings to read and meditate from a certain black book. They carried this same black book to church on Saturdays, and generally seemed to hold it in high regard. It apparently informed their corporate culture system of beliefs and values, so I decided to treat it as a "pertinent document" full of "sites" for grounded theory analysis. I "interviewed" its authors, and "collected data" on the topic of my core category, creating unity.

1The historical move toward unity as uniformity has been discussed by Barry Oliver, "Principles for Reorganization of the SDA Administrative Structure, 1888-1903: Implications for an International Church" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1989), 300-303, and George R. Knight, Organizing to Beat the Devil (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 128-129, 173-175.

2 I was there when they voted to change the name from Far Eastern Division to Asia-Pacific Division!

3 "Grounded theory," a method of sociological inquiry, develops integrated sets of hypotheses that are "grounded" in data collection and analysis. The goal is a research-based, problem-solving theory rather than verification. Researchers look for a core category, as well as sub categories and their properties to emerge from data. Procedures include data collection through participant-observation, interviewing, and studying documents; constant comparison of incidents, coding for categories, properties, and a single core category; theoretical saturating and sampling; continuous memoing; and writing up the emergent theory. Grounded theory-based dissertations and monographs have been written, for example, in the fields of organizational studies, nursing, adult education, public health, psychology, and Christian leadership. Topics of specific studies have, for example, included: how milkmen cultivate customers, how dying patients deal with social loss, how friendships are formed, how women manage approachability in urban public places, how prisoners cope with time on their hands, how emphysema sufferers "get around," and how God develops Christian leaders over a lifetime. See Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967); Barney G. Glaser, Theoretical Sensitivity (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1978); Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990); Barney G. Glaser, Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1992); Barney G. Glaser, ed., Examples of Grounded Theory: A Reader (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1993); Ian Dey, Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999). See also The Grounded Theory Institute website, www.groundedtheory.com. Examples of grounded theory studies applied to Christian leadership include J. Robert Clinton, Leadership Emergence Theory (Altadena, CA: Barnabas Resources, 1989) and my own dissertation (below).

In this paper I return to Genesis 1 and 2, the first biblical site of my research, and present an incomplete and dynamically open theory for creating unity in church groups. God is creating unity by speaking diversity into existence, identifying diverse parts, getting diverse parts together to form united wholes, and valuing the parts and the wholes. Although I call these categories "stages," they do not strictly follow one another in order; backtracking and overlapping occur. Since grounded theories of basic social processes are much more generalizable than studies of sociological units, the theory is applicable to our task of creating unity in Adventist corporate culture.

Creating Unity as a Mighty Act of God: A Grounded Theory

"He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Rev 14:7). A powerful way for Adventists to preach God the creator is to demonstrate to the world that he is still at work creating unity in their midst. Paul says that in Christ, "All things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). I take this to mean that Christ creates leadership and organizations with their structures and corporate-culture value systems. He invites the members of his body to participate with him in the mighty act of creating unity "so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21).

Speaking

Creating unity solves the problem of infighting that prevents a group from accomplishing its mission. In Genesis 1-2 the context is the "spirit" of God hovering over the waters. The first stage in the process is the act of speaking diversity into existence. It seems there can be no united wholes without diverse parts. So God creates light, atmospherically diverse waters, dry land, two kinds of great lights, different kinds of fish, birds, mammals, and creeping things, and two distinct human genders—all by speaking. The final diversity comes about through resting rather than speaking. The result is two different kinds of days. Pastors and religion professors know that speaking is work—and that communication is a very efficient way to get work done. I found two main properties of speaking in Genesis 1-2: power and speed. When God speaks, power is unleashed and entities are created quickly. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. . . . Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps 33:6, 8-9). In summary, God creates two diverse parts, the heavens and the earth—by speaking.

Identifying

God continues the process of creating unity by identifying the diverse parts he has spoken into existence. He establishes the distinguishing characteristics of the diverse parts by (1) separating them from one another and (2) naming them. God does this on all the days of Creation Week except the fifth; "And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Gen 1:4b-5a). He "sanctifies" (KJV) or "hallows" (NRSV) the seventh day, terms that mean separation or setting apart for a special purpose.

Diverse parts evidently need a time of separation to establish and maintain their identities so that they can contribute uniquely to the whole. Naming further distinguishes the parts, permitting them to relate together in the whole. God includes Adam in the process of creating unity by allowing him to name the animals and birds. The name must fit the characteristics of the diverse part precisely. It is difficult to relate meaningfully with someone whose name you do not know.

Getting Together

The twenty-four hour day, the plants in their soil, the married couple, and the seven-day week are wholes composed of diverse parts. When parts get together, the whole enhances the identity of each part as salt flavors food. So, the meaning of darkness and light is their diversity; the meaning of Night and Day is their identity; and the meaning of evening and morning is their partnership within the twenty-four-hour day.

Genesis 2 seems to focus specifically on relationships between diverse parts of the whole. God provides a day of rest perhaps for both horizontal and vertical relationships to blossom. The man and woman are seen in relation to their garden environment. Further, we are told that a man and his wife will "cling" to each other and become "one flesh."

I found four properties which function as conditions of the category "getting together." First, God insures that diverse parts share commonalities even though they are different. For example, Night is equipped with a lesser
light. Male and female are “bone of each other’s bone and flesh of each other’s flesh” (Gen. 1:23a). And the day of rest is not totally different from the work days.

Second, getting together requires openness as suggested primarily by human sexuality (Gen. 2:24-25). Each diverse party is willing to open up shamelessly to the other even as Night and Day open up to each other at dawn and dusk. (I am not advocating naked board meetings, but church groups whose members are characterized by openness and verbal intercourse.)

Third, diverse parts need leadership to help them secure their identities and to nudge them together. God provides leader-partners who complement each other as they govern diverse parts. Two great lights “rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness” (Gen 1:18). And male and female are given joint dominion over the animals (1:26). Adam, as leader, names the animal life. And God as “matchmaker” gets the man and the woman together. Even in the Western city of Chicago, “Two-thirds of sexual partnerships are brokered by the social networks people are in.”

Fourth, God gives each of the two sets of leader-partners a mandate. The sun and moon are commissioned “to give light upon the earth” (Gen 1:15), and the male-female tandem are commanded, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Note that God provides the man and woman resources for accomplishing their task: his blessing and food for energy (Gen 1:28a, 29). Today we would consider mission definition as well as spiritual and material resources to be important conditions of ongoing unity in groups composed of diverse parts.

Valuing
On the first day God immediately values the diverse part he has created. “God saw that the light was good” (Gen 1:4a) even before separation, naming, and getting together take place. On the third and fourth days, however, valuing is the last activity mentioned. On the sixth day he values the animal’s first, then everything that he had made. Three properties of valuing have emerged from the data. First, God values the diverse part for itself. Second, God values the unified whole when the diverse parts are brought together. And thirdly, even though separation is an important aspect of identifying, God says that it is not good for at least one party, Adam, to be alone indefinitely (Gen 1:18). It is the only case where something is described as being “not good” before the Fall.

Creating Unity in Adventist Corporate Culture: Applications
In applying the theory of creating unity discovered in Genesis 1-2 to the problem of creating unity today, we need to keep in mind the events of Genesis 3-4 and 10-12. We live in a world “where things fall apart; the center cannot hold.” So creating unity today means battling forces that would loose and destroy it—namely distrust, shame, fear, blame, hatred, pain, and death (Gen 3 and 4:1-8). After the flood God again speaks diversity into existence. Nations are separated by language and identified by the names of their progenitors. But God’s plan is to get them together through Abram and the nation of Israel. “A nation and a community of nations will come from you,” God promises Jacob (Gen 35:11; NIV).

The church as the Israel of God today continues to be the means by which God blesses the nations, uniting them as diverse members of Christ’s body in the worship of the creator. The church can participate with God in the mighty act of creating unity in its corporate culture today. By corporate culture I refer to a group’s system of core basic assumptions, beliefs, and values that function to insure internal integration for external mission accomplishment. When I speak about creating unity in Adventist corporate culture, I have two things in mind: first, creating unity (one of three core values currently being espoused) in all our groups, and second, getting all our basic assumptions, beliefs, and values together into a united corporate-culture whole.

Edgar Schein of MIT defines leadership as the management of corporate culture, which includes auditing the current culture and managing change if needed. For example, Adventists, after reviewing the audit and consulting God’s model for creating unity in Genesis 1-2, could choose to emphasize openness more as a corporate-

6 See the research of University of Chicago sociologist Edward O. Laumann, in *The Sexual Organization of the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

7 Is there evidence in the text that God considered darkness in Genesis 1:4-5 to be evil or bad?

8 The line is taken from William Butler Yeats’ poem, “The Second Coming.”

culture sub value under the banner of unity. I will conclude this paper by offering a few more haphazard examples of how the church today might create unity based on God's work of creating unity during creation week. The systematic work of applying the theory, however, needs to be done by each organizational unit itself.

How can we "speak diversity into existence"? In general the church can make organizational communication a higher priority. We can create relationships by speaking to one another. Specifically, the church can "speak diversity" by putting more young people on church boards and committees simply by voting "Aye." And of course we can tap into the spiritual resources represented by the power and speed of God's spoken word—to create unity.

What about identifying diverse parts? Can we learn how to value separation as a prelude to getting together? Can we encourage our diverse parts to maintain their unique identities so that they can contribute something special to the mission of the whole? For example, is it possible that God's plan calls for two scholarly theological organizations to work together like the offense and defense of a football team? With regard to naming, every Adventist group may carefully label its core values and show how each value relates to the others. We need to make sure that names accurately reflect the identities of groups. The name "Far Eastern Division" suggested that the area was a long way away from the Euro-American center of things, an inaccurate reflection of Asian identity.

Can diverse strands of Adventism get together and work together? They can if they learn to keep commonalities and diversities in balance. Their focus will be on Christ, for "in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). The context of their quest for unity will be spirituality, common fundamental doctrines, and agreement on denominational mission definition. Diverse groups within the church will value and appreciate their counterpart's unique calling; they will be open and vulnerable to each other in conversation; and each diverse group will nourish leaders who participate actively in creating unity in Adventist corporate culture.
DISAPPEARING ACT? THE MIGHTY ACTS OF GOD WITHIN ADVENTISM 
AND THE PROBLEMATIC CASE OF HIRAM EDSON’S CORNFIELD EXPERIENCE

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“A picture is worth a thousand words”—and sometimes a lot less. And it is a picture that would come to mind whenever I would think about Hiram Edson (1806-1882), one of the early pioneers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The illustration was made by Harry Anderson and published by the Review and Herald in 1944. In it one can see Edson standing in a cornfield and looking up into heaven, where Christ stands before the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place. For some reason, that illustration has been etched in my memory.

In the course of my research on Edson this past spring, I ran across an extract of Clifford Goldstein’s 2003 book *Graffitti in the Holy of Holies*\(^1\) on the *Adventist Review* website. I was not surprised to find Goldstein refer to Edson’s post-Great Disappointment experience on that gloomy morning of October 23, 1844. Here’s what I read: “For the next few moments let’s forget about 1844, ‘the investigative judgment,’ Ellen White, and Hiram Edson’s vision in the cornfield.”\(^2\)

I went ahead and purchased Goldstein’s book. But when I found the page on which Goldstein mentioned Edson, I was startled. Instead of referring to “Hiram Edson’s vision in the cornfield,” the book only mentioned “Hiram Edson in the cornfield.”\(^3\) The vision had vanished like the mist of an October morn.\(^4\)

A textual variant! Well, perhaps not. But I started feeling more and more like Sherlock Holmes as my somewhat casual research suddenly become an intriguing redaction-critical mystery. Why did the web extract differ from the published book at this point?

I decided to contact some of the parties potentially involved in this mystery. Goldstein quickly replied to my inquiry, but after trying to reconstruct what might have happened, he concluded he was just guessing.\(^2\) But he then asked me whether I thought Edson had a “vision” like Ellen White or something more like an insight. To me, this raised the question of whether he was the one who had used the word “vision.”

I then inquired at Pacific Press, Goldstein’s publisher, and received a response back from Russ Holt, Vice-President for Product Development. He also mentioned that he was not sure how the change took place, but he thought it was what would have normally taken place during the editorial process.\(^5\) He thought that the *Adventist Review* had used an earlier copy that was then later revised into what one finds in the published book. He then said that the decision to take the word


\(2\) The extract from which this quote comes is available at the web site of the *Adventist Review* (http://www.adventistreview.org/2003-1548/story5.html; accessed Nov. 16, 2004).

\(3\) Goldstein, *Graffitti*, 119.

\(4\) I scanned the first half or so of the chapter and discovered that there are other changes, but they appear to be either stylistic in nature (correcting grammar, punctuation; italicizing words; etc.) or changes that augment and further explain terms (i.e., such as who Kenneth Samples is).

\(5\) Personal e-mail communication, July 2, 2004.

\(6\) Personal e-mail communication, August 3, 2004.
“vision” out of the earlier draft did not affirm or deny that what Edson experienced was a “‘vision’ or merely an insight on Edson’s part.” According to Holt, there was no attempt to minimize Edson’s experience, and he cautioned me not to read too much into the change in wording.8

Finally, I wrote several times to the Adventist Review to see whether there might be light from that corner of the publishing triangle. On July 1 I sent virtually the same communication I had previously sent to Goldstein and Holt to Carlos Medley via e-mail; I received no reply. On July 29, I sent the same basic communication to the “letters” e-mail address at the Review; again, I received no reply. Finally, I wrote a letter on September 28 to William Johnsson, the editor. I have not received a response.

The primary account of Edson’s experience comes from Edson himself, written sometime before his death in 1882. A key part of his manuscript describes what happened on the morning of October 23, 1844:

After breakfast I said to one of my brethren, “Let us go and see, and encourage some of our brn [sic].” We started, and while passing through a large field I was stopped about midway of the field. Heaven seemed open to my view, and I saw distinctly, and clearly, that instead of our High Priest coming out of the Most Holy of the heavenly sanctuary to come to this earth on the tenth day of the seventh month, at the end of the 2300 days, that he for the first time entered on that day the second apartment of that sanctuary; and that he had a work to perform in the Most Holy before coming to this earth.11

Edson’s autobiographical manuscript came to light again—long after it had been written—when H. M. Kelley visited with Edson’s granddaughter. She gave him the manuscript, and a portion of it was printed, apparently for the first time, in the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald in 1921.12 There Kelley stated that Edson had written it “immediately after the disappointment in 1844,...”13 There is no contemporary evidence that corroborates Edson’s autobiographical account, and there were no other published references to his experience for more than forty-five years after the fact.14 Furthermore, in Edson’s obituary in the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, B. L. Whitney simply mentioned that Edson

7Ibid.
8Ibid.
9Medley’s address is: emedley@adventistreview.org.
10The address is: letters@adventistreview.org.
11Quoted from 1844 and the Rise of Sabbatarian Adventism, comp. and ed. by George R. Knight (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1994), 126.
12H. M. Kelley, “The Spirit of 1844,” Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, 23 June 1921, 4-5. Cf. LeRoy Edwin Froom, Finding the Lost Prophetic Witness (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 47-48 (Froom saw the manuscript as a corrective to the “faulty traditional account” regarding the “clarification of our sanctuary position” [ibid., 48]).
13Kelley, “The Spirit of 1844,” 4. It is important to recognize, however, that this is not the consensus view. Cf., e.g., Fritz Guy, “The Journey of an Idea,” Adventist Heritage 16 (Spring 1995): 10.
had had “a rich experience in connection with the movement of 1843-44.”

The interpretation of Edson’s cornfield experience has had a checkered history. The first published account of the experience was written by J. N. Loughborough in 1892, a decade after Edson’s death. Edson sometimes traveled from church to church with Loughborough, and they had much time to talk and share stories. Loughborough himself stated in his earliest published account of the story that Edson “told me” the story of the experience:

... as he was praying behind the shocks of corn in a field, the Spirit of God came upon him in such a powerful manner that he was almost smitten to the earth, and with it came an impression, “The sanctuary to be cleansed is in heaven.” [Edson] communicated this thought to O. R. L. Crosier, and they together carefully investigated the subject.

Loughborough’s two identical accounts were apparently the only published accounts of Edson’s experience until the second decade of the 20th century, yet there are at least five accounts of the story by him, and one finds discrepancies in some of the details. Besides that, they do not agree in details with Edson’s account.

Writers have utilized a number of terms to describe what happened to Edson in the cornfield—without stating that he saw a vision. For example, Edson had: a conviction; a flash (of conviction, discovery, insight, light, truth, understanding, etc.); an impression; an insight; a “remarkable experience of perception”; and/or a realization. Some


18J. N. Loughborough, Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists, With Tokens of God’s Hand in the Movement and a Brief Sketch of the Advent Cause From 1831 to 1844 (Battle Creek, MI: General Conference Association, 1892), 114; repeated in idem, The Great Second Advent Movement: Its Rise and Progress (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1909; originally published by Southern Publishing in 1905), 193.


writers were attracted to the idea that an idea or new thought “struck” Edson. Some wrote about apparent supernatural events associated with his experience, while avoiding mention of any vision. Sometimes attempts at interpretation appear to be confused: ironically, while Don F. Neufeld referred to an understanding that flashed into Edson’s mind but questioned the visionary nature of Edson’s experience, just weeks later he described Ellen White’s early vision in February of 1845 as comprised of representations flashing into her mind.

Several writers have either explicitly or implicitly questioned whether or not Edson’s experience was a vision. One account indicated that it was close, but apparently not the real thing. And another concluded, regarding Edson’s account, that it “should be relegated to the level of apocryphal literature to which, without doubt, it belongs.”


22 E.g., “Suddenly something like an electric current coursed through Hiram’s body, bringing him to a halt. He felt as though he were in the presence of God Himself” (Bowe, “Night of No Return,” 12).


26 Adriel D. Chilson, They Had a World to Win: Fascinating Glimpses into the Lives of Our Adventist Pioneers (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2001), 19 (“Almost as in a vision he saw Christ . . .”).

But there are a few who have stated that what Edson experienced really was a vision.²⁸ In 1935, F. W. Bartle, manager of the New York Food Company, stated in a letter to W. A. Spicer: "Elder Hiram Edson had visions before Sr. White did."²⁹ More recently, in 1994 Glen Greenwalt underscored his belief that Edson's experience was not only "truly visionary" but was, in fact, a vision.³⁰ Greenwalt found parallels with the phenomena of biblical visions, and to him they indicated a similar pattern of God reminding his people that he had not abandoned them.³¹ He moreover identified Edson "with the prophetic, heavenly vision, and Ellen White with the practical, down-to-earth vision."³² But a few months later Desmond Ford, while showing appreciation for Greenwalt's overall article, nevertheless maintained that Edson's experience was neither accurate nor inspired, basing his conclusions on his interpretation of Daniel 8.³³ Further, he emphatically stated: "There was no such vision."³⁴

Although there are apparently some historical discrepancies in the extant portion of the manuscript,³⁵ let's assume, for the sake of argument, that there are no discrepancies or questions of fact at this juncture in Edson's autobiographical account. Could his account be seen as a vision from God? First, Edson's statement that "I was stopped" is exactly the same as what one finds earlier in his account. On passing a house, he noted: "I was stopped in the road opposite the house, by some unseen power, and could not make progress. I know not what was the cause,..."³⁶ He then described a "shadowy form in human shape" standing before him and concluded that the "Lord's angel" was accompanying and leading him.³⁷ Both references should thus be seen to be understood by him as supernatural in nature.

Second, not only does Edson describe charismatic phenomena in his autobiographical account,³⁸ but we know that


²⁹Quoted in Nix, "Life and Work," 201 (Appendix H).


³¹Ibid., 47.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.


³⁵Burt, "Historical Background," 251.

