

THE CHURCH IN CRISIS

By Don and Joy Veinot, Ron Henzel

In a world awash in new religious movements—or what could properly be termed the “repaganization” of the world—Russell D. Moore raises a very important question regarding the future of the Church:

...the questions over evangelical identity are not ultimately about turf wars over publishing houses or academic guilds. They are about one question: Will evangelicals be able to preserve an authentic Christian witness for the next generation?¹

To answer Moore’s question, we need to explore the role of the Church in the world and the necessary qualifications of pastors and other church leaders to lead the Church into the twenty-first century. How do we choose a pastor, and how do we assess a church? Many times the choice of a pastor hinges primarily upon how well he “entertains” us rather than any truly biblical criteria. Similarly, churches are often chosen mainly for such things as the quality of the music or how good we may “feel” when we leave.

Like buying a house, which is something most people do only a few times in their lives, calling a pastor is a major decision that quite properly absorbs much of a congregation’s time and resources. Unfortunately, also like buying a house, that decision is often made on the basis of its ramifications for a church’s collective felt needs and ego gratification. Too often, the ultimate question seems to boil down to: Will our pastor make us look good as a congregation and, hence, make *me* look good for attending here?

It’s difficult to correct these pervasive attitudes because there’s a tragic dearth of training available to teach us what to look for in a pastor or church. We are unsure what a healthy biblically-based church should look like and how it should function. Thus, these very important questions are seldom addressed: What impact should the Church make on culture, and do I have a role and responsibility in carrying that out?

It seems as though the cry-baby-boomer generation (of which the authors must admit membership \approx) have transitioned from “If it feels good, do it” to “If it feels good, believe it.” Instead of our faith being “all about God and His will,” it seems increasingly to have become more “about us and our feelings.”

The Road to Faithlessness is Paved with Good Intentions

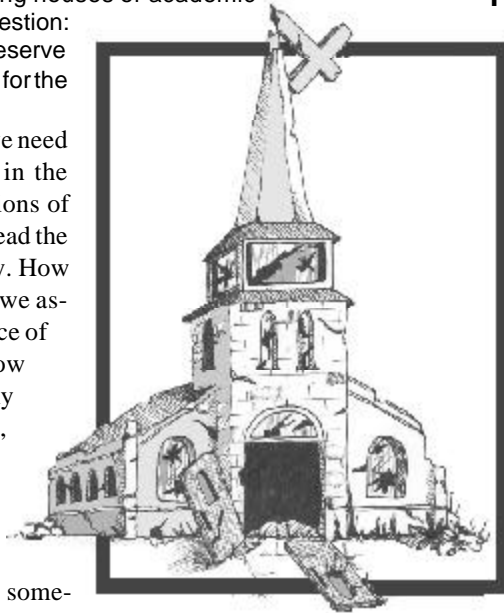
Frankly, much of the blame for this must be laid at the feet of the “Church Growth Movement.” True, it didn’t invent the problem. As one Lutheran pastor, Curtis A. Peterson, notes,

“Since human nature tends to be self-centered, congregations tend to become preoccupied in their own efforts and concerns to the expense of missions at home and abroad.”²

We had churches—even Bible-believing churches!—that sinfully had neglected evangelism and missions long before the Church Growth Movement came along. Peterson recognizes that the original intent of the Church Growth Movement was to shake the Church out of its introspective slumber. But, in the long run, it exacerbated the problem by its tendency to emphasize style over substance and presentation over purpose. While its various approaches were initially based on the good motive of winning the lost to Christ,³ somewhere along the way that motive got lost in all its deference to demographics, its emphasis on arcane concepts such as its “Homogeneous Unit” principle,⁴ its preoccupation with pragmatism, and its general capitulation to consumerism. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Church Growth Movement has been largely responsible for removing the task of fulfilling the Great Commission from missionaries and committing it to marketers, and relocating Christianity’s confrontation with culture from Mars Hill to Madison Avenue.

Throughout this process of progressive commercialization, the Church at large has been subjected to several different “models” of how to “do church” over the last 30 years. For a while in the early ’70s, Gene Getz was the model to follow. Get rid of the pulpit; get an overhead projector, bar stool, and leisure suit. Ray Stedman’s

(Continued on next page)



The
Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.
Journal

is the quarterly publication of:
Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.
P.O. Box 455, Lombard, IL 60148-0455
Phone: (630) 627-9028
Fax: (630) 627-6829
E-mail: Info@midwestoutreach.org

Don Veinot President
Joy Veinot Director
D. L. McGehee Editing
S. Todd McGehee Layout/Art
Christy Bobo Cover Art

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"Crisis" (Continued from page 1)

"Body Life" concept also became popular in some places. Have a separate service in which the pastor recedes into the background becoming a facilitator rather than an instructor, and the people in the pews (or, perhaps, in theater seats) spontaneously give testimonies, prayer requests, a sharing of "this Scripture means to me....," and so on. Robert Schuller's highly successful (in terms of generating nickels and noses, at least) walk-in/drive-in church emphasized comfort—thereafter, informality became the rage. More recently, it has been the Willow Creek "seeker-sensitive" church or the Saddle Back "purpose-driven church" model which has captured the spotlight, generating countless spin-offs and clones. Nothing succeeds like success, it seems.

We should emphasize there is nothing inherently wrong about utilizing testimonies, overhead projectors and comfortable surroundings, bar stools, or even wearing leisure suits while engaged in furthering the Gospel. There is certainly nothing wrong with seeking to appeal to the lost in words and with illustrations they might understand. *NONE* of these things are inherently good or bad but are essentially cosmetic. In any case, the Gospel itself must never get displaced by the methodology. To rephrase a popular metaphor: The Gospel is the "baby" that should not be drowned in the bathwater.