³⁶Quoted from _1844_, 124.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸_1844_, 123-125. Notice what Patrick says: "To view Edson’s account in the context of his previous experiences with the supernatural is to affirm this was a vision" ("Charles Fitch," 104).
he was involved in charismatic phenomena in 1849—five years later. In a letter he then wrote to the editor in *The Present Truth*, he mentioned the Spirit being poured out on two occasions, two occasions of speaking in tongues by another person, two dreams of his (one in which Ellen White was initially opposing him!), and a number of "impressions" he had had. 39 In the same issue, the editor, James White, defended Edson's description of charismatic experiences, particularly underscoring the biblical support for visions as well as dreams. 40

Third, while Edson does not explicitly say that he had a vision, his experience does mirror details in some biblical visionary accounts. Edson states that "heaven seemed open to my view." In Ezek 1:1, the prophet Ezekiel stated that while he was on the banks of the Chebar River, "the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." 41 Visionary accounts of the heavens opening occur in several other biblical texts. Luke's account of Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7:55-56, where Stephen saw the heavens opened and Christ standing at the right hand of God, is particularly illuminating. 42 While not described by Luke as a vision, some Seventh-day Adventists insist that not only was it a vision, but that Stephen was consequently a prophet. 43


40 James White [editorial], *Present Truth*, December 1849, 40.

41 Unless otherwise indicated, all English quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

42 When Peter had his vision of the sheet filled with unclean animals (Acts 10:3; cf. 10:17, 19; 11:5), he also saw heaven opened (10:11). Peter saw his vision clearly, or distinctly (10:3), just as Edson saw "distinctly, and clearly." Also, when John saw heaven opened in Rev 19:11, he then saw a vision of one called the Word of God riding on a white horse. And last, when the heavens were opened (Matt 3:16; Lk 3:21; or torn apart (Mk 1:10); as Jesus came up out of the waters of his baptism (Lk 3:21 says nothing about going up from the Jordan but rather states that Jesus was praying when this event occurred), it is possible that what Jesus saw was itself a visionary experience. A significant variant in Matt 3:16 indicates that the heavens were opened to him (see text above). On the value of this textual variant, cf. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I–VII*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 328, n. 66; Joel Marcus, "Jesus' Baptismal Vision," *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 512-521; and Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1998), 9.

43 Luke records this about Stephen: "But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'" (Acts 7:55-56). Despite the fact that Luke does not explicitly call this a vision, one can assume that such was the case.

44 Acts 7:55 is important for Seventh-day Adventists in anchoring the endpoint of the Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks in Dan 9:24-27, particularly the phrase "to seal both vision and prophet" in 9:24. Seventh-day Adventists believe that the seventy weeks ended in 34 C.E., when, as it is assumed, Stephen's speech and martyrdom took place (as recorded in Acts 7). In order to anchor Stephen as a fulfillment of Dan 9:24, one must conclude two things: (a) Stephen had a vision; and (b) Stephen was a prophet. And so notice what William Shea, for example, says: "When the Holy Spirit came upon Stephen, he was given a vision of heaven. By definition Stephen became a prophet at this point in time. It is to prophets that God gives visions of Himself like this" (William H. Shea, "The Prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27," in *The Seventy Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 3 [Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986], 81). More recently, Shea wrote: "When a person looks into heaven and sees God sitting on His throne and Jesus standing at His right hand, that person is having a vision. People who have visions are, by definition, prophets. At that moment, technically speaking, Stephen was a prophet" (William H. Shea, *Daniel 7-12: Prophecies of the End Time*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier, ed. George R. Knight [Boise, ID: Pacific
And finally, Edson’s repeated use of conjunctions like “that,” followed by information about what was seen, has been seen as undermining the visionary nature of his experience.\textsuperscript{45} But a similar literary style was not uncommon in Ellen White’s accounts of her visions.\textsuperscript{46}

Did Edson anachronistically utilize visionary language in telling his account? Did he come to believe only later in life that he had really had a vision? Or, could it be that Edson’s experience in the cornfield really was a vision? Perhaps we will never know.

Nevertheless, there been reticence to describe his cornfield experience as a vision, and this is striking in light of the experience having been described as being as “revolutionary” as what happened on the day Jesus rose from the dead\textsuperscript{47} and as one of “the most dramatic moments in religious history.”\textsuperscript{48} Among possible factors for this state of affairs, one should consider the following: (a) Edson never described it as a vision; (b) there was a strong sentiment against visions and dreams among the early Adventists after October 22\textsuperscript{49}; (c) Adventist understanding of the phenomena, nomenclature and taxonomy of visions developed over time; (d) Edson’s manuscript contained speculative interpretations of biblical prophecies, which may have tainted the whole account in the minds of some\textsuperscript{50}; (e) Edson was apparently not held in high regard when he died\textsuperscript{51}; and (f) there has been a strong emphasis on underscoring the biblical—rather than visionary—origin of and basis for Seventh-day Adventist beliefs.\textsuperscript{52}

The view that Edson’s experience was visionary came into prominence for awhile in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century after his autobiographical account was rediscovered, largely due to Arthur Spalding’s earlier works. But since then, Edson’s experience in the cornfield on that dreary October morn in 1844 has sometimes become contentious, and it has become, in a number of ways, a “disappearing act” within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It has been handled with kid gloves, downgraded in significance and marginalized. In some cases it is mysteriously missing. For instance, when the White


\textsuperscript{46}Ellen White once saw a “Mr. ___” in one of her visions and wrote: “I saw that he was deceived in regard to himself, that he was not in favor with God” (Ellen G. White, Child Guidance [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982], 452). Cf. also her report of her vision at the home of Stockbridge Howland on April 3, 1847, dealing with the heavenly sanctuary and the Sabbath, in which she wrote “I saw that . . .” six times (idem, Christian Experience & Teachings [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1922], 91 and 93). There are a number of similar cases.

\textsuperscript{47}Joiner, These Were the Courageous, 33; cf. Froom, Prophetic Faith, 884-887; Spalding, Captains of the Host, 95-97.

\textsuperscript{48}“The Adventist Church exists to bear a message, and its message is based to a great extent on the truth that Hiram Edson grasped on this occasion” (Moving Out, 27). Cf. Ruth Alden Doan, The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 203-204.

\textsuperscript{49}Damsteegt, Foundation, 121; and Spalding, Origin and History, 57.

\textsuperscript{50}In reply to Edson’s “new light,” Loughborough recalls that J. N. Andrews quipped: “Then let me spoil your light” (quoted in Nix, “Life and Work,” 209 [Appendix J]).


\textsuperscript{52}Cf., e.g., Maxwell, Magnificent Disappointment, 78-79.
Estate commissioned Elfred Lee in 1989 to paint the mural entitled “The Christ of the Narrow Way,” based on Ellen White’s first vision, they and the artist carefully chose 144 individuals to include in the mural who had made a special contribution in making the Seventh-day Adventist Church what it is today. The mural was unveiled on October 22, 1991. Intriguingly, while Lee portrayed beams of light falling to the earth from Christ, the High Priest in the Most Holy Place, those beams were falling not on Hiram Edson, but on Joseph Bates. In fact, Hiram Edson is nowhere to be found among the 144 individuals portrayed.

Recently I spent a number of weeks reading several of the best stories from Guide magazine’s fifty-plus years to my nine-year-old son, Tristan. Virtually every story was a fascinating and gripping account of how God had revealed not only his power but his care for those who trusted in him. And almost every time, at the end the story, I would say to Tristan, “What do you think about that?!?” or, “Can you believe that?!?” And Tristan would respond with something like “Wow!” or “That’s a neat story!”

What would Tristan say if I read him the story of Hiram Edson? Which version of the story would I read? Would he see God’s interaction with Edson as a mighty act? Perhaps; perhaps not. Maybe Edson’s experience was “only” a conviction, a flash of understanding, an insight. Ideas and insights can be powerful and life-changing. While not appearing as “mighty” as the Exodus from Egypt, they can turn out to be as revolutionary as the thoughts that coursed through the disciples on that dreary and bitter Sunday after they encountered the risen Christ. But I tend to think Edson’s experience was more than that.


54“The explanation of the portrayal of Christ in the Most Holy Place does not mention any individuals involved in the post-Disappointment context” (ibid., 25). The note explaining the placement of Bates does not mention anything with regard to the sanctuary, but it does mention that he was a co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it emphasizes his advocacy of the Sabbath and acceptance of health reform (ibid., 28).

TRINITY AND TEMPORALITY: WHY TIME IS REAL FOR A GOD WHO ACTS

Richard Rice
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The relations that constitute God are either temporal relations or empty verbiage.
Robert W. Jenson

The profound truth of the temporality of God is something we as theologians are all sooner or later going to have to learn.
Schubert M. Ogden

Divine action and the biblical portrait of God.
It is clear that the notion of divine action is central to the biblical portrayal of God. In the words of G. Ernest Wright, "Biblical man confesses his faith by reciting the formative events of his history as the redemptive handiwork of God." Similarly, "Christianity has always taught that in a real history of what once happened in the ancient world God came and revealed himself. Hence the Bible presents factual history, in which is seen the work of the living God."2,3

Though action is central to the Christian view of God, what divine action means is not nearly so clear. As Keith Ward observes, the idea that God acts in the world is problematic, even for confirmed believers. One reason is the success of modern science. In a world where everything is determined by natural laws there seems to be no room for God to act. Another reason is the moral reservations which the idea generates. If God can act, why does he intervene in some cases but not others? Many people would rather deny that God can act at all than say that he either acts arbitrarily or manipulatively.4

To add to the complexity, the expression, "divine act," refers to different things. One is the primordial activity by which God upholds the world. The universe is God's act in the sense that God exercises his power to uphold all that is moment by moment.5 Christians have traditionally asserted, however, that God not only acts upon the natural course of things, God also acts within it. That is to say, certain events in nature and history are due, not to God's general sustaining or providential power—a necessary condition of all events—but to God's direct and immediate influence.6,7 We typically call events of this sort "miracles" or instances of "special providence" when they are sufficiently vivid to attract our attention.8

1 "At the centre of Israelite faith lay the great proclamation that the God of the fathers had heard the cry of a weak, oppressed people in Egypt" (G. Ernest Wright, "God Who Acts," in God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem, ed. Owen C. Thomas, AAR Studies in Religion Number 31 [Scholars Press, 1983], 15. The essays in this collection deal with a number of questions surrounding the idea of divine action).


3 In the absence of helpful alternatives, I employ masculine singular pronouns throughout this paper, as do my sources, to refer to God. I hope this retreat to conventional usage will not be construed as an endorsement of patriarchy. Since the image of God in the human incorporates both male and female (Gen 1:26-27), it is clear that God is not to be identified with either sex to the exclusion of the other.

4 Keith Ward, Divine Action (Collins, 1990), 1, 3. Ward's book explores a wide range of issues related to God's activity in the world, largely from the standpoint of Christian theological concerns. For an approach that is theologically sensitive but deals at greater length with philosophical aspects of the issue, see Thomas F. Tracy, God, Action, and Embodiment (Eerdmans, 1984).

5 History, too, is God's act in the sense that God upholds the order in which human beings exercise their freedom, make decisions, and act.

6 The central events in the biblical narrative, the "history of salvation," are events of this second type. They include the creation of the world, God's deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage, and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). "The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut 26:8-9). "This man [Jesus of Nazareth], handed over to you according to the
The Trinity and the Christian concept of God.
When we consider the Trinity, a similar complexity confronts us. It is clear that the Trinity is central to the Christian concept of God, but just what the Trinity means is by no means so clear. Most Christians accept the doctrine only because it belongs to the inherited tradition. They were told it was something they should believe, but never expect to understand. The more inventive view of the trinitarian godhead as a mathematical conundrum, and try to explain how something can be both three and one by invoking analogies like a triangle, which has three sides, or the chemical compound H₂O, which exists in three different states—as a solid, liquid, or gas. For many theologians, the concept represents an embarrassing vestige of Hellenistic Christianity, whose framers lost the simple teachings of Jesus when they tried to express them in the thought-forms of late antiquity.

It took Seventh-day Adventists a long time to embrace the idea of the Trinity. Some of our early leaders directly opposed the idea. For Joseph Bates it was unscriptural, for James White an “absurdity,” and for M. E. Cornell it was a fruit of the great apostasy that also included Sunday-keeping and the immortality of the soul.⁹ In fact, according to C. Mervyn Maxwell, early Adventists were “about as uniform in opposing Trinitarianism as they were in advocating belief in the Second Coming.”¹⁰

Adventist thinkers today are much more supportive of the idea. They use explicitly Trinitarian language to talk about God and they interpret the concept of Trinity with care and subtlety.¹¹ Most recently, a trio (!) of Andrews University scholars has presented a strong case for the Trinity, arguing that the doctrine is biblically sound and

definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:23-24).

See John Sanders, The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence (InterVarsity, 1998), for an extensive evaluation of two models of providence, the “no-risk” and the “risk” view, to use his terminology. According to the former, “divine sovereignty can only mean exhaustive control of all things” (11).

⁷ Not all Christians accept this distinction. For theistic naturalism, or naturalistic theism, God is equally active in all natural and historical events, so that every event could be viewed as an act of God. And what we typically refer to as an “act of God” is an occurrence that to us manifests more vividly than others God’s involvement in all events. For one expression of this perspective, see Schubert M. Ogden, “What Sense Does it Make to Say, ‘God Acts in History’?” (in The Reality of God and Other Essays [Harper & Row, 1966], 164-187).

⁸ God could, of course, perform such actions in ways that would be imperceptible to us.


¹¹ In a 1993 article Raoul Dederen defends the doctrine of the Trinity as biblically based, even though the word itself is not found in Scripture. He rejects all tritheistic or modalistic conceptions of God and urges us to respect the essential mystery of God’s triune reality (“The Mystery of the Trinity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” Adventist Review [Aug. 26, 1993]: 8-11). The widely circulated commentary on the church’s 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs is equally explicit in affirming the Trinity and it, too, explores the meaning of the idea, albeit briefly. The Godhead comprises a relationship of love that comes to expression in the work of salvation, and most clearly at the cross of Christ. The Trinitarian differentiations within God correspond to the various saving activities of God (P. Gerard Damsteegt, et al., Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Twenty-Seven Fundamental Doctrines [Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988], 17-25).
asserting that it "forms the essential basis for the very heart of what is unique to Christianity," namely, "the greatest of all biblical notions—God is love."\(^{12,13}\)

Among well-known contemporary theologians, those who affirmed the doctrine were often tepid in their support. For Emil Brunner, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity "did not form part of the early Christian—New Testament—message, nor has it ever been a central article of faith in the religious life of the Christian church as a whole, at any period in its history." Consequently, says Brunner, "the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity is not a biblical kerygma, not the kerygma of the church, but...a theological doctrine which defends the central faith of the Bible and of the Church."\(^{14}\) In other words, Brunner seems to say, the doctrine serves an important defensive purpose, but it does not belong to the heart and soul of Christian faith.

**Divine temporality affirmed.**

In recent years this attitude has given way to remarkable enthusiasm. Since the appearance of Karl Rahner’s slim volume on the Trinity in 1970 there has been nothing short of a flowering of interest in the topic. In these remarks I would like to examine the reflections of a contemporary theologian whose take on the Trinity stands in marked contrast to the skepticism and reluctant acceptance it once received. Robert W. Jenson is among those who believe that the concept of the Trinity is not only essential to a Christian understanding of God; it is the very essence of that understanding. Moreover, his views on the Trinity are particularly relevant to the theme of our current meeting—the mighty acts of God.\(^{15}\)

As Jenson describes them, God’s acts in salvation history are not only central to God’s very identity; they determine what it means to be God. And this is why the concept of the Trinity is so important to a Christian view of God. God’s acts are constitutive of God’s reality.

Jenson develops this position in careful conversation with early Trinitarian thought. He accepts the familiar observation that the Christian religion emerged from the encounter between biblical religion and the thought-world of late antiquity. But instead of fusing the gospel with Greek culture, he argues, early Christian thinkers deliberately

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\(^{13}\) When and how did these transformations take place? I’m not sure we can tell. The earliest version of the Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists (1932) describes "the Godhead, or Trinity," as consisting of "the Eternal Father," "the Lord Jesus Christ," and "the Holy Spirit." The 1980 revision of the Statement curiously omits the word *Trinity*, but clearly affirms and further develops the idea. Belief 2 asserts, "There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-equal Persons," and Beliefs 3, 4, and 5 deal, respectively, with "God the Eternal Father," "God the Eternal Son," and "God the Eternal Spirit."

One of the church’s most significant liturgical sources also points to a doctrinal transition. Looking at the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* of 1985 alongside the 1949 *Church Hymnal* it replaced, we surmise that there were reservations among Adventists about the concept of the Trinity in the late ’40s but that these reservations were largely overcome within the next three decades. The 1949 publication altered a number of familiar Christian hymns in order to remove their Trinitarian references. The 1985 publication restored the Trinitarian references to these hymns. Thus, the closing line of "Holy, Holy, Holy" in the 1949 hymnal—"God over all who rules eternity"—becomes in the 1985 hymn "God in three persons, blessed Trinity!" The 1949 version of "Come, Thou Almighty King," deletes a stanza that begins with the words "To Thee, great One in Three, Eternal praises be." The 1985 version restores that stanza. The 1985 publication also adds no fewer than ten new hymns containing straightforward Trinitarian language. Consequently, we can now sing the following lines: "Praise the Father, praise the Son, and praise the Spirit, three in One" (in hymn 2); "Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, three we name You" (in hymn 30); "The Trinity whom we adore, forever and forever more" (in hymn 148).


\(^{15}\) Jenson develops his views on the Trinity primarily in two major projects, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Fortress, 1982), and the two volumes of his *Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1997-99), which are respectively entitled, "The Triune God" and "The Works of God."
refused to do so, and the doctrine of the Trinity is the fruit of their efforts. Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity is not the product of Hellenic influence, but the product of resisting Hellenic influence.\footnote{Cf. The Triune Identity, 34.}

As Jenson describes it, the critical difference between Christianity and Hellenism involved divergent views of God and time. At its heart, Greek religion was a quest for something that could resist the flow of time, for an aspect of reality impervious to change. The gods' one defining characteristic was therefore immortality, immunity to destruction, and the true object of Greek religion was Timelessness as such. \textit{(Think of Zeus conquering Chronos.)} Biblical thought could not have been more different. The Greeks insisted that divinity wasn't involved in time; the Hebrews insisted that it was. And instead of conceiving of eternity as abstraction from time, they viewed God's eternity as faithfulness through time.\footnote{Ibid., 59, 58.}

The Greek vision of things had a profound effect on early Christology. Christians who made the Hellenistic assumption that the divine is impervious to time were left with an enormous gap between God and the world, and this space is where they located Christ. Consequently, the Son, the logos, is inferior to God, an originated being, though nevertheless "God of a sort."\footnote{Ibid., 79.} Arian, too, was motivated by the late Hellenistic need to escape time. Because he accepted Origen's concept that God is unoriginated and devoid of internal differentiation, Arian concluded that "the Son is not unoriginated, nor is he in any part of the Unoriginated." Accordingly, "There was once when he [the Logos] was not." And because Christ is involved with time he cannot really be God. The Logos may be God for us, but he cannot be God in himself.\footnote{Ibid., 81-82.}

Though Trinitarian reflection began with the mistaken view that God is timeless and the Logos must be inferior to God, the mature doctrine developed as a rejection of these ideas. Its objective was to affirm both Christ's full divinity and God's intimate connection with temporal, creaturely reality. As expressed by Athanasius and confirmed by the council of Nicea, God is inherently relational. The Father-Son relation is internal to God's being. And since God is God precisely in his relatedness, it is the Trinity as such, not the Father as such, who is God. Later in the 4th century, the Cappadocian fathers solidified God's relationality by eliminating subordinationism. As Jenson describes it, they took the "hypostases" and "distinctions" Origen had used to connect God to time vertically, and placed them horizontally within the divine reality. In this way Father and Son could be one God without ranking them ontologically.\footnote{Ibid., 89-90.}

More of this would take us too deeply into the intricacies of Trinitarian reflection than we can afford to go here, but the central point is clear. God is inherently relational. The expression, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," names the one God and identifies him as having deity in a complex and interactive way.\footnote{Ibid., 112.} Furthermore, the implications of this concept of God for our salvation are profound. For as God is thus conceived, there is no distance between him and us that needs to be overcome. "Each of the Trinitarian relations is an affirmation that as God works creatively among us, so he is in himself."\footnote{Ibid., 107.}

Furthermore, there is a "tensed" quality to the divine relations. Salvation history comprises the manifestations of a divine reality, all of which is involved in each great act. Unlike the Greek view that God's self-identity is immune to all outside influence, leaving him changeless and impassible; the Trinity imparts change, dynamism to God. Since God is something that happens to us, God himself is an event.\footnote{Ibid., 112.}
If this is really what the Trinity is about, then why all the confusion, that surrounds the doctrine? Because virtually all of the insights of the Eastern fathers were lost when, the Trinity came to the West. Confused by their terminology, Western theologians employed what they thought were Latin equivalents (but weren't) in a way that not only obscured but distorted the Cappadocians' intent. And they set Western thought on a course that renders the Trinity at best incomprehensible and at worst a distortion of the biblical portrait of God.

The central culprit in this story was Augustine, who attributed to God the very characteristics of Greek ontology that the Cappadocians sought to overcome. They wanted to show that God is inherently related to his temporal creation; Augustine wanted to show what God is in himself, apart from creation. For the Cappadocians, God is complex: it is precisely the togetherness of the identities that constitutes God. But for Augustine, God is simple; each identity possesses an abstract divine essence in exactly the same way, so the distinctions among them are lost.\(^{24}\) The Nicenes called the Trinity God \textit{because} of the triune relations and differences; Augustine calls the Trinity God \textit{in spite of} them.\(^{25}\)

With these moves, Augustine severed the Trinity from its anchor in salvation history and cast it adrift on a sea of philosophical speculation. When you think of God, Augustine maintains, you think ‘a greatest and highest substance that transcends all changeable creatures…And so if I ask, ‘Is God changeable or unchangeable?’ you will quickly respond…, ‘God is changeless.’’ Here is the essential distinction between creatures and God: ‘speak of the changes of things, and you find ‘was’ and ‘will be’; think God, and you find ‘is’ where ‘was’ and ‘will be’ cannot enter.” God not only does not change, he cannot; just so, “he is rightly said to be.” God, in other words, is being itself, “he who is.”\(^{26}\) Thus conceived, God is timeless and impassible, untouched and untouchable by the temporal world.\(^{27}\)

But let us return to Jenson’s central point. Only salvation history gives meaning to the Trinitarian language of persons and relations. And if the mighty acts of God are constitutive of divine reality, we must conceive of God as inherently and essentially temporal. With this, the entire sweep of philosophical theism that insists on divine simplicity, impassibility, and timelessness gives way. Because the name “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” derives its meaning from God’s reality in time, the relations that constitute God are “either temporal relations or empty verbiage.”\(^{28}\)

Jenson’s voice is just one in a growing chorus of theologians who make this point. The best known is Karl Rahner, whose familiar maxim, “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity,” has become the mantra of recent Trinitarian thought.\(^{29}\) And the most influential is no doubt

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 119-120.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 118.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 117-18.

\(^{27}\) Augustine’s Trinitarian meditations were a magnificent mistake, of course. For in his attempt to describe the inner life of the divine, Augustine discovered the inner life of the person and thus began the long journey of introspection that produced our Western concept of the individual. As far as human consciousness is concerned, we are still benefiting from his insights. The emergence of the self in Western thought, as well as its subsequent demise, has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The most comprehensive discussion to date is no doubt Charles Taylor’s magisterial account, \textit{Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity} (Harvard, 1989). A number of works deal with various aspects of the modern and/or postmodern self, including Adam B. Seligman, \textit{Modernity’s Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence} (Princeton, 2000) and Calvin O. Schrag, \textit{The Self After Postmodernity} (Yale, 1997). An influential sociological study of the self in contemporary America is Robert Bellah, et al., \textit{Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life} (University of California Press, 1985). In \textit{The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei} (Westminster John Knox, 2001), Stanley J. Grenz provides an account of the self’s long history and proposes a revisionary interpretation of the self that draws on the recent emphases in Trinitarian thought on personness and community (55-56).

\(^{28}\) \textit{The Triune Identity}, 125-126 (emphasis his).

Karl Barth, whose exploration of the biblical portrait of God leads to sonorous declarations like these: God “is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us, as that which He is in Himself, in the most inward depth of His Godhead.... In the condescension in which He gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ He exists and speaks and acts as the One He was from all eternity and will be to all eternity.”

Similarly, for Wolfhart Pannenberg, God’s actions in salvation history reveal that God’s inner reality consists of “concrete life relations.” And for him, as for Jenson, the Trinity is not derived from God’s essence, the Trinity is God’s essence. Consequently, we never get behind the Trinity to something more basic or original. If God is truly love, there are relations in the very depths of God’s being. God’s fundamental reality is Father, Son, and Spirit.

**Divine temporality obscured.**

Jenson is in good company when he insists that complexity, relationship, and temporality are intrinsic to the divine life. The mighty acts of God are more than a record of what God does; they are a portrait of what God is. So far, so good. But when Jenson moves from his insistence on divine temporality to an account of God’s relation to the temporal world, this essential point seems to evaporate, unless his language betrays his intention.

As we have seen, Jenson follows the Cappadocians, who rejected the Hellenistic view and affirmed God’s relation to time. He puts the contrast this way: “Hellenic deity is eternal in that it circumscribing time has its motionless center: Gregory’s God is eternal in that he envelops time, is ahead of and so before it.”

But what is the difference between a motionless center and an enveloping reality? They give us different pictures of the God-world relation, to be sure, but in one respect they are strikingly similar. They envision time as a sphere, to which infinity may or may not be related. In the Greek case it isn’t; in the Cappadocian (and Jensonian) case it is. But the persistent image is that of time as a container, a sphere, a bounded area. And in this respect Jenson’s position fails to overcome the position he so thoroughly critiques.

For Jenson, as well as for the Greeks and the Hellenized Christians who accepted their assumptions, time appears to be a sphere distinct from God. For the Greeks, God exists apart from this temporal sphere. He is above and beyond it, or immovably centered within it, but he is essentially untouched by it. It contributes nothing to him. The bliss or tranquility of the divine is untroubled by any happening in the realm of finite reality. For Jenson, God graciously chooses to be involved in the creaturely, temporal sphere. God is the power of the future, who lures and guides the temporal process to the fulfillment of his purposes. He is not “above” time; instead, he is “ahead” or “in front of” it, drawing it dynamically forward.

Jenson’s spatializing of time is further evident in statements like these: “For God to create is for him to make accommodation in his triune life for other persons and things.... In himself, he opens room, and that act is the event of creation. We call this accommodation in the triune life ‘time.’” And in this statement, his spatializing of time is explicit: “In interpreting the reality of time, we could not avoid the language of space. Time... is the room God makes in his eternity for others than himself.”

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32 Although God’s identity finds expression in his relation to the world, for Jenson God’s identity does not depend on the world. God in himself, he asserts, could have been the same God he is had there been no creation, and no Trinitarian history (*The Triune Identity*, 139). Indeed, God could have been triune in some other way, even though we cannot imagine how (ibid., 141).

33 *The Triune Identity*, 165.

34 “Created time is accommodation in God’s eternity for other than God” (*Systematic Theology*, 2:25).

35 Ibid., 46.
With statements like these, Jenson shies away from the conclusion to which his Trinitarian suggestions naturally lead. According to Jenson, the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that something in the inner life of God corresponds to the temporal world. But when he describes the nature of this relationship, his remarks seem to indicate that God himself is not essentially temporal. Time is the sphere of creaturely existence, a sphere distinct from God which God graciously incorporates within himself. But God evidently encompasses the events in this sphere in one momentary embrace, rather than sequentially, as they happen. So, while he says that God is related to time, Jenson obscures the meaning of divine temporality.

We find the same problem in the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Like Jenson, Pannenberg affirms God’s relation to history as the key to understanding the divine reality, and, again like Jenson, he affirms the principle that the immanent Trinity is identical to the economic Trinity. But when he describes the ultimate future, he variously identifies it as “the coming of eternity into time,” and “the dissolving of time in eternity.”36 In other words, time gives way to timelessness, and temporal succession comes to an end. The final future is not a transition to a continuing life of temporal experiences, but a single, all-encompassing, momentary experience, an endpoint that subsumes the entire course of history that precedes it.

What happens to the divine temporality in the face of assertions like these? It evaporates. Instead of experiencing time sequentially, God experiences all things at once. The divine life is characterized by an “eternal simultaneity,” says Pannenberg. “To God all things that were are always present.” In the eternity of God, time is “taken up” into “the eternal simultaneity of the divine life.”37 God exists in “an undivided present.”38 Whereas creatures are “subject to the march of time,” “All things are always present to [God].” “The eternal God has no future ahead of him that is different from his present.”39

To be faithful to the biblical portrait of God, we will view the mighty acts of God as revelatory of the divine reality. (This is the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity.) But to do this, we must go beyond Jenson and Pannenberg. They affirm that God is related to the temporal sphere, and then proceed to speak of God as overcoming time or as incorporating all of time in a single moment. Such language, however, depreciates the significance of temporal passage. We do not uphold divine temporality by envisioning time as a sphere which God includes or surrounds, nor by invoking a distinction between “created time” and “trinit time.”40

If God acts in a mighty way, if history begins and ends—or, to put it more precisely, if history has begun and will reach its climax—with God’s decisive activity, then God’s acts contribute to the course of events, and God experiences events as they happen, not as items in a bounded sphere which he may precede, succeed, or envelop. Indeed, God’s own reality must consist of an ongoing series of experiences. If God is temporal in the way that the doctrine of the Trinity requires, we must think of him experiencing sequentially.41

So, Jenson’s insights, purchased by a painstaking analysis of early Christian thought, are historically informative and theologically helpful, but metaphysically deficient in one respect. He shows that temporality applies

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36 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 3:595, 607. “The relation between time and eternity is the crucial problem in eschatology,” says Pannenberg, “and its solution has implications for all parts of Christian doctrine” (ibid.).

37 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 3:607.

38 Ibid., 3:630.

39 Ibid., 1:410.

40 Jenson, Systematic Theology, 2:345.

41 This point requires extensive development, which space prevents us from providing here. For a classic discussion of the issues, see Nelson Pike, God and Timelessness (Schocken, 1970; reprint Wipf and Stock, 2002). For a more recent discussion, see Greg Ganssle and David Woodruff, eds, God and Time (Oxford, 2001). William Lane Craig argues for the tensed theory of time endorsed here in “Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity,” Faith and Philosophy, vol. 17, no. 2 (April 2000), 225-41. Richard E. Creel also deals with a wide range of issues connected to the theme of divine eternity in Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology (Cambridge, 1986). Creel argues, confusingly, that God’s knowledge of the actual world changes but that God is nevertheless changeless in his will and his feeling, as well as in his nature (ibid., 204-206).
to God, but some of his formulations leave us confused as to how this is so. On this point another line of theistic reflection is helpful. Process thought avoids the pitfalls of spatializing time, and it provides a way for us to think of God not only as temporal, but as temporal in a supreme and excellent way.

**Divine temporality clarified.**

If God’s mighty acts are sequential, as they certainly seem to be—creation, redemption, consummation—and if these mighty acts reflect the reality that God is, as the doctrine of the Trinity affirms, then God’s reality must consist of a sequence of experiences.

Many will object to this conclusion on the grounds that it reduces God to the level of the creatures and collapses the difference between God and the world. Instead of isolating God from the world, as the Greeks did, it seems to immerse him in it and turn him into another version of ourselves.

The assumption here is that temporal passage represents loss rather than gain, and is therefore unworthy of divinity. If God changed with time, then God could lose value, becoming less than he was before. On the other hand, if God learns or grows over time, then God is always less than he could be. Either account conflicts with the idea of divine perfection—the concept, as Anselm put it, of “a being than which a greater cannot be thought.” The challenge, then, is to think of divine temporality as an ongoing series of events in a way that preserves God’s essential excellence.

Schubert M. Ogden meets this challenge in an essay entitled, “The Temporality of God.” According to Ogden, we can develop an understanding of divine temporality by carefully analyzing human temporality. Since our own reality is the best entrée we have to reality as such, human existence gives us an answer to “the ultimate philosophical question of the meaning of being itself.”

Careful reflection reveals that human existence exhibits a twofold character. Each human individual embodies, or incarnates, certain characteristics which provide identity over time. These include characteristics that are common to all human beings, along with distinctive physical features and unique qualities of personality and character. But these do not exhaust the content of human existence. Each concrete moment of life presents a person with stimuli which he or she incorporates into a new synthesis of experience. So human existence is essentially “dipolar”; it consists of a number of features that are relatively enduring, and a sequence of momentary experiences which include or embody these features.

By analogy, the being of God also exhibits a dipolarity. It consists of an ongoing sequence of discrete experiences, each of which includes the various qualities which are unique to the divine reality. In this view, all persons, human and divine, are essentially temporal. They exist as concrete moment-by-moment occasions of experience, each of which has certain defining characteristics. In fact, to have experiences, to have a past and a future, is essential to the reality of anything. Time is therefore real for God, as it is for everything else. God is “an

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43 The Reality of God, 148.

44 This view of things reverses the familiar notion that reality consists of “things,” or enduring objects, which “have” experiences. Rather, reality consists of a welter of momentary experiences, some of which share certain qualities with previous experiences and therefore belong to a sequence of events that have sufficient similarity for us to think of them as an enduring object, that is, as a “thing,” or a person.

45 As Ogden puts it, our everyday sense of time is grounded in “a more primal temporality.” The truly primary time of our experience is not something we are within, as if it were a container of some sort in which we order the objects of our ordinary external perceptions. Instead, it is “the time constituted by our experiencing itself, as actual occurrence” (The Reality of God, 151).
experiencing self who anticipates the future and remembers the past and whose successive occasions of present experience are themselves temporal occurrences.\(^{46}\)

Consequently, it is misleading to speak of God as “outside” time, “above” it or even “ahead of” it. Instead, God is the supreme embodiment of temporality. His life, like all life, consists of a series of momentary experiences. And the best way to express this is not to say, “God is in time,” but to say “Time is real for God.”

This clearly conflicts with the familiar view of divine eternity, according to which God has no past or future, but only a single, momentary eternal now.\(^{47}\) But only such a concept gives the notion of divine action meaningful content. If action is essential to the biblical portrait of God, and if the world itself or anything within the world is to be conceived as an act of God, then this atemporal notion of eternity is inadequate. To act in the world is to be genuinely related to the world, to affect the world and be affected by the world.

A familiar objection to this view is that it construes God as a glorified human being, a larger version of us, one agent alongside others embedded in the flux of temporal passage. In particular, it seems to ignore the radical differences that are required for God to be a worthy object of ultimate human devotion. The desire to preserve this distinction is arguably the motive behind the insistence that God is impervious to time, that time and eternity stand in radical opposition. But we don’t need to deny God’s temporality in order to preserve God’s essential excellence.

We can distinguish God from everything else by saying, not that he is a-temporal, but that he is supremely temporal.\(^{48}\) Unlike God, creatures are not only temporal, they are temporary. Their experience begins and ends. In contrast, God’s own experience is “everlasting.” The sequence of events that constitute his life is without beginning or end.\(^{49}\) We might say that God’s experience, then, and God’s alone, is “eternally temporal.”

God is also distinguished from all creaturely reality by the fact that his experience is utterly comprehensive. God responds to everything that exists; each momentary experience encompasses the entire contents of the world. To preserve God’s unique identity, we need not conceive him as the exception to metaphysical principles; we can think of him as their chief exemplification.\(^{50}\) In Ogden’s words, “God’s distinctiveness [is] not an utter negation of temporality but its supreme exemplification. God’s eternity is not sheer timelessness, but an infinite fullness of time.”\(^{51}\) God’s experience is thus the perfect and complete register of all that happens in the world. In contrast to the unmoved mover of Aristotelian thought, the Bible presents us with a portrait of God as the “most moved mover,”\(^{52}\) as one who is more sensitive to what happens in the world than anyone or anything else could be.

By explaining the sequential nature of God’s experience, Ogden helps to clarify Jenson’s affirmation of divine temporality. But there is an important respect in which Jenson’s Trinitarian view of God corrects a deficiency in Ogden’s dipolar theism. For Ogden, as for process theism in general, the ultimate metaphysical fact is God-and-world, not just God. Without a world of beings other than himself to experience, God would have no reality. In other

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 152.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 157.

\(^{49}\) “In the case of God,” Ogden argues, “what is distinctive is the complete absence of...temporal finitude and limitation.” “God’s temporality is not itself temporally determined, so that there is neither a time when God was not yet nor a time when he shall be no more.” “God’s being has neither begun nor will it end, and the past and future to which he is related in each successive occasion of his present experience can be nothing less than a literally limitless past and future” (ibid., 154).


\(^{51}\) “In their truly primal forms, temporality and relational structure are constitutive of being itself, and God’s uniqueness is to be construed not simply by denying them, but by conceiving them in their infinite mode through the negation of their limitation as we experience them in ourselves” (The Reality of God, 157).

\(^{52}\) This is the title of one of Clark H. Pinnock’s books (Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness [Baker, 2001]).
words, God needs the world as much as the world needs God. But this conflicts with the historic affirmations of faith that God alone is supreme, that his existence alone is necessary, and that God creates out of perfect freedom, not out of some sort of necessity.\(^{53}\)

With his dramatic portrayal of God's inner life as one of complexity, dynamism, and drama, Jenson shows that God is relational not only by virtue of his connection with the world, God is relational in himself. God is not only capable of relationality, God consists of relationality. For this reason, we need not think of God in or by himself as anomalous, or as "lonely." The Trinitarian life is filled with experience, unimaginable to us in its richness, complexity, and love. Consequently, creation does not meet a deficiency in the divine reality. To the contrary, it is the overflow of divine love. It freely expresses God's inherent fullness; it extends the inner vitality of God's own life.\(^{54}\)

To summarize, the doctrine of the Trinity expresses the fundamental conviction that the mighty acts of God in salvation history reveal and correspond to God's essential reality. And to be faithful to this portrait we must conceive of God's experience as a sequence that has no beginning and no end. God always has a future as well as a past. In other words, time is real for a God who acts.

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\(^{53}\) There is another problem with Ogden's formulations that we cannot consider here. While he attributes sequential experience to God, and helpfully demonstrates that the scope and inclusiveness of God's temporal experience is qualitatively unique, his "re-presentational" Christology presupposes that God is not more directly involved in one event than any other and therefore implies that virtually any event could be construed as an act of God (see Christ Without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann [Harper & Row, 1961]). This may explain why the doctrine of the Trinity has a negligible role to play in his theology.

\(^{54}\) For further development of the idea that God expresses his innermost life in creation but does not depend on the world for his existence, see my essay, "Process Theism and the Open View of God," in Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue BetweenProcess and Free Will Theists, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock (Eerdmans, 2000), 199.
SPRIT BAPTISM IN ADVENTIST THINKING SINCE THE BIRTH OF MODERN PENTECOSTALISM

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Introduction

The Book of Revelation predicts the end of the world as we know it with a mighty act of God, that of the Spirit's final work on behalf of humankind, causing the entire earth to be "illumined with his glory" (Rev 18:1).1 Ellen White has called this event the latter rain. Adventist expositors from every theological camp have labeled it so, as well as some classic exegetes.2 For some, the birth of the modern Pentecostal Movement a century ago signifies the beginning of this glorious end. This "third wave" of the Spirit, with its cornerstone doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they say, is ready to crest. The Pentecostal Movement has enjoyed unprecedented growth and worldwide appeal, making up almost 90% of today's Christianity in the Third World.3 Many see this development as an ecumenical final "act of God" with profound eschatological implications.4 Walter Hollenweger, arguably the foremost Pentecostal scholar today, has said it clearly:

"The uniqueness of the charismatic renewal [is] in the fact that for the first time since the Reformation, an ecumenical grass roots has emerged which has crossed the frontiers between evangelicals and Catholics. This indeed is of great significance. The basis of this ecumenical approach is the fact that Christians have discovered a common experience, which is at the heart of their spirituality—and this, in spite of their differing theologies

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1 Making a parallel between the Day of Pentecost as told in Acts 2 and the final day of glory as revealed in Revelation 18, Ellen White states: "It is with an earnest longing that I look forward to the time when the events of the day of Pentecost shall be repeated with even greater power than on that occasion. John says, 'I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory'...Thousands of voices will be imbued with the power to speak forth the wonderful truths of God's Word. The stammering tongue will be unloosed, and the timid will be made strong to bear courageous testimony to the truth. May the Lord help His people to cleanse the soul temple from every defilement, and to maintain such a close connection with Him that they may be partakers of the latter rain when it shall be poured out." Review and Herald, July 20, 1886.


3 This statistic is from Walter Hollenweger, considered by many as the foremost scholar on Pentecostal studies today. Walter J. Hollenweger, Pentecostalism: Origins and Development World Wide (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1997), 300.

4 Hollenweger asserts: "What seemed almost impossible in the 60s and 70s is nowadays almost a matter of course, namely, that scholars and church men from Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal backgrounds wrestle together for a better understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in church and world," The Pentecostals, reprint (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), xxv. Cecil Emmitt Robeck Jr., has pointed out that the 20th century would be evaluated by church historians as a century in which the Holy Spirit birthed two great movements: the Ecumenical Movement and the Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement, Hollenweger, Pentecostalism: Origins and Development World Wide (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1997), 3-4.
and interpretations of this experience."