It is worth noting that a number of these "success" models have already gone out of fashion, and some have even spawned reactions among Christians who believe such practices sacrifice a biblical sense of the awesomeness and transcendence of God on the altar of appealing to the masses.

The Church Growth "principles" formulated by such gurus as Donald McGavran, C. Peter Wagner, and Win Arn have also begun to fall out of favor and with good reason: They haven't produced! According to Peterson, this has not escaped the notice of the movement's founders, who are at least honest enough to admit their failures.

C. Peter Wagner is quoted as saying, "Somehow they [the Church Growth principles] don't seem to work." In spite of everything, they have taught and advocated, he sees the percentage of American adults attending church remaining almost the same, while Protestant church membership is actually declining.⁵

It wouldn't be true to conclude there are virtually no "points of light" amidst this

darkness. As Peterson notes, "On the other hand, the rapid growth of several mainly independent mega churches is one of the most important developments in modern church history."⁶ However, as a pastor of one of those mega churches, Bill Hybels, might say: When you "net it out," the Church Growth Movement has over-promised and under-delivered while separating many Christians from a critical part of the church's *raison d'être*: Teaching.

While the C. Peter Wagners of the world may be honest enough to admit when their principles don't "work," their admissions are purely academic in nature. Their failures merely prompt them to resume their search for something that "works." They do not seem to have grasped at all the consequences of pursuing numeric growth at the expense of doctrinal edification. Peterson recalls:

At a crowded seminar I once heard C. Peter Wagner confess that he was not a theologian, adding, only half in jest, "That is a Church Growth principle!" How sad it is that his lack of the theology leads people away from the very Gospel which alone can feed the multitudes.⁷

How sad, indeed! *Theology* is simply a shorthand expression for *the study of God*. In addition, since Christian theology is rooted in Scripture, it means that our proper source for learning about God is the Bible. Therefore, for Christians to toss out theology is the same as tossing out God's Word. Why would a Church Growth guru want to do something like that?

We're not saying they *intentionally* denigrate Scripture, but they clearly misunderstand the proper relationship between the Bible and theology. They also have a dangerously naïve faith in the notion that what Ronald Reagan called "the magic of the marketplace" holds the key to evangelistic success. Moreover, once faithful pastors (of whom, thank God, there are still many!) begin to help their congregations sink their roots into Scripture, they begin to absorb truths that call into question any marriage between evangelism and marketing. As Craig Parro warned:

Marketing solicits, woos and entertains. But the [Word of God] confronts; it calls to repentance and commitment. There is a judgment to be avoided, a hell to be fled, and thoughts to be taken captive. In the words of Lesslie Newbigin, "We must not leave our hearer's worldview intact."⁸

A marketing mentality, however, begins with the assumption we can use our

hearer's worldview as the ground on which to stand as we "sell" him our "product" (which in this case, by mere coincidence, is the Gospel). It doesn't warn him to flee from the ground on which he's standing because that ground will be consumed by God's judgment. Such a mentality will not risk offending the "customer" by advising him that his worldview itself is what makes him an enemy of God (Eph. 2:1-3; cf. Rom. 1:18-33), because it doesn't want to risk losing the "sale." Moreover, once the deal is closed and the sale is made, all that is left is to recruit the "customer" onto our sales force. Thus, evangelism has not only been reduced to marketing, but multi-level marketing at that!

Despite a lot of talk about how believers should cultivate their spiritual gifts and grow in the faith, we've observed that many in the Church Growth Movement at least act as though these goals can be pursued without a serious emphasis on teaching. Not only that, some have even taken an unbiblical separation between evangelism and doctrine to an extreme that deliberately disparages doctrine which, in turn, unwittingly jeopardizes evangelism.

Oliver Twist Goes to Church

Quite a number of years ago—in our younger days, we (Don and Joy) attended a Willow Creek Church "clone" for a time. This church had much going for it, and it seemed to have so much to offer. The music was professional, the dramas were well done, and the pastor was quite gifted in evangelism. Soon, however, it became apparent that, although this church was focused on evangelism, there was no real substantive teaching. At first, we told ourselves that, even though we were not learning much (aside from "Psychology 101"), there were plenty of opportunities to serve, and it seemed the perfect church to invite others who might not go to a more traditional church. We thought, perhaps, we were being too critical and our doctrine-heavy background might make us extraordinarily hard to please in this area. But it soon became obvious the church was bringing in new (and often very young) believers in droves, but it didn't really seem to know what to do with them once they came to the faith other than call for greater commitment to evangelism, the church, and its leadership. There was a great hole in their scheme of things, and that hole was in the area of teaching. This was due, in part, to the senior pastor's view they didn't want to be, as he put it, "doctrinaire." He viewed doctrine itself as divisive and arrogant and considered *doctrine* almost a dirty word. The result of this mentality was his church became little more than a giant spiritual orphanage—well-intentioned, but poorly administered. It *was* a perfect church to take people who didn't like "traditional" church, as long as we didn't mind that they remained almost as ignorant of the faith as they were before they came!

The church also had a revolving door problem—almost as many were leaving out the back door as were coming in the front, and no one seemed to keep very good track of the "sheep." As a consequence, like Oliver Twist, some left the "orphanage" and fell in with thieves and pickpockets. There are plenty of "Artful Dodgers" and "Fagans" out there ready and willing to "take in" and "take care" of the sheep who wander away from our churches and go forth untaught into the world. Without the discernment that comes from sound Bible teaching, the babe in Christ will not be able to identify the thieves and wolves of the world and will often find themselves in dire spiritual danger. Most Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Wiccans are *former members of Christian churches* who had no defense to offer (as to why Christianity is true) when they were approached and seduced into these groups and belief systems.

After a time, we left that particular church, but we learned a very valuable lesson about the absolute necessity of doctrinal instruction. SOUND TEACHING—there is no substitute for it! Of course, we are not saying all non-traditional-type churches lack sound teaching, just as there are many "traditional" churches where sound doctrine is not emphasized. Indeed, lack of sound doctrinal teaching is reaching epidemic proportions today.