Confusion exists regarding what exactly is this mighty experience known, variously, as the baptism of the Spirit. Evangelical theology tends to equate it with conversion to Christ, whereas most holiness and Pentecostal writings have affirmed such baptism—and any accompanying signs and wonders—as part of a believer’s post-conversion spiritual maturity.

The Latter Rain and its implications are profoundly important for Seventh-day Adventist theology. However, little is clear as to where the Adventist Church stands in all this. While the purpose of this study is not to provide a definitive answer to this question, in view of the conflicting and tentative perspectives existent on the subject, a brief review of 20th century Adventist thinking may help us understand why we are where we are, and how we’ve been relating to it. How could the Church be ready for “the loud cry” of the Spirit’s power when key aspects of its pneumatology are still less clear than its eschatology?

Unfortunately, no significant scholarly work from an Adventist perspective exists, therefore, our brief study is limited to the most influential popular books on the subject. Adventist thinking about the Holy Spirit and, in particular, the baptism of the Spirit, can be divided into four sections: 1) Exploration and Discovery: 1898-1928, 2) The Lean Years of the Spirit: 1928-1967, 3) Reacting to Neo-Pentecostalism: 1967-1982, and 4) Confusion and Re-search: 1982-2004.

**Exploration and Discovery: 1898-1928**

Although the birth of modern Pentecostalism dates from January 1, 1901, it owes its beginnings to the Holiness Movement of the second half of the nineteenth century, perhaps even going back to the aftermath of the 1857-58 Layman’s Revival. Whereas Fundamentalism in America would become an intellectual reaction to liberal theology, it was Pentecostalism that became the *experiential* counter to “withered piety.” Melvin Dieter found the movement to be a synthesis between American Revivalism and Wesleyan Perfectionism.

It is unclear, however, if Phoebe Palmer, W. E. Boardman, Hanna Whitall Smith or other significant Holiness leaders had much influence on any Adventist thought leaders at the time, although perhaps they did on W. W. Prescott or E. J. Waggoner, the only Adventist leaders who wrote on the Holy Spirit before they much knew about who the Holy Spirit

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5 Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, 163.

6 Under the leadership of Charles Parham, a preacher-teacher who challenged his small Bible class in Topeka, Kansas to discover what evidence there may be for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. After agreeing that it must be the gift of tongues, one the students, Agnes Osman, began speaking in tongues when Parham laid hands on her. The more famous Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles where an explosion of tongue-speaking broke out in the congregation took place six years later.


9 Hollenweger, 190.


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was. The early Adventist reticence to accept a trinitarian view of the Godhead took a dramatic turn when, in 1898, Ellen White published *The Desire of Ages*. For the first time she referred to the Holy Spirit with the personal pronoun “he” instead of “it,” and understood Him not to be just as an influence from God but as “the Third Person of the Godhead, who would come with no modified energy, but in the fullness of divine power.” Now in her 60s, Ellen White took a much more sober view of so-called “manifestations of the Spirit.” Thanks to decades of experience and reflection, what she once participated in as a young Methodist convert was now seen to give the enemy advantages he turned into fanatical behavior.14

While the 1906 Azusa Street Revival became a defining moment for the modern Pentecostal Movement, Adventists scrambled to discover what the Spirit was all about and what exactly was His involvement in Christian spiritual development. An acquaintance of Ellen White, Mrs. S. M. I. Henry, a Bible worker, wrote a small book entitled *The Abiding Spirit*. In it she addressed families and children with more general words of encouragement than reproof but the book did not offer many helpful explanations regarding Bible texts about the work or the baptism of the Spirit. She called the Holy Spirit “the personality of God” the source of power and life, apparently assuming Him to be more of an emanated influence. It is not clear where she stood in the concurrent-subsequent continuum regarding when the anointing or baptism of the Spirit supposedly takes place.

Others studied the nature of the Spirit but with unfortunate results, most of them either spiritualizing the person of the Spirit or overemphasizing the experience of the Spirit at the expense of good exegesis. By 1902, John Kellogg had accepted pantheistic views which became core to his personal beliefs. Others, like E. J. Waggoner’s teachings on “spiritual affinities” and writings on the relationship between the gospel and creation, A. F. Ballenger’s view of a “spiritual” sanctuary, and the Holy Flesh Movement of 1900, all contributed to what George Knight would later


15Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1899.

16Ibid., 271, 294.

17Kellogg saw the Holy Spirit as God’s presence in everything that lived: “Where God’s Spirit is at work, where God’s power is manifested, God himself is actually and truly present,” *The Living Temple* (Battle Creek, MI: Good Health Publishing Co., 1903), 28.


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derogatorily call the Adventist Holiness Movement.20

A clearer voice finally arose in 1914. G. B. Thompson, then Field Secretary of the General Conference, wrote a well researched and clearly articulated book on the Holy Spirit, using Scripture, a wide array of Spirit of Prophecy counsel, and the insights of recent Holiness writers on the subject, such as A. J. Gordon, James H. McConkey and A. T. Pierson.21 He argued forcefully for the Spirit as a separate Person of the Trinity.22 He outlined the need for the reception of the Spirit to empower one’s life of service while avoiding giving the impression that this is a sanctifying, second work of grace.23 However, many of his contemporary illustrations were of people who did believe the baptism of the Spirit was a subsequent work of God beyond that of regeneration.24

Nothing in this stage of discovery made as much impact to church leadership regarding the role of the Holy Spirit as the landmark work in 1928 by LeRoy Froom, the result of an immensely popular series of lectures given to ministers the year before.25 Not only did Froom do an exhaustive research in the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, but he acknowledged to have studied “some fifty volumes on the Holy Spirit” before he shared his findings.26 Froom took a near mystical view regarding the regenerating work of the Spirit. He contrasted the work of the Spirit in the Old Testament with the indwelling of the Spirit in the New. He asserted that the baptism of the Spirit, as promised by John the Baptist (Matt 3:11), was “to keep [us] from sin,” just as Christ’s baptism of blood at Calvary was to “take away sins.”27 He painted a concrete and personal picture of the Holy Spirit, as the One through whom Jesus’ personal presence is localized in us, and no longer merely with us.28 Froom interpreted the fire analogy in reference to the Holy Spirit as opposed to the baptism of water.29 In this sense, he comes very close to classical Pentecostal interpretation, where sanctification is an experience subsequent to conversion, echoing both Catholic theology regarding confirmation and the traditional Methodist teaching of Second Blessing empowerment. However, he does not go as far. He recognizes that


22Ibid., 61-63.

23Ibid., 92-94.

24For example, Charles Finney, Charles Wesley, and D. L. Moody among others. Ibid., 198-201.

25L. E. Froom, Coming of the Comforter (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1928). The book was revised and expanded in 1946 and has been published almost continuously for 75 years. It may remain the single most important work on the Holy Spirit by an Adventist author.


27Froom, 29-32.

28Ibid, 60-64, 117-118.

29Ibid., 144-145, 267-268. Froom’s exegesis may be questionable here. He interprets “fire” in Matt 3:11 as complementary of “the Holy Spirit.” However, verse 12 speaks of Jesus clearing His threshing floor by “gather[ing] His wheat into the barn” and by “burn[ing] up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” This appears to set both acts in opposition to each other and not as complements.
empowerment and conversion should be a simultaneous experience even though it is not often so in people’s lives.30

The Lean Years of the Spirit: 1928-1967

From the thirties on we see the study of the Spirit in the Church as one of transition. The same appears to have happened in evangelical theology after the interest on the subject had lasted some 50 years.31 Perhaps due to the complexities and overwhelming demands of the office, two books by General Conference presidents were published in the mid thirties.32 Both of these men were clearly influenced by Froom’s earlier work, even using similar wording and ideas, and yet in some ways expanding on them. A few things differed from Froom. W. H. Branson, who wrote the book while he was a public evangelist, speaks of the endowment of the Spirit as the work of regeneration, a departure from the Wesleyan teaching of Second Blessing.33 He also warned readers about false manifestations of the Spirit such as glossolalia and faith healing.34

Charles Watson’s volume emphasized the role of the Spirit in the broad spectrum of salvation from sin. He wrote about being born of the Spirit, being given the Spirit, and knowing the Spirit as an inseparable process of Christian growth.35 Watson did not excuse the believer from reaching full holiness by the work of the Spirit, and yet the believer is to continue to fight war against temptation which in God’s hands means the perfecting of character.36

Both of these works have stayed away from an instantaneous sanctification concept brought about by a crisis. This is in distinct contrast from some of the popular writings in Evangelical circles at the exact same time, where Samuel Chadwick, for instance, urged readers that “the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is a definite and distinct experience assured and verified by the witness of the Spirit...[which] is distinct from that of regeneration.”37 Many years later, Dorothy Conklin, a Adventist Bible worker and the teacher with graduate education, wrote a book focusing on the analogy of the oil.38 Sounding much like Froom, and quoting just as much from Ellen White, Conklin focuses on the work the Spirit

30Ibid., 169.


33Branson, 61-68.

34Ibid., 129-136.

35Watson, 42-44, 56-57.

36Ibid., 95-113.

37Samuel Chadwick, The Way to Pentecost (Berne, IN: Light and Hope Publications, 1937), 34-35.

seeks to do in the heart of Christ’s follower without advancing any new ideas.

The most remarkable point to be made regarding this period in Adventist history is the fact that, aside from these three books, and the revision in 1946 of Coming of the Comforter, nothing else in nearly 40 years was produced by Adventist authors on the subject of the Holy Spirit. Such “dearth of the Spirit,” pun intended, was highlighted in 1950 with the rare republication by Review and Herald of A. J. Gordon’s book on the Spirit, a reprint of his 1895 original work. In addition, Gordon’s tendencies towards a Second Blessing theology muddied the waters even more on the ever-fascinating subject of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The irony is that while Adventists were busy working on Questions On Doctrine, and Evangelicals were busy trying to make sense of Adventist theology, Pentecostal denominations were quietly—and not so quietly—blossoming, and congregations of every stripe across the country became increasingly attracted to the Pentecostal experience.

Reaction to Neo-Pentecostalism: 1967-1982

Although growing by leaps and bounds, Pentecostalism in America remained with the fringe classes of society, and the classic tongue-speaking denominations. That is until April 3, 1960, when Dennis J. Bennett, an Episcopal priest in suburban Van Nuys, California, also began speaking in tongues. “The Holy Spirit did take my lips and tongue and form a new and powerful language of praise and power that I myself could not understand,” he said.

We Adventists tend to be a faith body that reacts rather slowly to national or international trends. Neo-Pentecostalism was born at a time when the last original Adventist book on the subject was now 24 years old and it would be another seven years before an Adventist would write again on this topic. By the late sixties, the scope of the seriousness of the movement began to dawn on scholars, pastors, administrators, and public evangelists so that an unprecedented increase of publications emerged between 1967 and 1982.

Some of these were by academics. Leslie Hardinge, another church historian, commented on some 18 different metaphors of the Holy Spirit, like rain, breath, seal, or fire. Arnold Wallenkampf, besides covering the various symbols and functions of the Spirit, dealt with the issue of baptism and infilling. Wallenkampf is the first person making a clear

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distinction between the terms: baptism is for initiation and infilling for continuation. “God gives the Spirit, or baptizes the true believer with the Spirit, in response to the person’s belief or trust in Him. He is thus born by the Spirit and sealed with the Spirit...The Spirit is given him as an earnest (guarantee) of his final and full salvation, with deliverance from sin and its realm...If a person has not received the Spirit, he [or she] is not a Christian.” He goes even further when he makes water baptism dependent on Spirit baptism: “New life in conversion and Spirit baptism are to preceed water baptism.”  

In fact, obedience is said to also precede Spirit baptism, based on Acts 5:32. “The verb tenses, in the Greek original, lucidly show that God gave His Spirit to those who are continuously obeying.” He points out that the tense in Greek from Eph 5:18, “be filled with the Spirit,” indicates this is not a once-for-all experience as it is in 1 Cor 12:13, but that it is ongoing. Ray Woolsey analyzes and clarifies several Bible texts and/or biblical terms that shed light on the Holy Spirit, like ruach and pneuma and the “seven spirits of God” (Rev 4:2/Isa 11:2). He also relates the work of the Spirit with the church, stating that while Jesus is the cornerstone of the church, the Spirit is its builder. Regarding the sanctified life, Woolsey goes contrary to Keswick theology by postulating that it is not sufficient to be free from evil to overcome sin, but that only a constant abiding of the Spirit in the life would make this possible.  

In 1974, the Review and Herald published Rattling of the Gates. In it, Roland Hegstad wrote convincingly of the challenge and threat represented by the fast-growing charismatic renewal, and appealing for doctrine and experience to be kept in balance. Although he wrote to warn the reader regarding so-called manifestations of the Spirit, Hegstad did touch on Holy Spirit baptism. He considered biblical “the holiness theology of sanctification that points to a second work of grace.” He described the baptism as “what happens to an individual when he first experiences, or experiences with new intensity, the presence and working of the Holy Spirit. The baptism can be synonymous with coming to Christ, or it can be distinct from that experience; the former seems to be ideal.” So, while agreeing with mainstream Protestant theology that Holy Spirit baptism is concurrent with conversion, Hegstad allowed for this experience to be subsequent, albeit not ideal.  

Perhaps the most influential book on the Holy Spirit and its impact on the general membership of the church was DeWitt Osgood’s Preparing for the Latter Rain, a sequel to his earlier The Promise of Power: How You Can Receive the Holy Spirit, both published in the early seventies. Osgood interpreted the new birth as the reception of the Spirit. “The Holy Spirit is a gift,” he said, “and the faith by which we receive it is a gift...And that is how we may be born again, born of the Spirit.” He did not see water and fire as symbolic of justification and sanctification—as two separate works of grace. For Osgood, water simply meant the Spirit’s cleansing, and fire the Spirit’s passion to save souls when the believer is filled with the Spirit. It is interesting to note that Osgood’s second book dealing the Spirit’s role at the time of the end became much more popular than his first one dealing with exactly how to receive the Holy Spirit in one’s life.  

I conclude this section of the reaction to neo-Pentecostalism with the one publication dealing with this question head
on. Jan Paulsen, in 1977 a professor of theology in Newbold College, wrote a definitive work on the work of the Spirit which he revised and expanded in 2001. Paulsen draws heavily from Reformed and evangelical theologians such as G. W. H. Lampe, Frederick Bruner, and James D. G. Dunn’s landmark work on the subject. He argues against Second Blessing theology by pointing to the New Testament examples as “a set of experiences whose order and depth [were] determined by an utterly unique and unrepeatable set of events,” such as Jesus’ Spirit baptism at the Jordan. With Dunn, he attributes the Samaritan believers’ initial lack of Spirit baptism (Acts 8:12-17) to a mere intellectual assent in Philip’s preaching, and like Simon Magus, they needed a genuine regeneration experience which was obtained when Peter and John came to lay hands on them. He maintains that “What Acts teaches us is that the manifestation of the Spirit’s presence may come immediately before water-baptism (as with Cornelius) or immediately after (as at Ephesus), but not apart from each other as though they are unrelated.” Paulsen is categorical in his conclusions: “There is absolutely nothing to suggest that the anointing/sealing/pledging images of Paul point to any rite other than baptism in water (or the laying on of hands), nor do we find in the passages discussed early roots of the practice of confirmation.” And then, he offers a helpful viewpoint in reading the language used by Ellen White when she writes about Spirit baptism. Ellen White used the term “daily baptism,” or “baptism of the Spirit,” before historic Pentecostalism came along with its own understanding of the term. Her basic use of the term being the equivalent of “growing in the Spirit.”

It is clear that Adventist scholarship on the subject of the work of the Spirit was challenged by the perceived in-roads the massive expansion of neo-Pentecostalism meant to the Church. In this respect, our scholarship is fueled by apologetic needs, and in step with typical developments in other Christian bodies. My wish is for us to have recognized the importance of the subject on its own merits, just because of the witness of the New Testament, and not have to wait until our membership weakens or our Church becomes confused on the subject.

Confusion and Re-search: 1982-2004

With the shock of the charismatic renewal absorbed and assimilated, Adventist thinkers turned to other interests until a pastor by the name of Douglas Cooper began to write on the Christian life. I still remember reading his Living God’s Love as a college student and being quite moved by the helpful analogies and clear explanations of God’s grace upon me. His third book was entitled Living in Our Finest Hour: A Journey Beyond Salvation. The subtitle is telling. Even though Cooper’s intent is to urge the reader to move beyond a paradigm of “sin and forgive” relationship with Christ, he reveals more than he bargains regarding his view of salvation and the role of the Spirit in that process. He says, in fact, that “receiving salvation is not a process” but “the experience of the moment.” What he means is that “Christians must not stop short after just their conversion experience” but must move on to “the next exciting dimension of the


55 Paulsen, 37, 57-58.

56 Ibid., 72, 80.

57 Ibid., 116.

58 Ibid., 129.
Christian experience,” “the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.” Such experience is “separate from conversion.”

Cooper’s views on perfection, Spirit-infilling, ministry-empowerment, and the like, sound very much like the Holiness writers 100 years before his time.

In the mid-eighties, Morris Venden’s book on the Holy Spirit confirmed the same basic idea: whereas the work of the Spirit on behalf of someone is many-pronged, the baptism of the Spirit is “separate and distinct” from conversion, and it is for the express purpose of accomplishing the Great Commission.

In the nineties, books on the Holy Spirit by Adventists became legion. George Rice and Neil Wilson co-authored a book in 1991 urging readers to seek and claim the endowment of the Spirit of God in order to finish God’s work on earth. However, nothing was specifically said about when this baptism is supposed to be in the individual’s conversion-sanctification continuum. The same year, Garrie Williams wrote How to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit and Know It which led a number of readers, particularly in the West Coast, to renewed personal revival and even corporate reformation in the churches. Unlike Cooper and Venden, Williams squarely assumes the reception of the Spirit at the time of conversion, for the Spirit “cannot fill a life that He has not already regenerated,” and the expressions “to fill” or “infilling” he equates with the word “baptism.” However, he quotes approvingly J. H. Waggoner differentiating between water baptism and Spirit baptism. Though Pauline in his understanding of Spirit baptism, Williams’ thrust is Wesleyan: the need to experience the presence of the Spirit.

Roy Gane, a New Testament scholar, wrote a companion book to one of the Sabbath School quarterlyies on the Holy Spirit that is rich with biblical insight. He came down on the conversion side of the debate by saying that eternal life begins with internal life. He explained the delay of Spirit baptism in the case of the Samaritan believers to be because with the laying of off hands by Peter and John, their former antagonists, God was showing them grace. The same objective God had in mind in the case of Cornelius and his household, except that from the opposite end. Now Peter needed to understand that God was showing grace to the Gentiles, and this is why Spirit baptism preceded water baptism.

The early nineties saw a revival of interest in the Holy Spirit that was unprecedented in recent times. The movement was clergy-led as much as it was lay-led. In the West Coast, seminars and conventions flourished with the themes of prayer and the Holy Spirit. A number of books by Adventists became available in ABCs all over the country, and the

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59 Cooper, Living in Our Finest Hour, 29, 36-38.

60 Ibid., 88; Living the Spirit-filled Life, 15.

61 His terms for this work, which is actually a process, are conviction, then conversion, then cleansing, and finally commission.

62 Venden, Your Friend, the Holy Spirit, 55.

63 A conclusion reached after conversing with the author.

64 Williams, How to Be Filled, 71, 52.

65 This may be the first work on the Holy Spirit by a Seventh-day Adventist. The Spirit of God, 35-36.

66 Enlightened by the Spirit, 27.

67 Ibid., 86.

68 In addition to those already mentioned, Kevin Wilfrey’s Studies on the Holy Spirit (Portland, OR: Oregon Conference of SDA, 1989), James W. Zackrison’s Power to Witness: The Need of the Hour (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), and David Wolkowitz’ A Mighty Rising Wind (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research, 1994).
Adventist Church capitalized on members’ responsiveness with Sabbath School lessons and devotional books. A number of ministers and church leaders contributed to this latest awakening mood in Adventism. During the 1990 General Conference Session, designated hours each day were open for special prayer petitioning for the outpouring of the Spirit upon the Church.

The momentum that saw the leadership of the Church right and center appears to have waned a bit. The vacuum is being filled up by others who are more limited in their scope or knowledge of the subject. Some of what is shared in these works is not well proven nor well reasoned. The majority take the post-conversion view of Spirit baptism. Today’s Adventist membership is again engulfed in a state of confusion and ambivalence while at the same time many silently cry out: “Where is the God of Elijah?”

**Conclusion**

The topic of the Holy Spirit is more emphasized in the New Testament than that of the Sabbath. Nevertheless, there remains a certain pneumaphobia among those who may be best positioned to help navigate the tricky eschatological waters of the Church-ship home.

As a denomination, we tend to be reactionary more than proactive in these matters. A hundred years ago, key leaders lost their courage because although the influence of Holiness writers contributed much good, there was little guidance on how to understand the Spirit’s work from the historical perspective of God’s purposes for the remnant. Then, at the time when Pentecostal bodies and Fundamentalism in America gained many adherents, Adventists went to sleep at the switch. In the seventies, we were rudely awakened by the gargantuan new phenomenon of the charismatic renewal. Writers and scholars went to the Bible and studied, and solid offers were made, albeit apologetic in nature. Finally, just at the time when many members are mesmerized by the possibilities of Saddlebacks or Willow Creeks, we find ourselves scrambling to find good, reliable scholarship that can help us on our way.

The study of the Holy Spirit, and that of the baptism of the Spirit, is inherently challenging (due to the complexity and the vast sources for Adventists in the Spirit of Prophecy), productive (since so much confusion is prevalent on the subject), and a personally rewarding task (because it begins to affect the heart). Ellen White sought to wake us from our slumber:

This promise belongs as much to us as it did to them, and yet how rarely it is presented before the people, and its reception spoken of in the church. In consequence of this silence upon this most important theme, what promise do we know less about by its practical fulfillment than this rich promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit, whereby efficiency is to be given to all our spiritual labor? The promise of the Holy Spirit is casually brought into our discourses, is incidentally touched upon, and that is all. Prophecies have been dwelt upon, doctrines have been expounded; but that which is essential to the church in order that they may grow in spiritual strength and efficiency, in order that the preaching may carry conviction with it, and souls be converted to God, has been largely left out of ministerial effort. This subject has been set aside, as if some time in the future would be given to its consideration.

It is time for good Bible students to consecrate serious time to the study of such wonderful subject in light of our anticipated role at the time of the end.

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69 Two of them were, Garrie F. Williams, Welcome, Holy Spirit (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1994), and Ellen G. White, Ye Shall Receive Power (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995).

70 Thus the latest offerings by ABC stores: G. Earl Knight, The Power of the Holy Spirit (Brushton, NY: Teach Services, 1998), and Dennis Smith, The Baptism of the Holy Spirit (self-published, c.2001), and their sequels: Spirit Baptism and Evangelism (c.2002), Spirit Baptism and New Wineskin Fellowship (c.2003), and Spirit Baptism and Deliverance (c.2004). This latest list includes a Baptist minister: Harry Young, Understanding the Holy Spirit (Alma Park, Graham, UK: Autumn House, 1998).

Two solid scholarly works in the last decade or so but they are limited to the particular study of speaking in tongues; they are Gerhard F. Hasel, Speaking in Tongues: Biblical Speaking in Tongues and Contemporary Glossolalia (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1991), and William E. Richardson, Speaking in Tongues: Is It Still the Gift of the Spirit? (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1994).

OBSESSION WITH DEATH OR PASSION FOR LIFE
Atonement in the Light of Resurrection

Charles Scriven

"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."
—1 Corinthians 15:17

Of all the “mighty acts of God,” none matters more, in New Testament perspective, than the resurrection. Although the death of Jesus has great importance, no disciple breathes a sigh of relief at the scene, and no apostle declares, “If Christ has not been executed, you are still in your sins.” The resurrection is the linchpin; the story that constitutes the gospel turns on this single great event.

Arguably, however, the cross has become, in popular imagination, the summing up of Christian vision. The cross is the most visible of Christian icons, the very signature of Christ. It is what opens the door to salvation. What is more, it is practically willed by the Father: Mel Gibson’s Mary, in The Passion of the Christ, reacts to Jesus’ arrest with the words, “It is begun. So be it.”

Bible writers tell and interpret the story of Jesus with great emphasis on the fact that his public ministry was controversial, and led the authorities to decree his crucifixion. Early on, narratives of Jesus’ life and teaching circulated in oral and written form, and in addition to telling the story of his birth and public ministry they paid careful attention to the events leading up to Jesus’ death. The letters and poetry that explored Jesus’ significance for humanity also made his death, and the way in which he approached it, important. But in all these accounts the cross—the death itself—quickly gives way to more elaborate affirmations of the new life that comes afterwards. The whole story, not the execution proper, is what really matters. And the whole story matters because of the startling testimony that Jesus arose from the dead.

Still, images of the cross became, and continue to be, commonplace. In that light, however, it’s striking to learn that before the cross appeared for the first time as a symbol in Christian art, 400 years (!) went by. Historian Kenneth Clark writes that the “earliest example,” from about 430 CE, may be found on the doors of Santa Sabina, a church in the city of Rome—and there it’s “stuck away in a corner, almost out of sight.” Early Christian art, he explains, focused on miracles, healings and “hopeful aspects of the faith like the Ascension and the Resurrection.”

From Genesis onward, the Bible upholds the Jewish vision of God’s power to create...life, or better, abundant life. God makes a living world, and takes steps to assure that in this world human beings flourish. When obstacles get in the way of human flourishing, God finds partners who respond to blessing by being a blessing themselves, partners, that is, who align themselves with what Ezekiel called the “covenant of peace,” and help construct a world of prosperity and well-being for all.

The ministry of Jesus proceeded in this spirit. In his time and place the prime obstacle to human flourishing was the Roman Empire, which held barbarous dominion over Palestine. One mark of the deep humiliation of the Jews who lived then was that “perhaps two thousand” crosses (as one historian estimates) stood along the roads near Jerusalem, a constant intimidation to passers-by. Although Caesar Augustus styled himself “Savior of the World” and considered his rule to be “good news” (euangelion), these crosses attested to the fact that his regime was at once savage and totalitarian.

Jesus grew up, despite all this, to embrace the covenant of peace that was his heritage, and to do so with a determination that was as fierce as fire. Like the best of those before him, he set about defending the ideal of

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2 See John 10:10.
abundant life for all. He brought healing to the sick, forgiveness to the guilty, hope to the downtrodden. He made outsiders into insiders.

He said, too, that the days of the abusive authorities were numbered: God’s movement of mercy and kindness—God’s “kingdom”—was getting a toehold. Then he said his true friends would become peacemakers like him; as God’s grace allowed, they would create abundant life themselves.

So at a time when crosses all around Jerusalem symbolized the deadly politics of Rome, Jesus set out to be generous and joyful. He was radiant with hope. His passion was so heartfelt and unwavering that neither risk nor seething danger could nullify the purpose he was living for. He stayed true to the covenant of peace. And when authorities who were jealous or threatened or both could endure his witness no longer, they made him a victim along with all the others they had victimized. Jesus himself was crucified.

It was a horrific ending. But when crucifixions were frequent, why did this one matter so much? What did it bring to light? Why is it still remembered?

One reason this crucifixion is still remembered is that everyone can identify with a story in which jealousy and resentment cause one person or group to suffer mistreatment at the hands of another. Jockeying for advantage—in power, possessions and prestige—is ordinary human experience, and it intensifies, all too often, into serious or even violent conflict.

Consider this: If I am a normal human being, I want to flourish. What is more, I define what it means to flourish by noticing what others in my circle have or want to have. Then I want the same thing. And now I am caught up in rivalry. My situation is like that of two four-year-olds surrounded by hundreds of toys who sooner or later quarrel because each one thinks the best toy is the one the other child has or wants. Desire, it turns out, settles on its object in light of what others think. My neighbor becomes the model I imitate. That is why advertisers want me to see someone who is bright and beautiful wearing the clothes or drinking the soda they hope I will buy: if they can make me envious, they have a chance of moving the product they want to sell. Parents know this, too. They teach me to talk by taking advantage of the veneration I have for them: in that light they can get me to imitate their own ability to talk. In the same way, coaches teach me how to kick or throw by getting me to imitate the skills they have, or the skills of athletes they think I admire.

So the fact that I model my desire on what I notice about the desires of others may lead to positive outcomes: I learn to speak, to play an instrument, to add and subtract, to write and draw. But negative outcomes are apparent, too—in feelings of envy and inadequacy, in the rivalries I am drawn into, in the constant jockeying for advantage that sullies relationships and gets in the way of peace.

Even the person who has everything may struggle with envy. Alexander the Great, born three and a half centuries before Jesus, was handsome and brilliant. At twenty, he was a king; soon after, he was leader of the ever-expanding Greek empire. Now, though, his imagination fastened on the stories of the pagan gods, and the gods in these stories began to shape his desire. He wanted to have what they had, and began calling himself “King of Kings.” It wasn’t long until he expected his subjects to prostrate themselves in front of him. He was like the Caesar of Jesus’ day, or the earlier Nebuchnezzar, who required people to worship a statue he had made of himself. Desire is, or often seems, insatiable.

When ambition has no limits, and rivalry goes unchecked, the result, of course, is division. Those who are affected feel cheated and inadequate, seeing what they lack compared to others. At the same time they feel angry and belligerent.

But a war of all against all won’t do, not if it gets out of hand; that would be worse than feeling cheated and inadequate. So, as often happens, people achieve a fragile truce by taking out their feelings on some victim they

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4 In this and the next few paragraphs I rely on the anthropological insights of the literary critic René Girard. Consult, for a recent example of his work, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, tr. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).
consider their common enemy. And this unites them, at least temporarily. It is what happens when bullies gang up on someone who is defenseless, or a mob conducts a lynching, or one ethnic group tries to eliminate another. In each case a mob of rivals—people who, being human, want more than they have and know that their neighbors stand in the way—nevertheless come together. They unite, if only for a time, in shared antagonism toward another person or another group.

Everyone knows this, knows that jealousy and resentment lead to conflict. That is why it’s easy to believe a story about someone’s undeserved mistreatment. But what happened to Jesus was one crucifixion among many, perhaps thousands, of others. Why did it stand out? In part, surely, it was because here a mob united against a victim who, from today’s standpoint, seems so undeserving of mistreatment. The fact that the mob was unanimous—even the disciples gave in to the pull of conformity, and abandoned Jesus—only exacerbates the sense of the victim’s innocence.

But now consider this: In the stories—the mythology—that guided cultures dominant in Bible times, no one dissents when a victim falls before a mob of persecutors. When a community agrees to expel or murder someone they have made into a scapegoat, the decision provokes no outcry. The stories take the viewpoint, always, of...the crowd. Collective violence is justifiable.

This fact, as René Girard says, makes the “divergence” between the Bible and mythology “absolutely decisive.” From the Jewish testament to the witness of the first Christians, forgiveness interrupts the “spiral of reprisals” to which violent acts give rise. In the Joseph story, the reader’s sympathy lies with the mistreated younger brother—who in the end pardons those who have mistreated him. Later the Jesus story proceeds along similar lines. It is told, not from the standpoint of the persecutors, as in mythology, but from the standpoint of the victim. And as the crucifixion is underway, the victim, sensing that his executioners are themselves caught in the snare of satanic falsehood that he wants to expose, asks God to “forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

But none of this would lodge in memory except for what happened next. The mob’s unanimity shatters when a small group of dissidents—a faithful remnant—begin to proclaim the resurrection. They have no high place—Paul would later remind Corinthian Christians that “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth”—yet they have seen Christ alive, and their message begins to dismantle the edifice of mythic falsehood. Now the abuse of the weak by the strong is seen to be an absurd and contagious virus. Now Satan is unmasked. Now God identifies the divine with the underdog, the victim. Now concern for “the least of these” becomes the divine signature, and the life abundant becomes the patrimony of the poor, the lowly and the disinherited.

Killing Jesus, it has been said, was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it. The faithful remnant put forth the resurrection as proof that the story of Jesus is “individually one” with the story of God. By the resurrection, as Paul wrote, Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God.” Now it was clear, as the letter

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5 Here my reliance on Girard continues.

6 Ibid., 109.


9 1 Corinthians 1:26.

10 Matthew 25:45.

11 This phrase is from the “two-narrative Christology” set forth by James McClendon, Jr., in his Doctrine: Systematic Theology, vol. 2, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). It appears on p. 272, where it is italicized.
to the Hebrews said, that he is “the exact imprint of God’s very being.”12 The message spread like leaven through the Empire, a discredit to the “untruth of the principalities and powers.”13 Now, says the Letter to the Colossians, those who align themselves with Christ are “made alive ... together with him,” and those who live by violence are “disarmed.”14

All this is why one crucifixion, among thousands, stands out. It is... revelatory. And the revelation happens because the resurrection happens, and makes love without boundaries the absolute value of the new age. With God’s true colors shining through, nothing can be the same again, nor has it been the same in any society anywhere that has been touched by the gospel.

It is the true that the new absolute value is more honored in the breach than the observance. When the marauding Constantine embraced the cross as the sign of his empire, the degradation was as dark as the blood of the dead he left in his path, and it was perhaps why the cross, the mark of Roman vengeance, came at last to greater and greater prominence in the Christian imagination.

But the new value remains, a light against the uncomprehending dark, a lever for the disarming of evil power; an assurance to all who fall short of flourishing, a sign of God as the maker and defender of life, not the patron of death.

Jesus came to redirect desire. Instead of restless jealousy of neighbor, he invites humanity into the restful and energizing imitation of God. He invites all men and women, that is, to be makers and defenders of life, and to be fully aligned with the covenant of peace that brings prosperity and well-being to all.

That is why an obsession with the cross misleads. The cross is part of the story, and in a world yet unconverted the cross falls on the shoulders of the faithful, as it fell on the shoulders of the Master. But the cross—the death of the innocent—is what the gospel aims to overcome, and is what God undermined decisively through the resurrection of the Son—the Son who is the Prince of Peace, the true King of Kings and the true Savior of the world.

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12 Romans 1:4 and Hebrews 1:3.

13 Girard, Ibid., 138.

14 Colossians 2:13, 15.
EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES:
THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND ITS WRITINGS

Carl P. Cosaert

What do we teach? At first glance the initial answer to the question posed by Bob Johnston for our New Testament group sounds obvious: The New Testament, what else? Consideration of Bob’s subsequent explanation behind his question reveals, however, that the only “obvious” thing is the vastly different perspectives among us on how we define and approach the New Testament.1 While my teaching experience at the University of North Carolina and Duke pales in comparison to the experience of most people within our group, I have volunteered to explain how someone on the cusp of finishing his Ph.D. has come to conceptualize our field. Since I want this paper to serve more as a discussion starter than anything else, I have chosen to approach the topic from a more personal perspective than a formally cited scholarly paper. With that being said, I think that the “what” of what we teach should not be limited to the New Testament canon alone but expanded to include the study of early Christianity (say 130 C.E., or thereabouts), and its wider range of writings.

My perspective is rooted in the belief that the New Testament was not written in a vacuum, nor was it delivered to the early Church on golden plates let down from heaven. Rather, it was God’s revelation of the truth in Christ revealed at a particular time and place in history. I also do not believe that any subject can be viewed accurately without consideration of its historical context. This also applies to the study of the New Testament. Therefore, I am convinced that the more we understand about the time and place of its composition, the better understanding we can have of the truth that God chose to reveal in it.

The first reason for broadening our field to include early Christianity is connected to the much-debated issue today over the New Testament corpus itself. By the end of the second century, most churches accepted the books that would eventually comprise the twenty-seven books in our canon. Not all churches agreed, however. The diversity of the books listed in the Muratorian Canon (175? CE), Eusebius’s canonical lists, and the books included in Codex Sinaiticus clearly demonstrates the vast differences of opinion among early Christians. Some Christians accepted the Apocalypse of Peter, while others rejected the Apocalypse of John. Others accepted First Clement, Barnabas, Hermas, and even the Gospel of Peter as authoritative, while others did not. Some of these books may have even been in circulation at the end of the first century. The major battles over the canon did not come to a close until the fourth and fifth centuries. Thus, to isolate the New Testament from this broader collection of Christian writings distorts the actual situation. Don’t misunderstand me. While some question the validity of the whole concept of a twenty-seven book canon, I do not. I do think, however, that the canon debate and the growing popularity of early Christian writings necessitate not only our awareness of them, but that we acquaint our students with them as well.

Another benefit of studying the New Testament as part of the wider historical context of early Christianity is the check it can place on interpretation gone awry. One of the negative consequences of the enlightenment has been the tendency among some Christians to feel that historical enquiry is either irrelevant or detrimental to Christianity. This resulted in the well-known separation in New Testament Studies between history and theology. Bultmann’s mythical Jesus and his belief that any historical information about Jesus was of no real benefit for Christian faith is a well-known example of this. While the truth of Christianity cannot be proved by historical enquiry, neither is theology complete without connection to the historical roots of Christianity; both are needed.

1For those who have either forgotten or overlooked Bob’s explanation, I include it here. “Some see our discipline as some sort of interaction with a given canonical corpus called the New Testament. This could be of the nature > of reader response or the search for authorial intent (two rather > different approaches). Others see it as a study of earliest Christianity, with an emphasis > on reconstructing the Sitz im Leben and cultural background, and including an interest in noncanonical documents. Some emphasize theology, others exegesis. Still others take a > confessional approach, reading the NT documents through the lens > provided by Ellen White, especially Desire of Ages and Acts of the Apostles. There are probably still more approaches. The question I am raising > is how we see our job. This in turn helps us to decide what textbooks > and tools we use. For example, for our NT introduction text do we use > Carson, Moo, and Morris, or do we use Ehrman?” Robert M. Johnston, “Next Year’s Topic,” 3 December 2003, personal email toshephe@ucollege.edu (6 January 2004).
together. The docetic and gnostic views of Jesus within early Christianity provide examples of the christological danger of separating Jesus from genuine history. On the other hand, the so-called Third Quest of the Historical Jesus illustrates some of the benefits of taking the historical context of the New Testament more seriously (e.g., the Jewishness of Jesus).

When we limit our field to the New Testament canon alone, we run the danger of enforcing the impression that the earliest Christians had some kind of pristine spiritual beginning uncluttered or challenged by internal conflict or mundane realities. One of the things I learned as a pastor was that the majority of my parishioners tended to divorce their personal faith from the reality of day-to-day life. I discovered that the problem was not so much a lack of basic biblical knowledge as it was a romanticized view of the world from which the Bible emerged—a world that seemed to them far removed from the issues and struggles of life today, a world where good and truth always triumphed.

While a close reading of the New Testament shows this was not always the case, knowledge of early Christian writings outside the New Testament can help counter this problem more easily. For example, a comparison of the language and style of New Testament letters with other early Christian writings reveals a common genre of writing—a vocabulary and format that the average person in the ancient would have been acquainted with. Early Christian writings can also provide evidence of “regular” Christians (not apostles) who were struggling to connect their faith to the world in which they lived. Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians reveals someone immersed in Paul’s letters and dealing with a Christian who had been caught embezzling church funds. Injunctions in the Epistle of Barnabas against pederasty, cross-dressing, and oral sex; not only sounds like the degenerate subject matter of some afternoon talk shows but vividly illustrates our modern problems with sexuality. One could also mention parallels in modern thought with the gnostic picture of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas. While many things in the world have changed over the past two thousand years, the common struggle of humanity against sin remains the same. This connection can be seen more clearly when the study of the New Testament includes the larger context of earliest Christianity and its world.

Of course, I could also include the importance of early Christianity for understanding the rise of anti-Judaism, the demise of Jewish Christianity with the Jewish revolts, and the related demise of Sabbath observance among Christians.

For these reasons, it seems to me that the “what” of our discipline needs to be taught in the wider context of early Christianity. This does not mean that I don’t think a confessional approach, or any other approach is invalid. When devoid of the context of early Christianity, however, I think other approaches lack a solid foundation.

I am sure I have probably overlooked some issues, so I am looking forward to your comments and reactions—especially those of you who have been established in this field for decades. In any case, I hope this paper will generate some beneficial discussion for this year’s group. Many thanks, to Bob and Tom for putting this whole thing together.
I had breakfast not long ago with David, a doctor friend of mine. I explained to him the difference between the modern and postmodern viewpoints. He immediately said, "I'm postmodern." He identified himself as part of a cultural transition that some see as a major movement in the current cultural flow of the contemporary Western world. The modern mindset emphasizes science, technology and rationality as a part of a unified and all-encompassing vision; the postmodern mindset finds these values bankrupt. They are incapable of providing meaning and purpose. The extreme postmodern thinkers have given up on the possibility of finding any truth, determining the meaning of any text and creating a unified vision of life.