In congregations that have an aversion to doctrine, it eventually becomes unclear as to who really is a Christian and who is not. This is true even in churches that focus intensely on evangelism, because *everything* associated with evangelism — from the content of the Gospel itself, to the nature of saving faith and regeneration — is defined by *doctrine*!

The very notion evangelism can be separated from doctrine is itself a false doctrine, as Peterson notes:

As a matter of fact, it is precisely the evangelism texts of the Bible that exhort us to sound doctrine. The Bible forever joins the concern for sound doctrine with the mission mandate of our Lord. The Great Commission itself, (Matt. 28:18-20) commits us to teach "everything I have commanded you." In Acts 20:18-35, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders of "how I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance, and have faith in the Lord Jesus." Later he says, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock." Even as an evangelist and missionary, Paul was concerned about false doctrine and especially on the mission fields!

Another, example of the marriage of evangelistic zeal with sound doctrine is seen in 2 Timothy 4:5, where the great apostle urges Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" in a context (3:14-4:4) that is concerned about maintaining sound doctrine based on the Scriptures in the face of false teachers. When dealing with its theological underpinnings, Church Growth proponents are prone to put the cart before the horse. Experience and observation too often determine their conclusions rather than Scriptural exegesis. Reformed missiologist Roger Greenway complains: "Most of church growth missiology's theological bases have been worked out after the methodological insights and mission principles were arrived at through field observation and experience."

It's a bit like writing a sermon and then looking for a text.⁹

As we move into the twenty-first century, experience and observation are beginning to confirm the need for biblical truth rather than church-marketing practices. Nearly every day, we deal with the consequences of modern churches that bring spiritual infants into the world and leave them to fend doctrinally for themselves. They're almost immediately "***blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming***" (Eph. 4:14, NIV) until they turn to us or ministries like ours for help. As the tide of culture flows back into the sea of spiritual ignorance, it is sweeping away countless professing believers who were never taught how to swim.

Culture Transforming the Church

As we look across the landscape of the Church, we can begin measuring the effects and degree to which culture is impacting the Church rather than the other way around. According to pollster,

(Continued on next page)

“Crisis” (Continued from page 3)

George Barna:

Over the past 20 years, we have seen the nation’s theological views slowly become less aligned with the Bible. Americans still revere the Bible and like to think of themselves as Bible-believing people, but the evidence suggests otherwise. Christians have increasingly been adopting spiritual views that come from Islam, Wicca, secular humanism, the eastern religions and other sources. Because we remain a largely Bible-illiterate society, few are alarmed or even aware of the slide toward syncretism—a belief system that blindly combines beliefs from many different faith perspectives.¹⁰

The result—of what seems to be the abandonment of sound teaching and practice—is that we are moving ever farther from the biblical faith and very few seem to notice:

Barna indicated that the passing on of a Christian heritage from one generation to the next appears to be rapidly dissipating in America. “Our continuing research among teenagers and adolescents shows that the trend away from adopting biblical theology in favor of syncretic, culture-based theology is advancing at full gallop.” Citing a wealth of statistical evidence drawn from his books on teens’ lifestyles and religious beliefs, *Real Teens*, Barna noted that, “relatively few adults are alarmed by this trend, since teens and adolescents are merely reflecting the trail that their parents and teachers have already blazed.”¹¹

It is as though much of the Church climbed on to a great ship and has become so busy with making everyone comfortable and providing entertainment, they don’t realize the ship is detached from its moorings, has no fuel for its engines, and is adrift in an ocean of relativism. How very different is the Church in the third millennium than the Church in the first three centuries. It is almost as though we are looking at bookends in time. The Church on this end is being transformed by culture. The Church of the first three centuries influenced culture and transformed civilization. What did the culture of the first century look like? Human life was not a high value. The gladiatorial games and bloodshed were very popular. Suicide was commonly practiced and encouraged. Abortion and child abandonment were socially acceptable. Homosexuality, bestiality, and sexual promiscuity (including sex in public and orgies) was part of the fabric of society. Young girls were viewed as the property of the father who at his own discretion arranged his daughter’s marriage and sold her to her future husband. The father was his children’s authority either until he gave them permission to be out from under his authority or he died. The Church rejected this pagan practice as well and,

...the validity of marriage without the consent of the father began to be recognized. Soon this practice was widely accepted with the support of the church’s theologians. But apparently because *patria potestas* had been entrenched for centuries, the practice of getting married without the father’s consent required periodic reinforcement.¹²

This Christian view of the equality of women, rather than regarding them as property, brought about a new family standard. The marital bed became a sacred place where a husband and wife partook of conjugal acts. They were private acts between the husband and wife which excluded their friends, neighbors, and family pet.

Obviously, the Christians were not admired for rejecting the sexual immoralities of the Romans. St. Augustine in the early part of the fifth century said that the Romans despised Christians because they opposed their unrestrained sexual lifestyles (*The City of God* 1.20). Tertullian said that the Romans so despised the

Christians that they hated the name “Christian” (*Apology* 3).¹³

Not only was the view of sexuality changed, but the role of women was raised significantly.

A respectable Athenian woman was not permitted to leave her house unless she was escorted by a trustworthy male escort, commonly a slave appointed by her husband. When the husband’s male guests were present in his home, she was not permitted to eat or interact with them. She had to retire to her woman’s quarters (*gynaecium*). The only woman who had some freedom was the *hetaera*, or mistress, who often accompanied a married man when he attended events outside his home. The *hetaera* was the man’s companion and sexual partner.¹⁴

Who Were Those Guys?

Who were the people that changed civilization? Professional church planners? Church-growth experts? Christian psychologists? Hardly!

Jesus’ disciples originally were plain, ordinary Jewish citizens. Several were fishermen, one came from the socially despised tax collectors, and the others similarly came from low-ranking occupations. They had different personalities and temperaments. One was over confident, two craved special recognition, another was skeptical, and still another was a self-serving miser.¹⁵

Not a pretty picture of an army of well trained, well dressed experts—just regular folks armed with the knowledge of the saving transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ. Clearly not the type our modern Church would look to for guidance in crafting growth plans. But it didn’t stop there.

The power of Christ’s Gospel to transform individuals did not begin and end with his handpicked disciples. It also transformed countless others, and these individuals in various ways left their mark in history. There were individuals found in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and other places throughout the world.¹⁶

Their lives, their beliefs, and their willingness to confront culture—even to the point of being martyred—caused the culture around them to take notice. These simple folk really believed what they claimed to believe to the point that it really affected how they really lived. The transformation eventually extended into the arena of political leaders including emperors Galerius, Constantine, and Licinius. We catch a snap shot of what this looked like in Scripture as Peter and John are standing before the well-trained religious leaders and governing officials of their day:

Now they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marveling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. [Acts 4:13, NASB]

New Testament Christianity

Many cults and false movements claiming to be Christian contend they are trying to restore New Testament Christianity. By that, they generally give the impression the original Christian congregation was in lock step, trouble free, united in belief and action, and unquestioningly submitted to a pristine authoritarian hierarchy. The problem is one can hardly read the New Testament and see anything even closely resembling this ideal. From its inception, the Church has been wrought with problems, and most of the New Testament was written to correct faulty teaching and/or behavior. That being said, we still need to answer the question as to how this uneducated, unprofessional rabble so deeply affected those around them that civilization radically changed as a result.

It Begins With the Leadership

In many ways, the format of the church is less important than the heart, gift mix, and view of leadership. Is the scriptural model “seeker sensitive,” “purpose driven,” or something more “traditional?” None of them are essentially better or worse than the other—there is freedom of choice when it comes to “form.” The overall effectiveness of a church depends on the people involved, and how God has gifted and impassioned the individuals who are carrying out their “vision.” Unfortunately, we as humans tend to look for programs, and step-by-step instructions which, if followed to the letter, produce the same results every time. This works in McDonald’s where you are making French fries, but it doesn’t translate as well in spiritual pursuits. Dealing with people is less predictable and far messier. However, there are some things the Church of the third millennium can draw from the Church of the first century beginning with the leadership. In some cases today, the pastor has been made the corporate CEO whose job it is to broaden the market base. In other cases, the pastor is the authoritarian leader who cannot be questioned. In still other models, the pastor is the paid, professional Christian who is expected to do all of the work of the church (preaching, teaching, hospital and home visitation, heading up all committees, etc.), and the rest of the church fills the role of spectators who deposit their weekly entrance fee in the offering plate. We have a few glimpses in Scripture as to how leadership functioned in that bygone time which might be helpful in answering the question as to how the Church so radically challenged those around them.

“Eets Not My Job, Mahn!”

One of the first glimpses we get into the early Church occurs in Acts chapter 6:1-7. The Church in Jerusalem was growing in number and a segment of “disgruntled” members went to the Apostles to register a complaint with the expectation the leadership would jump right in and straighten out those evil doers. The Apostles’ response and solution is quite revealing in its simplicity. They called the congregation together and said:

It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. [Acts 6:2-4, NASB]

Several things should be noted. First, the Apostles had a clear vision and description of their role in the body. They were not the supreme authority to whom everyone else was accountable, but there was a plurality of leadership. Second, even though there was a real issue to be resolved, they refused to have their energies redirected away from their basic job description—prayer and ministry of the Word. Third, the responsibility of choosing who would direct this other aspect of the ministry was given back to the congregation. Fourth, the people chosen to direct this aspect of ministry were to be spiritual men—not just popular or charismatic leaders or men with a good head for business—but individuals whose *faith* was outwardly observable. After they were chosen, they were commissioned by the Apostles and the result of this was:

And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. [Acts 6:7, NASB]

How would this translate into the life of the Church today? The basic job description of the pastor is to pray for and teach the church.

It is not to broaden the market base. The “market base” is already there. It is called *lost souls*. Jesus said the “field is white for harvest” and prayed for harvesters. The job of the pastor is *not* primarily to make hospital visits, engage in pre-marital counseling, referee between Sister Jane and Sister Sarah, or Brother Bob and Elder John, oversee the purchase of new pews, or otherwise be distracted from the business of praying and teaching. That does not mean the pastor cannot do any of these other things as *extra-curricular* activities. He may be very gifted or have a particular passion for one of these areas, but he would be involved in these areas *as time permits*, because all members of the Body of Christ should be caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned, etc. Realistically, the pastor and elders should be training and commissioning those who the congregation identifies to head up these various areas of ministry. The result would be a well-trained, actively-involved body of believers. The Apostle Paul lays out a similar theme in Romans 12:3-7. Each member has something to contribute to the life of the body as well as ministry to non-believers. They need to be trained and used in their areas of gifts and prayed for as they use them, which is, as it happens, the job description of the pastor and elders.

The Timothy Factor

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to a young pastor by the name of Timothy in 63 AD. After his greeting, Paul reminded Timothy of the reason he had asked him to remain at Ephesus. His task was to teach or instruct “*certain men not to teach strange doctrines*” (1:3). It is apparent these “*certain men*” were straying away from the central doctrines of the faith and replacing them with speculative myths which were only serving to distract and mislead (1:4). Thus, we should think of false teaching as *anti-evangelism*, because its goal is to undo the work of evangelism. The only biblical antidote for it is a proper focus on doctrine.