Others are not so sure that we are on the edge of a paradigm shift. They see the divide between modern and postmodern more like a crack in the sidewalk than a San Andreas-like fault.¹

What I wish to do in this paper is to point to some ways in which an Adventist understanding of Christianity fits with some of the concerns of the postmodern mindset and suggest some ways that evangelism might more effectively reach out to those in a postmodern mindset. Even if there is not a tectonic shift of cultural norms going on, there is enough evidence of a new way of thinking and living that it is valuable to consider ways of relating to it. Rather than discussing theoretical and philosophical issues I want to take the topic of conversion as a model for seeing how an approach to the modern world is different from an approach to a postmodern world.

It is crucial to understand the basis on which we approach this topic. I am not exploring a postmodern approach to conversion or to Christianity. Some advocate such an approach, For example, there are those who see Christian truth as one among a plurality of truths. One might even approach the doctrine of conversion from a postmodern perspective, where conversion is seen as an attempt to impose one's alien worldview on another.

In my opinion, such approaches point to a diversity of religious options with no way of knowing how any of them might turn out. Postmodernism as a philosophy leaves one with no way of knowing whether one set of beliefs is more true than another and no way of making a judgment between them.²

Instead of a postmodern approach to conversion I intend to explore a Christian approach to conversion in a postmodern world. I would like to present an Adventist spirituality that is Christian, authentic and compelling. I believe that Jesus' incarnation, life, death and resurrection bring Life to light. In response to postmodern criticisms of Christian attempts to facilitate conversion, encouraging conversion need not be a matter of power and control. Rather "we are inviting them to join us in the place where God dwells. Our message is: 'You are a child of God. Please call home.'"³

The work of facilitating conversion seems to be happening more and more in my friend David's relativistic and fragmented postmodern world. The content of the message need not change. But because men and women live within postmodern paradigms, the message needs to be shared in ways that it can be understood and received.

For example, appeals to the intellect and reason increasingly fall on deaf ears. It seems like modern values such as objectivity, analysis and control are become less compelling. Why? Because they are no longer seen as pathways to truth. Rationalism and Scientism are seen as part of the problem that has made human beings into


solitary individuals having equal rights but only because we are "equally interchangeable parts in the gigantic machine of the commercial and martial state."

The Modern Approach to Conversion

But before we describe how Christianity might approach conversion in a postmodern world, I would like to sketch what a modern approach to conversion looks like in the areas of revelation, soteriology and missiology.

The modern approach to revelation suggests that God handed down in the Bible an inerrant answer book that gives the information a person needs to know before he or she is converted. The goal of personal and professional Bible study is to achieve a bombproof certainty where our faith is at rest with everything proven logically.

Such an approach to evangelism came to resemble the scientific and technological work of an engineer. There were bridges to heaven, certain steps that one must take, spiritual laws to follow and crusades that overcame barriers and conquered alien territory. Christians sought to marshal all the logical ammunition they could to demolish the enemy with irrefutable argument. Needless to say, the “enemy” was not kindly disposed to receive them.

To give another example, my wife and I once invited her high-school friend over for supper. We knew that she was into new-age spirituality, so after supper we began to talk religion. As a new seminary graduate I foolishly felt I had all the answers and proceeded to fire them at her. Where a modern person would have acknowledged the common ground and argued back, she just withered and left nearly in tears.

Not everyone is like my wife’s friend. Not everyone is postmodern. There are still plenty of places and plenty of people who inhabit the modern world. Modern concepts, arguments and techniques still work in those places with those kinds of people. Yet it seems that the younger and the better-educated an adult is, the more likely they are to have a well-thought-out postmodern viewpoint. And there are plenty of young people who have a postmodern viewpoint that is not thought-out at all.

The modern approach to soteriology is all about the individual. Conversion is getting a person saved, getting them across the line, and getting them within the boundaries of salvation so they can go to heaven. The “convert” is persuaded of the truth and benefits of Christianity and/or Adventism and accepts its doctrines. A market-driven exchange takes place where each gets what they want: God gets the person’s allegiance and the person gets eternal life. Once a person has what they want, they are free to walk away. And they often do. The emphasis on accepting the logically presented doctrines reduces the convert to a mind and ignores the convert’s imagination, creativity, moral and emotional life and relational needs. The community of the church is left as only a possible source of involvement, and if there is any time left over one can become involved in the church’s mission to the world.

Modern missiology defined the gospel in terms of knowledge and sought to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over other religions on the basis of reason. E Stanley Jones notes that many saw themselves as God’s lawyers, armed with evidence, presenting their cases and seeking a verdict.

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5Brian D. McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 131.

6See McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize, 147-148.

7Paul G. Hiebert, Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999), 27.
Missionaries established schools for the training of leaders in which the acquisition of knowledge was seen as the central qualification for the ministry. They taught that there was one body of knowledge, that there was one true theology and that all others were to be condemned as error.  

Modern missionaries often attacked other religions in order to discredit them with the hopes that their followers would then turn to Christ. But this rarely happened because attacks and arguments rarely win people. More often than not this stance was seen as arrogant and missionaries were accused of being more interested in proving correct doctrine than in listening to non-Christians as humans.

The Adventist missions that were successful were often ones that brought about conversion as “institutional transition,” to use Bailey Gillespie and Lewis Rambo’s terminology. That occurred when one exchanged one institutional loyalty for another, as when a Methodist converted to Adventism. Adventists were able to present better evidence for their doctrines and their arguments were more persuasive than their Christian competitors. Such arguments were also effective in facilitating “conversion as affiliation,” where there were many cultural Christians in a Christian cultural milieu uninvolved in institutional religion. But it seems to me that Adventists may have been less successful facilitating conversion as “intensification” where nominal Christians find deeper meaning in their (often inherited) tradition; and conversion as “tradition transfer” where converts come from other religious traditions such as animism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. This is not to suggest that other Christians have been any more successful with “tradition transfer” than Adventists.

The Postmodern Approach to Conversion

Because postmoderns are skeptical to any claim to authority and do not believe absolute truth exists, they will not be converted using the arguments and methods that work with modern people. Rick Richardson says, “Any attempt to claim that one has the truth for everybody is experienced as an arrogant, offensive attempt at domination and control.”

Advocates of the Christian faith cannot begin the process of conversion by seeking to demonstrate the “truth” of the Bible. Postmoderns don’t believe that kind of truth is possible. They dismiss the Bible by saying that it can be interpreted any way one wants to interpret it. There can be no one set of laws and principles applicable to everyone.

While this postmodern attitude militates against faith and conversion, another perspective opens the door for it.

Postmodern people have no stomach for the kind of modern biblical analysis that picks apart the Bible into unrecognizable and unrelated bits. They are interested not in the individual atoms but in the relationships between them. Life is not lived in isolation but in relationships. Postmoderns are open to seeing the Bible not as a list of rules or as a subject of literary criticism but as a story. We can invite them to see the Bible as a family history where each member of the family can find their place. When they discover their place in the family story, they are then called to come together with other members of the family and accomplish their destiny.

While uninterested in purely objective knowledge, postmoderns are attracted to relationships and experience. They are already on a personal spiritual journey in search of meaning. The barriers to their faith are not so much intellectual as experiential and behavioral. If they can see and experience something authentic and genuine, they are more likely to consider it and be open to conversion.

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11 Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box* (Downer’s Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2000), 39.
Salvation and conversion then are not an isolated individual experience that happens at a point in time. Rather conversion and the reception of salvation are seen as part of a (sometimes lengthy) process that entails three aspects, according to Brad Kallenberg. First, it entails a change of one’s social identity. That involves finding one’s place in the story line of the gospel and finding one’s place in the gospel community in relationship with others who are also there. Second, it entails the acquisition of a new conceptual language. He contends that one must acquire the language for religious experience in order to have the experience. And third, it involves shifting one’s paradigm, bringing the world into focus in a whole new way. The convert no longer seeks to interrogate the text of Scripture, but rather the convert willingly submits to the text of Scripture in a way that allows the text to interrogate him or her.12

The resulting knowledge is not a set of certain laws and principles but a web of interconnected beliefs that find their justification in scripture, experience, the community and other points.

Salvation then is experienced not as an individual fire escape from hell into heaven that does little to actually transform the person’s life, but as a means of deliverance from the flesh, the world and the devil (of which postmoderns may well have experience on some very real levels) into the rule of God and into the community of faith.

The missionary is then not out marketing a product but demonstrating in his life a relationship with God that, once established, is developed lifelong. Heibert affirms that the missionary or advocate does communicate knowledge, but it is more than factual information. It is what people use to live their lives. “Knowledge is not impersonal facts that can be stored in a computer as well as in a head. It is ideas that interact with feelings and values in complex ways to produce decisions and actions.”13

Heibert goes on to say that the faith that the missionary advocates “is not simply cognitive affirmation of the truthfulness of a statement [modernism]. Nor is it simply positive feelings toward God [postmodernism]. It is knowledge and feelings that lead us to respond to Christ’s call to follow him. … The goal of theologizing, therefore, is not only correct knowledge but also obedience and discipleship.”14

The missionary advocate then does not abandon the concept of objective truth. While recognizing that it is not complete and perhaps not perfect, and that objective truth is understood by humans in their context, the advocate for Christianity can share the deep convictions she or he has about the truth and bear witness to it. Instead of being God’s lawyers, the advocate is a witness to what God has done within his or her life. This leads the advocate to respect people of other beliefs as thinking adults. He or she can show respect for the other person’s convictions. The evangelist in a postmodern context should not be as interested in winning an argument as in winning the lost to Christ, says Heibert.15

Conversion then “is not simply a mental acceptance of a set of theological truths. It is a change in a person’s central allegiance and a personal commitment to follow Christ in life and in death. It is both a point and a process.”16

In the end, evangelism, missionary activity and conversion in a postmodern context value mystery and wonder, experience and authentic relationships. These are values that it seems the modern world has excluded. Evangelism in a postmodern context does not do without proof and logic. It is not just about relationships and

12 Brad J. Kallenberg, Live to Tell (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 32-46.
13 Hiebert, Missiological, 74.
14 Hiebert, Missiological Implications, 98.
15 Hiebert, Missiological Implications, 108.
16 Hiebert, Missiological Implications, 108-109.
experience without working through the life implications of one's experience with God. Rather, as Brian McLaren says, Proof needs to go far beyond logic. Concepts can become idols. “Only wonder understands. . . . The most important thing you can communicate to anyone is something beyond your logic and arguments—your own humbled sense of wonder, passion and love.”

Suggestions for evangelism in a postmodern world

Instead of an evangelistic Crusade with all its militaristic overtones of violence, power and control, evangelism in a postmodern world will be done in humility, in the attitude of a learner. The apostle Peter was sent by God to Cornelius’ home and in the process he seems to have learned more about the work of God and the work of the Spirit than Cornelius did.

So the evangelist in a postmodern setting becomes a learner. He or she refuses to place themselves on a higher plane than anyone else. He or she shows respect to those to whom they have been sent. McLaren calls this approach “spiritual friendship” and suggest that the Christian who is engaged in it learns more in this process than could ever be learned from classes and courses and sermons. He suggests that when spiritual friendships happen, real evangelism happens and it is the Christians who are converted first. They are converted from being people who judge, remain aloof, feel superior, and who disrespect those who do not believe. They are converted into Christians who befriend others and who believe that as they make spiritual friends, everyone involved will become closer to God.

Those who work in Postmodern contexts such as secular college campuses note that sometimes a postmodern person will come to a church or a group meeting and over a sometimes lengthy period of time come to belief. This is the opposite of the supposed modern paradigm where a person is persuaded to belief and then comes to belong to a church.

They also note another phenomenon. Sometimes a postmodern person will become involved in a Christian group or service project and will over time come to believe. It seems that they start behaving like a Christian and then come to believe like a Christian. Again this is the opposite of the supposed modern paradigm where a person is persuaded to believe and then begins to behave like a Christian.

This suggests at couple of ways Christians can encourage postmoderns to come to faith. One is to foster authentic personal relationships within the believing community. Small groups are one way this is done, but it is not the only way. As I will note below, there can be no cookie-cutter sure-fire technique that will work for all every time. But the Christian community meets a real felt need that postmodern people have.

The modern world tends to isolate individuals and separate them. Postmoderns no longer see the world that way. They see the world as a network, a web. This affords a real opportunity for Christians. A godly pattern of relationships requires more than one person. And that pattern of interpersonal relationships has no secular analog. Brad Kallenberg says, “It is as unique as the Cross of Christ after which it is modeled. Because of the importance of maintaining the integrity of this weave of relationships, an individual’s conversion cannot be considered completed until he or she is seamlessly woven into the fabric of the believing community.”

Eddie Gibbs suggests that those involved in training leaders need to focus not so much on an academic course of study as on developing a community.

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17 McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize, 149.
18 McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize, 61, 62.
19 Kallenberg, Live to Tell, 72.
20 Eddie Gibbs, ChurchNext (Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 96.
Another way Christians can encourage postmoderns to come to faith is by inviting them to become involved in social-service activities. These validate the postmodern concept of an interconnected web and give them an opportunity to put some of their idealism to the test. It also puts them with the most active part of the Christian community. The result is often conversion. Belief follows behavior.  

And there are not sets of neatly definable, logically compelling and universally valid ways of evangelizing or training leaders in community development. Kallenburg suggests that instead of trying to develop a set of techniques we see evangelism through a set of contrasting analogies:

Evangelism is more like sailing than proofreading. Proofreading suggests that the application of a set of rules perfectly will yield a perfect static outcome. In contrast, while one must first know the basics of sailing, one then uses judgment to apply them in the specific set of winds and waves that one encounters. One cannot know what one will do in advance.

Evangelism is more like questing than archery. We are not so much trying to hit a bull’s-eye as we are learning and gaining skills at each new adventure in the journey.

Evangelism is more like acting kindly than cobbled. Fixing a shoe is an activity distinct from one's self, but acting kindly is self-involving. It cannot be done alone in a mechanistic way.

Evangelism is more like the practice of medicine than like parallel parking. Parallel parking involves learning a works-each-time technique. But in evangelism there is a need to develop skilled judgment in the messy business of dealing with a dying world.

Brian McLaren summarized what he sees are the factors that encourage conversion in a postmodern world:

1. The Relational Factor: Count conversations, not just conversions.
2. The Narrative Factor: Listen to their story, share your story, and share God’s story, not just propositions or formulas.
3. The Communal Factor: Expect conversion to normally occur in the context of authentic Christian Community, not just in the context of information.
4. The Journey Factor: See disciple-making as a holistic process and unending journey, not just a conversion event. Use not only boundary but also centered, process and journey thinking.
5. The Holy Spirit Factor: Believe that God is at work “out there” in everyone, not just “in here” in the church.
6. The Learning Factor: See evangelism as part of your own discipleship—not just the other person’s!
7. The Missional Factor: See evangelism as recruiting people for God’s mission on earth, not just people to heaven.
8. The Service Factor: See evangelism as one facet of our identity as servants to all.

A couple of themes that are particularly appropriate for an Adventist context come to mind as a result of this study. One is the emphasis on translating cold intellectual facts into a way of life. Only an authentic, lived-out Christianity is attractive to postmodern people. This echoes one of the consistent Adventist critiques of the mainline Christian world. Its nominal Christianity does not transform persons and lead them in a new way of life. My impression is that in the past our evangelism was more integrated and holistic and that the adoption of modern concepts and techniques may have inhibited us from facilitating the development of lifestyles of discipleship.

Another emphasis is our view of revelation. Adventists have not traditionally taught the modern concept of an inerrant Scripture. We see revelation occurring not in the dictation of words, but in the communication of thoughts, ideas, concepts and meanings. The words are not as important as what they convey. This puts us in contrast to the modern fundamentalist view of scripture and much closer to the postmodern understanding of language. While we must be careful not to embrace the radical skepticism of deconstructionists, we have no problem recognizing the way the context influences the writing of a text and the way the context influences the reception of the text.

21 See Kallenburg, Live to Tell, 92-104.
22 Kallenburg, Live to Tell, 123-126.
23 McLaren, More Ready Than You Realize, 135-143.
We can identify with Rob Bell, a pastor who appeals to postmodern people. In a recent Christianity Today article he is quoted as saying that he and his wife had discovered the Bible as a human product. He says, “The Bible is still in the center for us but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.” His wife Kristen says, “I grew up thinking that we’ve figured out the Bible, that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white, and now it’s in color.”²⁴ The Adventist view of the Bible makes it possible for us to put aside the modern spirit-killing analysis of the Bible and pay attention to it in a way that we no longer see it and our world in black and white but now in color.

Not everyone we encounter has a postmodern worldview. There are places where it does not predominate. But when we do encounter it, and we seek to bring postmodern men and women to Christ and into His church, we cannot use the concepts and techniques of the modern world effectively. Logical proof, compelling reasons and proof texts will fall on deaf ears. Instead we are called to contextualize the gospel. That means that we will emphasize relationships, respect and mutuality in our communication. We will witness to our experience without seeking to overwhelm people with our truths. We will invite them to experience God in our community. Finally we will invite them to serve the world in need. And God will work to bring them to conversion.

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\textbf{"THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT \ldots\"}
\textbf{CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE SPIRIT'S OUTPOURING}

Jeffrey O. Brown
Oakwood College

Portia Nelson\textsuperscript{1} delivers her autobiography in five succinct chapters:

\textit{Chapter One}
I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

\textit{Chapter Two}
I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend that I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in this same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

\textit{Chapter Three}
I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in... it's a habit
But my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

\textit{Chapter Four}
I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

\textit{Chapter Five}
I walk down another street.

Peter's autobiography was also in five chapters: his call, his challenge, his conversion, his cowardice, and his courage.

\textit{Chapter One—Peter's Call}
Matt 4:17-20 "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him."

Chapter Two — Peter’s Challenge

John 6:63-70 “Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Matt 16:13-17 “He saith unto them, But who say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee.”

Matt 16:22-23 “Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”

Luke 22:31, 32 “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.”

Chapter Three— Peter’s Cowardice

John 18:25 “And Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. They said therefore unto him, Art not thou also one of his disciples? He denied it, and said, I am not.”

Luke 22: 60-62 “And Peter said, Man, I know not what thou sayest. And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.”

John 21:17-19 “He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, Lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.”

Chapter Four—Peter’s Conversion

Acts 2:1-41 “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place... And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance... But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.... Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.... Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”

Chapter Five— Peter’s Courage

Act 10:11-16 “And [Peter] saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending upon him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, what God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.”

Acts 10:27-34 “And as he talked with him, he went in, and found many that were come together. And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean... Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.”

1 Peter 4:12, 13 “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”

The three-strike scenario was repeated three times. The first strike, commission, was the divine command: “Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.” The second strike, tradition, was the human excuse: “Not so, Lord; for I have never...” The third strike, salvation, was the divine response: “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”
The divine commission constitutes simplicity (unambiguous) and temerity (unwaverung). The word “kill” implies slaughter and destruction, but instead it involves sacrifice and dedication (cf. Rom 12:1). Hitherto, acceptable sacrifices had been from clean, pure animals. Now the unclean are to be a part of the clean.

The human excuse consists of timidity (fear) and tenacity (stubbornness). F. F. Bruce, commenting on God as an equal-opportunity accepter, declares, “This may be the veriest truism to us, but it was a revolutionary revelation to Peter.” I beg to differ. I suggest that it was a revolutionary revelation then and it is a revolutionary revelation now. Like Peter, some things we are willing to accept and other things we are not. The Spirit’s outpouring, however, crushes the customs that we cherish, trashes the traditions that we treasure, pushes away the positions that we will not part with, and bulldozes the baggage that we bring. The Spirit says there is a sheet coming to a church near you: make way for the Gentiles. Let differences in gender and culture come in. Let differences in age and ability come in. Let differences in worship styles come in. Let the jeans come in. Let the long hair and short skirts come in. Let the alcoholic and drug addict come in. Let the thief come in. Let the murderer come in. Let the prostitute come in. Let the pimp come in. Let the homosexual come in. Let the child molester come in. Let the terrorist come in. “For mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people” (Isa 56:7). The church must claim them before it can clean them; and the church’s Master is no respecter of persons.