Do we want to preserve the fruit of our evangelistic efforts? Then we do well to constantly remind ourselves of Paul’s charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-30, cited above by Peterson:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. [NASB]

Again, the concerns the Apostle addressed in his charge to the Ephesian elders are the very things he is addressing in his reminder to Timothy. Guard the flock from the wolves who creep in from the outside and from those who rise up within to drag away the sheep.

Sometimes it is not outright heresy, but hokum, that distracts the Church from her mission to win the lost and instruct the saved. Remember the Y2K crisis that was supposed to end civilization as we know it? Many Christians were distracted by this greatest *non-event* of our times. Twenty years earlier, David A. Lewis persuaded thousands of believers that Ronald Reagan was in imminent mortal danger because early in the nineteenth century a disgruntled Native American had supposedly placed a curse on the White House so that every president elected in a year that ended with a zero would die in office.¹⁷ Then there are mythical Bible codes, widely circulated rumors of Satanic baby killers, internet-spread nonsense concerning now-deceased Atheist Madelyn Murray O’Hair’s supposed campaign to get *Touched by an Angel* off our TV sets, “holy” laughter, phony faith healers and fraudulent healings, and gold-dust re-

(Continued on next page)

“Crisis” (Continued from page 5)

vival meetings, and well, we could go on and on, but we don’t wish to depress you. ☞

How many of these embarrassing examples of Christian naiveté (to put it as kindly as possible ☞) could have been avoided with a healthy dose of biblically-informed skepticism? Some might say, “Well, that stuff’s not heretical; it’s just hokey,” and, perhaps, there’s some truth to that observation. We should keep in mind, however, that when Christians earnestly embrace false rumors, religious con artists, false hope, or alarmism (as we so often seem to do), it inevitably makes us all look foolish and gives our critics yet another opportunity to ridicule, not only us, but our faith and our Lord as well. And that just makes it much easier for the lost to dismiss Christianity out of hand as a bastion of kooks. These types of errors cause much division in the body and are the result of lack of teaching and a tendency to accept whatever some “celebrity” Christian tells us is the latest, greatest, or most fearsome thing. It is sadly reminiscent of the Pagans in ancient Athens of whom Luke remarked, “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” (Acts 17:21) The Athenians spent their time “doing nothing...”. And *that* is our point—Christians have better things to do with their time ... or they should! At the very least, we must point out our tendency towards hokum is a sign of a serious deficiency of discernment, which then frequently leads to the embracing of out-and-out heresy.

A case in point is religious con artist/“healer” Benny Hinn’s “revelation from God” that there are “nine of them” (i.e., nine persons) in the Godhead. Here’s where “Brother Love’s traveling salvation show” slipped from hokey farce to outright heresy. How many of his admiring listeners even CAUGHT that? And how about Hinn’s ridiculous boast (made on “Christian” television) that Jesus Christ would appear on stage at his crusade, and people would be raised from the dead if their coffins were placed near television sets with Trinity Broadcasting Network on? Please tell me that some discerning soul at TBN laughed out loud—before showing this humbug the door! And then we had Kenneth Copeland explaining that God is really just a big man—about six-feet-two-inches tall, weighing a couple of hundred pounds; and God and Adam were exact duplicates of each other to the point that one couldn’t tell the difference between them. How many walked out in disgust that a supposed man of the cloth would speak such things? Turned their sets off? Withheld their money *at least!*? Then we have Bill Gothard with his endless lists of principles, steps, and rules which if strictly applied guarantee, not only moral, but *successful* living (i.e., health and wealth), but not necessarily regeneration through the work of the Holy Spirit. Grace, he says, is earned; and circumcision is a moral requirement for Christians. Where is the outcry? The Gospel within the Church becomes packaged and “sold” as a health and wealth “elixir” or as a means to impose or infuse supposed “Christian values” upon the general culture.

Today, however, our temptation is to use the Gospel as a prop for the higher pursuit of “Christian Values,” for children as well as for adults. Too often in our preaching and teaching, we fail to communicate to our people the preciousness, not just that the Gospel “works”, but that it is *true*.⁸

How does one guard the flock from such shenanigans, false teachings, and faulty thinking? By instructing and teaching and, in some cases, *naming names* as the Apostle Paul does:

...keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have

rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to the faith. Among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme. [1 Timothy 1:19-20, NASB]

Clearly, a part of guarding the flock is pointing out who the false teachers are in order for the sheep to know who to beware of. It appears Paul was unconcerned about appearing “divisive” and was not especially “tolerant” in the American twenty-first century sense of the word. Protecting his flock from the ravenous wolves was far more important to him than artificial “unity” at the expense of truth. He was also concerned with nurturing believers—giving them a strong grasp of the truth through sound teaching. We suspect the Church loses enormous credibility when it focuses on judging those outside the Church while turning a blind eye to the false teachers in their own midst.

In 1 Timothy 2:1-8, Paul focuses on prayer. We see in the first two chapters of this pastoral epistle the very things which the apostles claimed as their role in Acts 6, but Paul didn’t stop there. In chapter three, he gives the qualifications of elders and deacons. Why did he take time to do this? Because the spiritual maturity of leadership is the measuring stick for determining who should fulfill those positions, not their business acumen, prestige, or fame. Why are these qualifications important? Paul warned that the future would bring more false teachings, teachers and dangers to the faith (4:1-5). Paul makes a full circle from the theme he began in chapter one and reminds Timothy in verse 4:6:

In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of sound doctrine which you have been following.

And again in verse 11 he writes, “*Prescribe and teach these things.*” Here we go again. Teach, Timothy, *teach!* What a doctrinaire character this Paul is! One would get the impression he honestly thought sound biblical teaching took priority over “feel good” theology.

Russell D. Moore from Southern Baptist Seminary also seems to be convinced this is important if the Church is going to be relevant in the future:

In all of this, it is appearing more and more likely that the future of evangelical conviction will not be decided in a denominational convention, or a theological society meeting. It will be at Vacation Bible School. The next battleground over evangelical conviction will center at the place where it matters most, the local congregations.⁹

He is correct in this assessment. As the local congregations assume their role of training their people, they will influence both their denominations and the culture around them.

Don’t Abandon Culture!!!

The early Christians didn’t abandon the world, but they left a legacy which transformed civilization for the last two millennia. The early Church and early Church fathers earned the right to confront culture because they took the responsibility to correct error within the Church. They did the work of training believers to think and articulate why the Gospel is true and how to communicate that to the religious pagans of their time. They focused on doing two things very well. Teaching and praying. If the Church today really desires to win the culture war, we may need to consider following this biblical model.


In our day, we’ve begun to witness our culture trending in the opposite direction and the Church’s influence over it declining.

To make matters worse, the Church of our day is also trending downward along with its surrounding culture. It doesn't matter whether we speak here of the institutional church (or churches), or of the Church as the spiritual body of all true believers — the diagnosis is the same: since we have relinquished cultural influence abroad by neglecting doctrinal instruction at home, we have produced a generation of spiritual orphans. Thus, instead of providing a challenging contrast to the world around it, Christians are gradually blending in, and their collective worldview is becoming indistinguishable from the pagans who surround them. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow paints a picture of what happens to people without spiritual moorings in a culture that lacks a biblical foundation:

Although some individuals work out highly coherent religious orientations that have internal consistency and integrity, it appears that the more common result of living in religiously pluralistic settings is a form of personalized eclecticism. People become heteroglossic; that is, they gain the capacity to speak with many religious voices. Their religious orientations may not provide a guiding philosophy of life that maintains an orderly view of the world. Rather, religious orientations become tool kits, assembled from a variety of personal experiences, social contacts, books, sermons, and other cultural repertoires, from which the individual is able to draw as he or she is confronted with the challenges of life.²⁰

We don't have to worry about the day when many in our pews might become spiritual eclectics who subsist on a smorgasbord of spiritual fare ranging from the latest pantheistic bestseller, to an occasional out-of-context Bible verse, to transcendental medical quackery, to the current tabloid offerings at the checkout counter. That day is already here. ✍

God has given pastors and elders the responsibility to care for the flock and grow them up into mature Christians. But we all have our parts to play. If good pastors lead, will we follow? If they faithfully study and forthrightly teach, will we replace them with someone we feel may be more "comfortable" with, or one who may be more "available" to serve us and meet our emotional needs? If you have a good and faithful pastor—who preaches the Word, fervently teaches the faith, and exhorts you to Christian holiness (as so many of us are blessed to have)—are you supporting him? (Not blindly, but kindly at the least.) Are you praying for him and his family? Do you recognize how difficult it is to lead an often wayward flock of saved sinners? Are you grateful for his efforts on your behalf?

The responsibility to improve the grave situation of the Church in the world rightly falls upon us *all*. Black conservative economist Walter E. Williams likes to point out that we can complain all we want about our dishonest politicians, but in many cases, we the people would not tolerate any politician who would *dare to tell us the truth!* Yet, it is the truth we desperately need to hear ... especially from our spiritual leaders. God Bless all of you pastors who labor long and without proper recognition for all the good you do. And may our great God grant all of us courage and great strength for whatever lies ahead. 

ENDNOTES

¹Moore, "Christianity and Liberalism at Vacation Bible School," *The TIE* (Southern Seminary Magazine), Vol. 69. No. 4, Winter 2001, 11. <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/ssmag/2001/Winter01.pdf>.

²Curtis A. Peterson, "A Second and Third Look at Church Growth Principles," paper delivered at the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's

Metro South Pastors Conference, February 3, 1993, Mishicot, Wisconsin, 4. <http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/PQ/PetersonGrowth/PetersonGrowth.pdf>.

³Ibid. Peterson writes: "We applaud the Church Growth emphasis on evangelism and missions as 'the greatest and holiest work of the church.' From the beginning [Donald] McGavran and his disciples have emphasized the lostness of the lost, and have taught that salvation is only through Christ. John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 are part of their vocabulary and theology. Outreach to the lost is an irreplaceable function of the church. Since so many are satisfied when the church looks nice and the bills are paid, we need this continual reminder."

⁴Ibid., 8-9 Peterson believes the "Homogeneous Unit" principle—which asserts "that missions flourish best in single 'people groups'"—has been misunderstood by critics and, therefore, unfairly caricatured as racist and exclusionary. In fact, says Peterson, "it is designed to do the very opposite—to make sure that certain groups are not overlooked in our mission and evangelistic strategies." Unfortunately, however, with so many Church Growth Movement practitioners using the Homogeneous Unit principle to specifically target white, middleclass suburbanites in the U.S., its original intent seems to have been reversed.

⁵Ibid., 3.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 13.

⁸Parro, "Church Growth's Two Faces," *Christianity Today*, June 24, 1991, 19. Cited in Peterson, *ibid.*, 12-13.

⁹Peterson, *ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁰"Americans Draw Theological Beliefs From Diverse Points of View," Barna Research Group, October 8, 2002, 3-4.

¹¹Ibid., 4.

¹²Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, HarperCollins/Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2001, 111. Defining and regarding *patria potestas* Schmidt writes, "The most severe deprivation of a Roman woman's freedom and rights had its roots in table 4 of the Twelve Tables of Roman law that originated in the fifth century B.C. Table 4 spelled out the law of *partia potestas*, which conferred rights of *paterfamilias* on the married man. In his role as *paterfamilias*, the man had supreme, absolute power over his children even when grown, including grandchildren." p. 100. It is interesting to note that there is a growing movement within the Christian church attempting to re-lay the foundations of this pagan practice under the guise of Christianity.

¹³Ibid., 93-94.

¹⁴Ibid., 98.

¹⁵Ibid., 16.

¹⁶Ibid., 19.