The divine response comprises patience and insistence. Patience is exemplified in the quantity or count: God gave the command to Peter three times. He did not cast Peter away. He did not look for someone more receptive or responsive. Insistence is exemplified in the quality or content: God gave the same command to Peter three times. Acceptance of and integration with differences are indisputable prerequisites for entering the kingdom of God.

This led to what is affectionately called the Gentile Pentecost. The purpose of this new movement of the Spirit was not to show off tongues but to showcase truth. Peter looked back at his conversion experience and saw that while the evidence of his conversion was the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost I, the essence of his conversion was the Spirit’s imploring at Pentecost II. Like the Good Samaritan, it was now time for Peter to cross the street.

Jesus’ directive (Luke 22:32) does not doubt Peter’s call; neither does it debate his conversion; rather it directs his courage. “You will face opposition. You will have to go against the grain. But as a converted person, strengthen your brethren.” It is a call to exchange preference for deference, emotion for devotion, fear for faith, cowardice for courage, and like for love.

It is not conversion, but rather submission that represents the highest level of Christian devotion. “Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake. Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake?” (John 13:37, 38). Criticism of Peter may be valid, but is there really any other cause worth dying for than to live out the purposes of God? To strive for a nonjudgmental community characterized by repentance, forgiveness, acceptance and diversity, constitutes the kingdom of God. Jesus asks us to experiment on earth to achieve what He experiences in heaven. “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). So a Caucasian minister in suburban Chicago can declare:

I was concerned to see that the worship did not exclude any group in the community. I was careful not to have everybody dressed in the same way, or only men in the offices. There would be a large mother on the platform, a Puerto Rican usher and someone playing black music, so that people could say, “This is the church for me.” We had young people reading the scriptures and even younger children handed out the bulletins. We were communicating what Jesus said; “You can all come to me—not just rich people, white people, smart and good-looking people, but ugly people, hurting people, people of all races and colors.”

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Three strikes—but still in. The call is accompanied by a challenge. Conversion closes the chapter of exclusion but openness may be preceded by cowardice. But conversion is not the terminus; it is merely the prelude to courage. It takes courage (and potential ridicule) to change direction. The Spirit’s outpouring (Acts 2) acknowledges a conversion that sees a whole in the sidewalk; the Spirit’s imploring (Acts 10) pleads for courage to walk down another street.

Five chapters: how does my autobiography read?
WHEN THERE AREN’T ENOUGH ROCKS TO THROW
Revelation 2:8-10

Larry L. Lichtenwarter
Michigan Conference

I. NOT ENOUGH ROCKS

The movie Forrest Gump contains a heart-wrenching scene where five-year-old Jenny, Forrest’s friend, prays as the two of them are running into a cornfield to hide from her drunken father: “Dear God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far away from here.” Her father has been sexually abusing her, and although the next day he was arrested and Jenny went to live with someone else, her struggles over what he did to her had only begun. In fact, she spends the rest of her life trying to recover from the damage. Years later, Jenny returns to the small town where she grew up, to visit Forrest. The two of them, now adults in their thirties, are walking near the abandoned shack where she once lived. As she fixes her eyes on it, painful buried memories of the abuse flood her mind. She bursts into tears and begins to vent her hurt and anger by picking up the rocks around her and throwing them as hard as she can at the shack. When there are no more rocks, she takes off her shoes and throws them too. Finally, she falls on the ground sobbing. As Forrest reflects on the scene he says, “Sometimes I guess there just aren’t enough rocks.”

When you think about the pain in your life, do you find yourself resonating with what Forrest said? Perhaps you were verbally, physically, or sexually abused. Maybe you’ve experienced the wrenching pain of a divorce, grew up in a chaotic home with an alcoholic parent, or lost a loved one in a senseless accident. Perhaps you’ve been deeply hurt in a relationship or have felt the aching loneliness of abandonment or ostracization. Could it be that you were treated unfairly in a work situation or betrayed by people in your church, family, by a friend, your spouse?1 Like Jenny, you could throw a few rocks—knowing deep inside there will never be enough to throw—because the hurt seems so insurmountable. Not only are there not enough stones for what you have already experienced, but like Jenny you long to be a bird so you can fly far, far away from what you may be experiencing right now. Today. You can’t help but wonder, “Why? Why is this happening to me?” And so you think and burst out, “God, it isn’t fair.” Or you may wonder, “Does God hear? Does He know? Does He care?”

The Smyrnaean church was a suffering church. Filled with deeply hurting people who faced poverty, trials, ridicule, abuse, persecution, imprisonment, suffering, and death. As victims of mob violence, vandalism, and looting (by both Jews and pagans, stirred up by Jewish hatred), they were hard pressed to keep their jobs, their homes, their possessions.2 Tongues were wagging busily all around them. False rumors were circulating. Unkind things were being said behind their backs. Minds were being poisoned against them. It hurt. It was painful to be misunderstood, caricatured, laughed at, put down, sidelined, boycotted.3 Their trials, poverty, slander seemed endless, but there was only more and worse to come. Prison. Death.

Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey) was one of the hardest places in Asia to be a Christian. No believers faced a more uncertain future than did those in the church in this ancient city. They were a small church. They had few economic resources. They faced a hostile world around them. No doubt individuals within that congregation often wished they could be a little bird so they could “fly far, far away from here.” As hurting human beings, with feelings and emotions like everyone of us, it would be only natural to want to throw a few stones at some of those who personally hurt them, or at life in general, whoever or whatever represented the realities or people who wounded them.

This is a letter especially for those who are going through hard times.4 Real life. We can apply it on two levels. On the level of the text where it applies first to persecution and suffering endured for Christ (because of one’s faith and the truth of the gospel and God’s Word). Then there’s the level of its theological underpinning where it applies to more general trials, abuse, wounds, suffering, loss, and sorrows—not particularly linked to our faith journey, but which become a focal point of the strength of our relationship with Jesus.5
Revelation unfolds the pain and wickedness that are everywhere in our world and so distressingly evident politically, socially, personally—and how much it hurts! How confusing it is! You know it by the recurring exhortation to endure, persevere, keep patience (Rev. 1:9; 2:2, 3; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). You know it as it promises the day when God will gently wipe away all tears (every tear) from our eyes (Rev 7:17; 21:4; Isa 25:8; 35:10; 65:19). “He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever” (NLT). The context suggests that God “accounts for the wounds of the past.”

At the opening of the fifth seal we have people crying out “How long, O Lord?” (Rev 6:9-11) These people lost everything dear to them including their lives. So they cry out! They want to throw a few stones—or at least have God stand up in their behalf and avenge them. While the context is the faithful people of God who suffered unjustly for their faith during the tribulation of the middle ages, their haunting cry reflects the anguish of the innocent of all ages (Rev: 18:24: "And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth.").

Christians living in Smyrna were no doubt suffering for Jesus, but their suffering and sorrow point to the cry of hurting, innocent hearts everywhere, through all time. This letter fits our experience today.

II. NEVER ALONE . . .

Last Sabbath we learned that Jesus still stands in the center of His church speaking—not to everyone in general, but to me, personally. That’s why I love Him. He is never quiet. He has something to say about everything going on in my life and my world and my church. Oh, how I need His voice in my ear! But when the going gets tough and I’m hurting deep inside, when I’m wounded. When I’m yearning to fly like a bird or throw a few stones, I want to know, “Does Jesus hear me? My cry? Does Jesus know? Does Jesus care?”


So Jesus speaks. “I know,” He says. “I know!” “I know everything you’ve been through. Everything you are experiencing right now. Your tribulation and your poverty and the slander of those who profess to know me (Rev. 2:9)” “I know.” Then He adds, ‘On top of all this, I know what’s on the horizon. Where you’re headed. What tomorrow will bring. How it will not get any better. How in addition to your pressure and stress, your poverty, the abuse you are right now experiencing, there will be imprisonment and death. Your suffering is about to get worse. The tribulation will be extended to the point that some of you will be put in prison—some of you will die violently.” Jesus knows exactly what will happen to us. Notice too, what He tells the church at Pergamum. “I know where you live—right there in Satan’s lair” (Rev 2:13). It can’t get any rougher.

But I wonder, “What does Jesus know. Just the facts, or does He know how I feel? Me? Just what I am going through or my heart, my struggles, my inner emotional need? Think about it. What is Jesus really saying here and throughout Revelation? I believe He is assuring us: “I know your tribulation. I know how you have been treated—blasphemed, persecuted, imprisoned, boycotted, shunned, killed. I know your tears. I know how you feel—hurt, alone, frustrated, tired, belittled, vulnerable, powerless, helpless, angry, disappointed. I know how hard it is to hang in there when you are getting tired and things are getting worse. I know how you want to give up, give in, compromise, find peace. I know how you want to lash out, in anger or retaliation. I hear your questions of why and fairness. How long. I hear your prayers. I know.” I believe this is the heart of Revelation’s message to our hurting world, our hurting lives.

“Nobody knows but Jesus,” the spiritual goes on to avow. That’s why I love Jesus. I love Jesus because He knows what I am going through right now. He knows where I live. How I am being treated. The trials I am facing. How I feel. My questions and confusion. How I want to lash out. Run. Compromise. Give up altogether. He knows. Jesus knows what we are going through right now. Jesus knows what we will go through tomorrow.

A Herald Palladium photographer came to my office to take my picture for a full-page special feature article the
paper was going to publish on my *Hope in the Apocalypse* series. He was a typical young postmodern adult who didn’t know very much about the Bible. He referred to Revelation as “revolutions.” I watched his facial expression and increased interest as I spoke of Jesus in Revelation. How Jesus was at work in my world and in my life. I would point to the text and say, “Jesus knows where I live. He knows what I’m doing. Jesus knows what I’m going through.” “I know your troubles and the verbal abuse and slander you face, your poverty . . .” My sorrows and trials.

**III. EVERYTHING I NEED**

But Revelation goes even deeper. To this little hurting congregation Jesus says, First—before you know what I know—I want to tell something about Myself. I want you to know who I am. “I am the first and the last, who was dead and has come to life” (Rev 2:8). “As the ‘First and the Last’ I have power over time. I am the Lord of history. Nothing happens here apart from my knowledge. When it’s all over I will be standing there at the end. Everything will finally be as I have promised. But most of all, I want you to know that I have personally experienced the full range of human suffering. You see, ‘I was dead . . .’. Remember? On the cross I suffered injustice, felt the shame of nakedness, was deprived of my rights, endured taunting, was the focus of other people’s rage. I was rejected and forsaken. I endured excruciating pain, thirst, hunger, emptiness, torment, confusion, and finally, death itself.”

I like the way Pastoral theologian Frank Lake puts it: “Christ’s own being on the Cross contained all the clashing contrarieties and scandalous fates of human existence. Life Himself was identified with death; the Light of the world was enveloped in darkness. The feet of the Man who said, ‘I am the Way’ feared to tread upon it and prayed, ‘If it be possible, not that way.’ The Water of Life was thirsty. The Bread of Life was hungry. The divine Lawgiver was Himself unjustly outlawed. The Holy One was identified with the unholy. The Lion of Judah was a crucified lamb. The hands that made the world and raised the dead were fixed by nails until they were rigid in death. Men’s hope of heaven descended into hell.”

This means Jesus can truly identify with us when we suffer because He has personally experienced the breadth and depth of human suffering. Hebrews tells us that Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8) and was “made perfect through sufferings” (Heb 2:10). Because He has been “touched with the feelings of our infirmities” (Heb 4:15), He can empathetically identify with our distress, hurt, and sorrow.

“But,” Jesus says in these three pregnant words “who was dead”—I didn’t just suffer personally on the Cross. I suffered vicariously. I was ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,’ but I also bore your griefs and carried your sorrows” (Isa 53:4). Jesus bore not only His own suffering but, in some mysterious way, yours, mine, and the suffering of the world as well. There on the Cross Jesus bore our sins. There too, He bore our sufferings. We are both sinners and sufferers. Villains and victims. The Cross of Jesus touches both needs. The wrongs we have done and the wrongs done to us were nailed there with Him. This means that Jesus not only identifies with us completely in our suffering because He had an experience like ours, He also participates in our suffering because our very own experience of suffering has mysteriously been laid on Him.

Can you imagine what’s packed in those three little words “who was dead”? Revelation unfolds Jesus as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” He carried our sins and our sorrows. His substitutionary death touches the very heart of our hurts.

We are wounded people. In this fallen world, people are hurt and exploited. Children are abused. Marriages are broken. The innocent are oppressed. Followers of Christ face opposition and persecution. Tragedies of all kinds afflict us and the ones we love. Woundedness, it seems, is simply a fact of life. But we are not alone in our sufferings and trials. Despite our emotional, psychological and physical injuries, Jesus has not abandoned us. Jesus is not distant or aloof. Rather He enters our painful situations to bring healing and redemption. It is important to know Christ’s heart as we face suffering, so that we may understand our suffering in light of His love for us, in light of His sharing our suffering in the Cross, rather than interpreting His heart toward us on the basis of our suffering.

Listen to what Jesus goes on to tell this broken, hurting community in Smyrna: I am the one “who was dead, and has come to life.” Think about those powerful words for a moment—“and has come to life” (Rev. 2:8). In Smyrna Christians
were suffering and dying for Jesus. He wanted them to know that He had suffered and died for them first. Then He rose from the dead to guarantee they will, too. I Am everything you need. I have everything you need. If you are faithful even to the point of death, I will give you a crown of life (Rev 2:10). If you overcome, you will not be hurt by the second death (Rev 2:11).

This crown of life is the victor’s crown. You’ve heard of it. The garland wreath placed on the head of the victorious athlete at the games or the conquering military leader. Smyrna was famous for its athletic games, so this would be a natural metaphor. One story coming out of ancient Smyrna is how one of these garland wreaths was given posthumously to a leading citizen. In other words, he’s dead and gets a crown of life. It fits the death-life antithesis of this passage. The Smyrnaeans bestow their honor on a corpse, while Jesus uses it to bring “life” out of death. The single major theme of this letter is that Christ will bring life out of death. Nothing they could ever suffer would fail to lead to God’s vindication and their reward. As the First and the Last, the Living Jesus would stand down there at the end of history—a bringer of life out of death.13 In between is the incredible promise that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose for them (Rom 8:28).

Dennis Ngien, an international evangelist and pastor in Canada, tells about a conversation he had with a Czech government official as he was returning home on a plane following a preaching tour in the former Czechoslovakia. The man had attended one of the services where Ngien had preached about Christ’s suffering for His people. However, instead of being inspired to trust in God, he left the service cursing God, his mind swirling around the forty years of torment he and his family had experienced during Communist rule, particularly his parents’ death by starvation and his own wrenching experience growing up in an orphanage. When the man arrived home, he continued to burn with rage. His eyes fell on a crucifix hanging on his apartment wall that his mother had given him before she died. She had prayed that someday he would come to know Christ, but seeing it fueled his anger even more. He was so upset that he picked up a cake topped with thick white icing and threw it at the crucifix. The cake hit the crucifix and the icing clung to it. Then it slowly began to drip off the face of the crucified Jesus hanging there.

At that moment Ngien’s words about Christ’s suffering resounded in his mind. As he stared intently at the figure of Jesus, he noticed there were tears in his eyes. He was so moved by them that he fell on his knees before the cross and surrendered his life to Christ. “Christ is for me, not against me,” he exclaimed. “I don’t understand many of the things that happened politically,” the man told Ngien as they continued to talk on the plane, “but I know that Jesus did not forsake me. He was in pain when I was in pain. He was in tears when I was in tears. He did not experience joy when I suffered most.”14

Like Jenny throwing rocks or the Czech government official throwing cake, we may find ourselves throwing things as we confront the intense pain of our undeserved hurts. After all, the road to the cross is strewn with rocks and other objects thrown by rage-filled sufferers down through the centuries. So Christ’s invitation to us still stands. “Come, walk this rugged road with Me. Throw rocks if you have to. But don’t turn away—keep your eyes on Me. Consider your affliction in the light of my affliction. Consider your wounds in the light of mine. Be assured that I know. Understand. You have a part. I have a part. Be faithful unto death [your part] and I will give you the crown of life [My part]. He who overcomes [your part] will not be hurt by the second death [My part].”

“I know . . . I Am . . . I will . . .” I love Jesus because He knows my sorrows and trials. He knows what I am going through right now. He knows what I will go through tomorrow. He knows where I live. How I am being treated. The trials I am facing. How I feel. My questions and confusion (Why? How long? What will become of me? Does He care for me?). How I want to lash out. Run. Compromise. Give up altogether. How hard it is to hang in there when I am tired and my situation just keeps getting worse. Not only does Jesus know and care. He has everything I need to be at peace and remain faithful. He invests my suffering in a hope-filled future.

What life situation do you find yourself in right now? What makes you wish you were a bird who could fly away? What would you throw stones at today?

1Stephen Seamands, Wounds that Heal: Bringing Our Hurts to the Cross (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 9, 10.


Osborne, 136.

Osborne, Ibid.


There is likely an allusion here to Jer 51:49, in which Babylon is blamed not only for the slaughter of Israelites but also for that of other peoples as well: “Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel, as for Babylon have fallen the slain of all the earth” (see David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52c [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 1011; Osborne, 659).

Osborne, 136.


Seamands, 17.

Seamands, 18.


Osborne, 135.

PRAYER IN SAN ANTONIO

Meeting of Adventist Theologians and Bible Scholars
Friday night, November 19, 2004

Jiri Moskala
Andrews University

Our dear heavenly Father,

We are coming to you — to your throne of grace — as theologians, Bible scholars, pastors, and students of your Word, as your children, and we want to praise You for your marvelous goodness, astonishing kindness, abounding grace, and incredible faithfulness toward us!

We came here not to be entertained, but to be intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually challenged by your Word. You promised that your word will never come back to you empty. Speak to us, disturb us in our status quo, that we can advance in the knowledge and understanding of your truth, that we can see you better in the beauty of your character — in what you are doing and in what you really are. Touch our hearts that we can grow in love, faith, and hope, that we can be better persons.

You are a God of relationships. Help us, therefore, to cultivate a meaningful relationship with you, our spouses, colleagues, friends, and those in need. Transform us by your grace and the power of your Word and Spirit that we can be as loving, caring, and serving as you are.

Before you we are like beggars with empty hands, totally dependent on you as small children. Fill us with your Presence and may your Word speak clearly to us. Bless Dr. Lichtenwalter when he will preach to us. Use him powerfully by your Spirit that our eyes can be fixed even more firmly upon you!

We pray for this and thank you for it in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.
A WRIGHT AND FULLER READING OF THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST:
Looking through the Window of a Visual Theology

Ronald L. Jolliffe, Professor of English
Walla Walla College

What can a $0.95 used book say to a $700,000,000 movie? This paper critiques the visual theology of Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, 1 through a window provided by Wright and Fuller in their book, *The Book of the Acts of God*, 2 chosen in keeping with the thematic glue for this session of ASRS. 3 Wright 4 provides a devastating critique of the premise of this three-quarter-billion-dollar-gross-and-still-climbing movie. The thesis of this paper is that the theology of *The Passion of the Christ* is wrong about Isaiah 53.

The first part of this paper provides a brief introduction to visual theology. The second section presents a reading of the visual theology of the Gibson film. The third part describes Wright’s exegetical treatment of Isaiah 53 and the how the film’s visual theology endorses a mistaken understanding of the Christ and that violence ought to be removed from the roster of positive theological values.

Part One

An Introduction to Visual Theology

The term visual theology, coinage as yet with little purchase, is gaining currency as clergy and professors of religion come to grips with the reality that the majority of those who listen to them are more literate visually than textually. I speak of being visually “literate” intentionally; there are many studies 5 that demonstrate ways Western culture teaches people to read meaning in visual conventions that are not understandable to those who have not had the conventions, i.e. these visual conventions are not just a matter of “common sense.” Culture teaches how to “read” and how to “write” these conventions. In film studies it is common to speak of “doing a visual reading of a scene,” or simply asking, “How did you read this film?”

The term visual theology refers to the religious meaning reflected in imagery; in this case the imagery is a narrative film. Of course films have included words since the invention of the “talkies” about 1926, but film remains a primarily visual medium that has no direct mechanism for explaining meaning. For example, film has no good way to tell the audience what someone is thinking; it can only fall back on the usually obtusive use of “voice over” by a narrator. Film prefers to show, for it does not tell well.