¹⁷Lewis, *The Presidential Zero-Year Mystery*, (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1980). Of course, Reagan not only survived the "curse" (despite a nearly-successful assassination attempt in 1981) but lived long enough to see yet another president elected during a "zero-year" (George W. Bush). Lewis still stands by his curse theory, credits the prayers of believers with preventing it from doing in Reagan, and now urges people to pray the same way for Bush. But even if we grant Lewis's theory a modest level of plausibility (which is far more than it deserves), the real "mystery" is: why does the curse only apply to presidents elected every 20 years, and thus only when elections occur during years that have zero as their final digit? Even more mysterious is the question of how so many Christians bought into this zany idea.

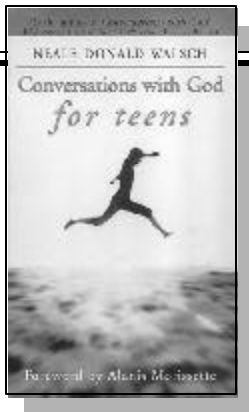
¹⁸Moore, *ibid.*, 14, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹Moore, *ibid.*, 11.

²⁰Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 107-108. Unfortunately, it's difficult to tell at what points Wuthnow's own spiritual moorings connect to Scripture.



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Don't Talk To Strangers

By Marcia Montenegro

Examining: *Conversations With God For Teens*

God is a pool of energy; there is no certain age or time for sexual initiation; there is no right or wrong, our main purpose is to remember we are actually God; and after death, we will lose our individual distinctions in The Oneness, but then become individualized and be born again, a cycle to repeat for eternity. If one were to believe Neale Donald Walsch's assertion that these proclamations are from God, then one would likely accept them as true. These statements are in *Conversations with God For Teens*, a book providing what Walsch claims are answers from God to questions sent to Walsch by teens on the Internet.¹

Walsch is a veteran of these conversations with someone he says is God, having published preceding conversations in three *Conversations with God* books, *Friendship with God*, *Communion with God*, and other similar books that sold quite well. The ideas in this book are not that new or different from his previous works; what is new is that this book is aimed at teens, and that real teens asked many of the questions. A variety of questions and topics are covered—from drugs, to sex, to love, to school, to death and suffering; but due to space and time limitations, only a few major and recurring themes can be discussed here.

Approaching this Book with Teens

Even before evaluating or criticizing this book, adults should pause and realize that the questions asked by the teens are normal questions. The idealism, frustrations, anxieties, and searching so common to teens shine clearly through the questions. The questions are not the problem, and the questions deserve answers. Keeping in mind this book was not written for adults, the approach should be to show teens: How the answers to these questions are problematic, the evidence that Walsch's god may not be God at all, and then, to try to answer these questions for the teens. Dismissing the book could be seen as dismissing the teens' questions, and that would be a serious mistake, opening a door for teens to turn away from advice from those who most care about them. Rather than a sweeping assault on this book, it might be more effective to address the issues in the book and to point teens to sound responses while exposing the unstable, contradictory, and flawed advice found in CWGT.

The second point to keep in mind is that there is some good advice and information in the book. For example, Walsch's god strongly advises against taking drugs, he states that most suffering is caused by man himself, and he advocates honesty and responsi-

bility.² He even urges teens to try to understand their parents, and he makes some good points on love versus need.³ Acknowledging the few good ideas will not detract from any criticism of the book, but rather will make any criticism more credible and palatable.

Walsch has a cheerful website based on this book at <http://thechangers.org> where teens are warmly invited to join chat groups, to become involved in ongoing study groups based on the **original** *Conversations with God* books, to give their feedback, to attend a retreat for teens, and to participate in other activities related to Walsch's books and projects. There is no effort to hide the fact this is a spiritual enterprise, and the goals involve finding new spiritual attitudes and beliefs.

Is this God Speaking?

The most important question for any reader of this book to ask is: Is the god giving answers to Walsch really God? Walsch states it is God.⁴ Should we take Walsch's word for it? Walsch, in a classic case of circular reasoning, admits he asked God whether what was being communicated were Walsch's own thoughts or not. Naturally, this god responded that the answers Walsch was receiving were from God, since how else would God communicate but by putting thoughts in his (Walsch's) head?⁵ This is still not any evidence these thoughts are from God, since one can argue this answer itself came from Walsch's thoughts or imagination.

Nevertheless, let's apply another test to this god since one might maintain Walsch's explanation does not disprove he's hearing from God. Since we cannot assume this is any god we might be familiar with, this god will be referred to throughout this article as G. If G is a god that we can trust, then G would have to show wisdom, love, and perfection. Clearly, an imperfect, unloving, or unintelligent god will not do, since such a god would have failings and therefore could not be counted on. It would then be pointless to consider the advice offered in the book since G might be lying, stupid, crazy, or a total fraud. So what does the book indicate G is like?

Throughout the book G declares that, since there is no right or wrong, there is only what works and what doesn't work; and G does not judge, condemn, or forgive since there is nothing to forgive. These are major themes in the book.⁶ If we are to take G at his word, one must assume Hitler is an okay guy with G. After all, G cannot condemn Hitler since G repeats over and over that he does not judge or condemn. This would have to hold true for rape, child molesting, racism, and other acts generally shunned by society. The

reader may wonder why no one specifically asks how G sees such behavior.

It is crucial to understand that Walsch tells us in a “few cases,” he sent G’s answer back to the questioning teen to see if the teen had follow-up questions but that in most cases, Walsch himself asked the follow-up questions he thought the teens might ask.⁷ This is an essential point to keep in mind when reading the book, since we do not really know what the teens thought of the answers G gave them. We only have, in most cases, follow-up questions from Walsch. In only one instance is there something close to a really hard follow-up question. This is when G has stated there is no right or wrong, and the follow-up asks if killing and cruelty are wrong. G replies with a question by asking: If these are wrong, what about wars and hitting someone who has broken into your home? The follow-up points out those actions would be self-defense, to which G replies, “Oh, so you mean that there are situations in which killing and cruelty are not wrong?”⁸ The follow-up points out those actions are called self-defense, not killing or cruelty. G’s response is remarkable: “Changing your terminology does not change your actions. It merely justifies them.”⁹ If we are to believe G, then even self-defense is the same as killing or an act of cruelty! G is telling teens defending themselves against an attacker is the same as murder.