Another reason for the need to be visually literate is the unrelenting linearity of film. By comparison, a book is amazingly circular, almost interactive; its structure allows the reader to pause, to reread, to reflect, to highlight, to annotate, in contrast to the cinema-shown film which drags the viewer forward like a Grim Reaper not to be dissuaded from a timely arrival at an appointed destination. This, perhaps, is the primary rhetorical quality of film that creates “the enormous power of the motion picture medium to communicate ideological arguments.” 6 And

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3 Gibson’s film is based on the Gospels, tradition, and *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ [from the Meditations of Anne Catherine Emmerich].*

4 G. Ernest Wright wrote the section of the book dealing with Isaiah.


rhetoric always deserves to be received critically. The following list provides a few basic principles for reading a film, which Part Two will utilize. They will seem natural to good readers of text.

1. **Pay attention to the opening and closing scenes**—as with texts, the first and last scenes in film are usually key indicators of the purpose of the film.

2. **Watch for commonly repeated motifs**—issues important to the film usually surface in multiple places.

3. **Remember that the director controls the viewpoint**—the camera is invisible, but it is the foreordained surrogate for the viewer’s eyes. This invisibility of the camera tends to override the critical faculties of the mind by implying that the view shown is what happened rather than what the director chose to show. This is an illusion difficult to resist because humans usually believe what they see is what happened.

4. **Notice the duration of film elements**—the amount of screen time the film dwells on a particular part of the narrative is a gauge of its importance to the film’s purpose.

5. **Monitor your emotions**—literature (textual and visual) is emotive. Musical scores, camera movements and angles, costuming, plotlines, etc., affect how viewers read a film.

**Part Two**

**A Visual Reading of The Passion of the Christ**

Many aspects of the film are inviting. The camera angles, lighting, thematically connected flashbacks to earlier parts of the story, costuming, and sets are absorbing elements in the film. There is a delightful exchange (albeit fictional) between Jesus and his mother in a flashback to Jesus working as a carpenter about the Unlikelihood of “tall tables” with chairs ever becoming popular. Although the musical score seemed emotionally manipulative at times, it was beautifully done at other moments. And the sound track captures the walla[7] of crowd sounds. In contrast to films such as The Last Temptation or Jesus of Montreal, which were clearly understood to be artistic interpretations, The Passion of the Christ is widely understood to be an accurate historical portrayal and therein is a particular reason for a critical reading, for a theology that makes pain redemptive sanctifies violence, retribution, and punishment as the standard remedies for any and all departures from values. I have had people ask, after reading my review of the movie in Spectrum, why I didn’t like the movie, because, they say, Gibson worked hard to be as historically accurate as possible. But narrative and life should not be confused. All stories are constructs; even history is a construction. Life is messy. Stories arbitrarily mark out beginnings and middles and endings, while life is just a sequence of stuff. It is only through the heavy editorializing of selectivity that life becomes story. Is Mel Gibson’s film historically accurate? No. Was the air of first-century Jerusalem filled with Dolby-quality symphonic music from no explainable source? Did Gibson have a vision that Jesus, while in the courtyard of Caiaphas, remembered how his mother made him wash his hands before eating? And even if he did, that does not make it history. Every work of art and every work of scholarship is part luck, part skill, part selection, and part creation.

I believe the theology of Gibson’s film at core can be stated in these words: Salvation came through the horrific violence Jesus endured. I believe the following visual elements justify that reading.

1. The opening and closing scenes match this summary. The opening frame of the film places words from Isaiah 53:5 in white letters on a black screen, accompanied by somber instrumental music. The final frame is a close-up of the rectangular wound in Jesus’ hand. The very first frame and the very last frame of the film form a programmatic *inclusio* of wounding.

2. The most commonly repeated motif is the violence perpetrated upon Jesus’ body. He is hit repeatedly with chains and fists while still in the Garden of Gethsemane following his betrayal. He is struck with fists and chains, even knocked off a viaduct, on the road to Caiaphas’s courtyard. He is struck repeatedly in the courtyard before the arrival of Caiaphas so that when Caiaphas appears Jesus’ right eye is already swollen shut and his face severely bruised. These are violent additions to the narratives of the four Gospels[8]. Following the hearing there is

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about a minute of screen time dedicated to the text “they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him.”9 By the time he gets to Pilate he has been so brutalized that the screenplay inserts Pilate asking Jewish leaders, “Do you always punish your prisoners before they’re judged?” The film then revels in the biblically referenced chastisement, 10 and the crown of thorns and the striking with reeds.11 The next nineteen minutes of the film, the Via Dolorosa, have almost no biblical basis (with the exception of Luke’s account of the women.)12 However, this section, based on the traditional “Stations of the Cross,” provides a nearly continuous opportunity for the depiction of violence: as soon as Jesus lifts the cross the Roman guard strikes him from behind and continues beating him as the procession moves until Jesus falls the first time and is beaten; then stumbles and is beaten; then falls the second time and is beaten and the third, with intermittent strokes while he is walking. By the time Jesus arrives at Golgotha he looks more like meat than a man. The crucifixion is shown in lingering, painful detail. Violent, physical abuse is an emphasized, repeated motif.

3. The director controls what is shown. The story is told from multiple viewpoints, occasionally as though through Jesus’ own eyes, sometimes from heaven’s viewpoint, sometimes through the eyes of Mary, of Pilate, of Judas, of children, etc. The director places the viewer in these and many fictionalized situations for emotive effect: a few inches from Jesus’ face while he is on the cross; in the cell where Jesus is imprisoned; a few inches from Jesus’ ribs when the flogging exposes bone; in flashbacks where the viewer sees what Jesus, or Mary, is remembering. The film leads viewers into fictionalized locations, Herod’s quarters, Pilate’s bedroom, Mary’s home, etc.

4. The duration of scenes is also an indication of what is important to the director’s intent. The film seems to find violence generally, rather than the crucifixion specifically, redemptive. It is instructive to compare the duration of the crucifixion scene, which runs for 11½ minutes (including one 30-second flashback to the last supper), with the duration of the flagellation scene which runs nearly as long, 10½ minutes with a 55-second flashback to the foot washing. If a film needs to be reduced in length, less important scenes are deleted or shortened. The flagellation scene clearly could have been shortened without loss of plot line if it were not core to the director’s purpose. To further clarify this point, three Gospels make reference to the flagellation of Jesus. Luke does not record the flogging, but only the earlier threats of Pilate, speaking to the Jewish leaders, that he will punish him (Luke 23:16, 22b: παῖς ἔσται = “after he is chastised”); notice Luke’s verb is based on the stem for “child” and has to do with educational punishment perhaps “spanking (?)” Two verbs for the beating appear in the three Gospels. Mark 15:15b: φορτισταί = “after he was flogged” Matthew 27:26b: φραγμοὺς ἔστην = “after he was flogged” John 19:1: μαστοῦ ἔστην = “he whipped (him).”

These two Greek words, an aorist active participle and an aorist active indicative, constitute the entire textual record of the flogging. It is expanded into more than ten screen minutes. Furthermore, perhaps based on the two different Greek terms, the movie includes both a whipping with canes and a flogging with instruments resembling cats-o-nine-tails.13 It is unusual in film that extended actions are treated in real time on screen. The duration here says the director considers this scene core to his purpose.

5. Pay attention to devices that tug on your feelings. The bodies of the two thieves crucified with Jesus are amazingly free of marks of physical violence, yet there is no historical reason to assume they would have been treated differently from Jesus, for scourging and abuse were regular elements that preceded crucifixion.14 However,

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9 Mt 26:67; Mk 14:65a.
10 Mt 27:26b; Mk 15:15b; Lk 23:16; Jn 19:1.
11 Mt 27:28-31a; Mk 15:17-20a; Jn 19:2-3.
12 Mt 27:31b-32; Mk 15:20b-21; Lk 23:26-32; Jn 19:17a.
13 In contrast to Gibson, compare George Stevens’ The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), which devotes no screen time to the flogging.
14 Philo, Against Flaccus 72, 84; Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 12.256; Jewish War 2.306, 308; 5.446-451.
had the film shown their bodies as having endured the same treatment as Jesus it would diminish the rhetorical impact on the viewer of the uniqueness of what Jesus suffered. By visually contrasting the differences in treatment between Jesus and the two thieves, the film is able to emphasize the magnitude of the violence Jesus suffered.

In summary of this section, the visual theology of The Passion of the Christ argues that Isaiah 53:5 predicted that the wounding of the Messiah would be for our healing. Christ's endurance of such horrific violence mandated by God's prediction, along with his ready forgiveness, brought salvation. What Jesus suffered makes it clear that he is the Messiah, as shown by the nail prints in his hands.

Part Three

The film read through the window of The Book of the Acts of God.

According to Wright, biblical scholarship dates Isaiah 1-39 to the 8th century BC. However, Isaiah 40-55 belongs to a different writer designated "Second Isaiah" who worked about a century and a half later, ca. 540 BC. Second Isaiah opens with the call and commissioning of the prophet by God (Isaiah 40:1-11). Second Isaiah explains the rise of the Persian ruler Cyrus by consistently separating the two traditional roles for the Messiah:

Second Isaiah solves in a most remarkable way the old problem of the Israelite theology of the Messiah. How is the Messiah as the leader of Israel to be a savior and a destroyer at the same time? The prophet splits the two aspects apart, and applies the title "Messiah" solely to the Persian emperor, Cyrus. God's servant as the in[s] trumpet of his salvation for the Gentiles cannot effect his mission except by being willing to suffer and to die in order to effect it. 16

Simple lexical work with an English concordance is sufficient to show that Isaiah 40-55 explicitly and consistently identifies the term the "anointed" (the "Messiah") with Cyrus the Persian, and the servant with Israel.

Isaiah 45:1-4

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
Whose right hand I have grasped
To subdue nations before him
And strip kings of their robes,
To open doors before him—
And the gates shall not be closed:
I will go before you
And level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
And cut through the bars of iron,

15 Wright, 164.

16 Ibid, 183.
I will give you the treasures of darkness
And riches hidden in secret places,
So that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
The God of Israel, who calls you by your name.

For the sake of my servant Jacob,
And Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me.

The servant is ubiquitous in deutero-Isaiah. Four passages describe the career of the servant, 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. Some are clearly addressed to “the whole people of Israel, at another moment to the ideal Israel, and at still another time to a figure in the third person singular who in himself personifies the true role which Israel should assume in this world.” The apparent discrepancy of reference is possibly no more difficult than understanding that the three underlined terms in the following sentence all refer to the same entity: The United States primarily refers to the people who live within her boundaries. The Lord often calls Israel “my servant” (41:8-9; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4—see above; 48:20).

Isaiah 41:8-9:

But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
The offspring of Abraham, my friend;
You whom I took from the ends of the earth,
And called from its farthest corners,
Saying to you, “You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you off”

According to Mays, the designation of a corporate group by the title “my servant” is an innovation of deutero-Isaiah. Isaiah 53:5 is located within one of the servant songs (52:13-53:12) and is itself framed by

17 Ibid, 184.

preceding (52:13) and following verses (53:11) clearly identifying Isaiah 53:5 as belonging to a section addressing the servant.

Isaiah 52:13-15a:
See, my servant shall prosper;
He shall be exalted and lifted up,
And shall be very high.
Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
And his form beyond that of mortals—
So he shall startle many nations; ... 

Isaiah 53:11:
He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied;
By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
Make many to be accounted righteous;
And he shall bear their iniquities.

For the purposes of this paper, it is not the identity of the servant that is central to the conversation, so much as the observation that Isaiah 53:5 does not reference the Messiah. Cyrus is the Messiah. The servant suffers, but the servant is not the Messiah. Therefore it is exegetically fallacious to use Isaiah 53:5 as evidence of what the Messiah is to do. It is this direct reading of the text itself that undermines the validity of the visual theology of Mel Gibson’s film.

Surprisingly, Isaiah 53:5, a favorite text among evangelical Christians as referring to the cross of Christ, is referenced only once in the entire New Testament, in a late book of the New Testament. 19 1 Peter 2:24 quotes part of the verse, “by his wounds you have been healed,” but in a problematic and troubling application. It use is reminiscent for me of a manipulative dorm worship I sat through as a teen. The dormitory dean, utilizing John 20:7 as his shill said that just as the risen Lord had “rolled up” the grave cloth that had been at his head before leaving the tomb, so we academy dorm students were to make our beds and pick up our rooms before going to classes. Just as the rolled head cloth in Jesus’ tomb makes no ethical demand on dormitory etiquette, so Isaiah 53:5 does not substantiate a subordinate status for slaves and women, even though 1 Peter places the Isaiah quotation as the central defense to that effect in 1 Peter 2:18-3:6.

Salvation is founded neither in subordination nor in suffering. That is the logic of the Inquisition, but it served to demonstrate only that the powerful rather than the righteous use violence and for ignoble purposes. Expiation, the resolution of iniquity through torment or torture, is neither described nor implied in deuter-Isaiah and should not be imported into Christian theology. Violence is an unmitigated evil. Just as it took the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib to clarify the realities of American interrogation, perhaps it has taken the “visual theology” of Gibson’s film to clarify the equally problematic view that Christ’s pain was redemptive.

In conclusion, I find the words of A. O. Scott regarding The Passion of the Christ directly to the point: “It is disheartening to see a film made with evident and abundant religious conviction that is at the same time so utterly lacking in grace.” 20

19 Mt 8:14-17 quotes Is 53:4 with respect to Jesus’ healing activity, but not his crucifixion.

JESUS, THE MOVIES

Bonnie Dwyer
Spectrum Magazine

During the media frenzy over *The Passion* this past spring, there was a sketch about it on late night television. In it one person is telling another about the gruesome crucifixion scene when the other interrupts saying, “Oh no, you’ve ruined it! You mean; He dies? No way....”

Likewise, you’ve heard the well-founded charges against *The Passion* that filled the press: excessively violent, anti-Semitic, misogynistic. I agree with them all. However, I also respect the creativity and artistic skill that characterize the film. What more is there to say.

With the help of biblical scholar Barnes Tatum’s book *Jesus at the Movies* I’d like to look at *The Passion* in light of the Jesus movies that have preceded it and then talk about the next Jesus movie. Perhaps, now that Southern Adventist University is producing films, it might be an Adventist version of the Jesus story.

With his *Passion*, Gibson takes us back to the earliest film concepts about Jesus that grew out of the European passion plays such as the one produced every decade by the people of Oberammergau.

In 1898, the film titled “Passion Play of Oberammergau” premiered at the Eden Museum in New York. This Jesus movie had 23 scenes and lasted twenty minutes. While the title made it sound like it was shot in Europe, in truth it was made on the roof of the Grand Central Palace in New York. It was the *New York Herald* that broke the location story and told of the production difficulties created by shooting outside during winter in New York. Snow had to be shoveled from the Garden of Gethsemane, animals had to be transported to the rooftop set. In spite of the newspaper revelations, the movie proved to be a success.

According to Tatum, the most extravagant portrayal of Jesus on film during the silent era was a movie by Cecile B. DeMille called *The King of Kings*, made in 1927. This film became the most widely viewed Jesus film in the world over the next half century. DeMille claimed that more people had been told the story of Jesus through his film than any other medium except the Bible itself. He calculated that 800 million viewers had seen the film and even cited the use of the film by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in faraway jungles.

DeMille followed the harmonizing approach to the story, combining material from all four Gospels. Other films that have used this approach include Samuel Bronston’s action-drama *King of Kings*; George Stevens’s meditative *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and Franco Zeffirelli’s made-for-television miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Tatum says the harmonizing approach to the four Gospels was anticipated literally in the earliest centuries of the church when Tatian, a Christian from Mesopotamia, combined the four Gospels into one linear story about Jesus. Literary harmonies of various kinds were also created by Augustine in the fifth century, by John Calvin in the sixteenth century, and even by Thomas Jefferson in the nineteenth century.

While combining material from all four Gospels helps the film director to be true to the original story, it also creates problems. What do you include and what do you leave out?

To solve that problem there have been movies that use only Scripture as the script. The recent film *The Gospel of John* uses that approach. Viewers thus hear the words of the Gospel as well as experiencing the visual representation of the story. As I walked out of the theater after viewing *The Gospel of John*, I kept thinking about what a difficult time Jesus had in getting the people around him to understand his mission. Not only the Jewish leaders of his day had trouble; even his disciples seemed to be confused by their expectations of what they had read in prophecy. They kept saying to him, the prophets said that the Messiah would be this or that and you do not seem to fit that picture precisely.

Believability is a major challenge for Jesus movies. How do you get the incarnation portion of the story right? Is Jesus human or divine? Which story do you tell? Writing about Martin Scorsese’s movie *The Last
Temptation of Christ, Harlan Jacobson identified what he considered to be the central question raised by that film’s characterization of Jesus, “not was he man or God, but was he nuts?”

Jesus movies always seem to have elicited strong reactions—both negative and positive.

Recently at the church I attend, the youth took the worship service with several different ones giving their personal testimony. One young man told of how he was converted by watching “The Greatest Story Ever Told.”

George Stevens was the producer of this 1960s film. He used a script that includes the most familiar episodes from the four Gospels. While on location shooting the film in Utah, he described his vision: “We are doing simply the story of Jesus, with no interruptions for theatrical embroideries. Our contacts are with ideas rather than spectacle.”

However, watching it in 2004, it was the spectacle that impressed me. There were huge production scenes with sweeping vistas backed by music from Handel’s Messiah as the story moved from place to place. Tatum says that Stevens meant his film to be the greatest version of the greatest story ever told. He also says that when the film opened, its smart look elicited much comment. No less than five, supposedly independent, movie reviewers suggested that the film had the appearance of a series of Hallmark greeting cards. . . . The film received little honor in its own day. Ultimately, this twenty-million-dollar production also became a loser at the box office. But it is still in the video stores, making converts in spite of what the critics say.

In between Stevens’ film and Gibson’s, numerous movies were made about Jesus that explored the story creatively: the musicals “Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell; Martin Scorsese’s controversial The Last Temptation of Christ. Tatum suggests that these directors, whether they knew it or not, were taking a “redaction criticism” approach to the Gospels similar to what has flourished alongside the second and third quests for the historical Jesus.

Finding new elements and ways for this well-known story to surprise the audience is a creative challenge that seems to fascinate film directors and producers. Watching Jesus movies has helped stretch my imagination and understanding of Christ, perhaps no more so than in the Jesus movie that I saw here at the AAR meetings two years ago titled: Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter.

You may have missed this Canadian cult flick. The name tells the plot. And did I mention it’s a musical, too. The scene is set for Jesus to be an action hero after we learn that a vampire is going around lethally biting lesbians. Using kung-fu Jesus swings into action to save the women as a lively musical score thumps in the background. My response to this lively telling of the Jesus story was much like Thomas’s in the book of John. When he was told that Jesus was alive, he could not believe it. People do not come back to life after being crucified. No one would make a movie about lesbian vampires, cast Jesus in the middle of it, and make it a musical! But in the midst of Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter, I did find Jesus—just not in the form in which I was accustomed to thinking of him. But there he was saving people—lesbians—from the evil—vampires that were attacking them.

I have new appreciation for Thomas and for what Jesus said to him: “. . . Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

After the death of the disciples, there was no one who had literally seen Jesus, so his comment is relevant to all generations. To believe without seeing requires imagination.

With each generation the Jesus story needs to be retold. Film provides a fascinating way in which to do so specifically because of what we are doing this morning. In critiquing the film we can safely analyze our understanding of the story.

For instance, Gibson’s film has been called a “Catholic” rendering of Jesus’ story. With its use of the Stations of the Cross as a structure for the story, this is easy to see.

So, what would the Adventist version of the story include? I can imagine that the GC version might be titled: The NET Story, a prequel to the famous NET Evangelistic Series. The focus would be on the preaching of Jesus, and hopefully the Sermon on the Mount would be the centerpiece.
If Adventist Forum were to be the producer, the story might look like a remake of Babette’s Feast, with the emphasis on Jesus’ conversations at the Cana wedding or with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The ASI Version might feature the story of the rich young ruler.

Could we tell our version with as much passion as Gibson?

Whether or not we could, the lesson of all these movies seems to me that there is a Power in the gospel story that transcends our telling. Even schlock Hallmark versions bring about conversions. Jesus saves even in vampire films. Whatever we think of Gibson’s efforts, he did tell the Jesus story in a powerful way.

However, there is also more to the story than Gibson told. He needed Chuck Scriven or Ivan Blazen to help him with his resurrection scene.

Or, perhaps that is where we should begin in our telling the good news of Jesus’ life here on earth.