If there really is no right or wrong, then we must conclude things like theft, racism, and rape cannot be wrong to G; so what should we think of G? Furthermore, if G says there is no right or wrong, how can we judge whether that sentence itself is right or wrong? We can’t. G tells us all of us will return to him. There is no Heaven or Hell, so Hitler, along with rapists and child abusers who have died, have presumably returned to “meld” with G.¹⁰ G says we then go out again to be born once more in a cyclical fashion for eternity.¹¹ That means for a while, Hitler, rapists, murderers, and others—who may not even care about what they did—have become part of God. According to G, we lose our individual identity in melding with G. Consequently, at any point in time, G is composed of the essence of those who have committed violent or cruel acts on others!

Interestingly, G tells teens religion has kept us “stuck in a system of Absolute Right and Wrong” which is part of a theory of separation that is “killing the lot of you.”¹² G is talking about morality. According to G, we are all one, and the idea that we are separate is destructive. But which is more likely to kill: A system that recognizes right and wrong based on a consistent standard of good and evil, or a system that believes there is no right or wrong? Separation is a part of believing there is a right and a wrong, since there must be a line between the two. But according to G, there are no lines, there can be no absolutes, and there is no right or wrong. What are the implications of this?

If we are all one, and there are no absolutes, then all actions and behaviors are equal. A man robbing a bank is not doing anything different, worse, or better than a woman feeding hungry children. Lying to your friends or doing them a favor must have the same value. In fact, G says he did not create us to obey, but to create, because we are like him.¹³ We are all “Divine Beings” and “Gods in formation.”¹⁴ We must conclude that, like G, we then should not judge or believe in right or wrong. Therefore, it cannot even be wrong to disagree with G! It cannot be wrong to have a “religion.” But wait a minute! G clearly expresses an unfavorable view of “religion” since he said it is killing us. G contradicts himself. He also expresses

disapproval of such things as: The belief there is only one way to God, damage to the environment, lying, and hypocrisy.¹⁵ He prefers we remember we are God and advises our present views of God should change.¹⁶

We now have someone claiming to be God who wants us to make no judgments—which would mean no judgment about the actions of a Hitler or a rapist, who tells us there is no difference between right and wrong since right and wrong don’t exist, and who contradicts himself. Is this a picture of a perfect and wise God? If we can catch him in these contradictions, what does that say about G’s intelligence? What does it say about his character?

Although G talks a lot about love, he also says he only observes us, he does not care what we do, and has “no preference in the matter.”¹⁷ If G truly does not care what we do, then how can he love us? Loving and caring go together. On the other hand, G has stated some preferences, so he is contradicting himself. So here is a god who does not really love, who lies to us, and who contradicts himself. Could this be God? Do we want a God like this?

Are We Real?

Most of the human race is living in an “illusion,” according to G¹⁸ The illusion is we are separate from each other and separate from God. If someone says something is an illusion, then there should be a way to decide if this is true. But if we are in an illusion, how can that be done? Furthermore, if we are in an illusion, then maybe G himself is part of that illusion. Maybe the answers Walsch has recorded are illusions. Maybe the illusion is really we are being told we are in an illusion!

This idea of being in an illusion and being deceived into thinking we are separate from God is part of a teaching that derives from Hinduism. This belief has also been foundational to New Age thinking for the past few decades. If we accept this teaching, then we must doubt our senses. We cannot accept the normal awareness of being separate individuals, or the belief that we are not God. This teaching causes us to mistrust our own eyes, mind, and feelings. In fact, G tells us we are not our body, and we are not our mind; and he advises us to get out of our mind and to “drop our thoughts.”¹⁹ Of course, one must use one’s mind to read this sentence and to understand this advice. If we are to stop thinking, it seems strange that we need to think in order to understand that we should not think.

If we are not separate from each other, then our individual identity must be an illusion or a temporary vehicle that will be blotted out. A unique identity is essentially meaningless. In fact, G states that when we meld back with him after death, we can hold on to our individual identity for as long as it “serves” us, implying that it will be a temporary crutch before finally letting go and being absorbed.²⁰ If we really are not separate from God—but actually are God (as G insists), then how did we forget this? How can we, as gods, be in an illusion? We only have G’s word for this, against all evidence of our individual senses, thoughts, and feelings.

G explains that after being absorbed after death, we will be in tune with a “primal vibration” that will stimulate us to “differentiate,” and we somehow will leave and be born again and again.²¹ Why is God differentiating? G partly explains this by saying in order to know God, we must be away from God.²² We can’t know hot without cold, we can’t know night without day, etc. But since G has insisted all is one, and there is no separation; then these opposites—hot and cold, night and day—must be illusions as well. Essentially, G (who should be perfect and

(Continued on next page)

“Teens” (Continued from page 9)

all knowing) must create illusion so he can know himself, and must create opposites that do not really exist so we can realize there really are no opposites, but that all is one.

It is as though someone has taken us as a baby to a house that is really a stage set but has given us senses that inform us it is a real place, has allowed us to grow up there as though it is real, and then tells us our senses really are faulty, and that it is all an illusion created just so we would know this fake house is not real. Some may argue it is us who created the illusion. But G has said we are God, too; so whatever we do, God is doing. After all, if we take G's words to heart, we are not separate. This illusion seems to be a rather roundabout, unnecessary, and even cruel process for what should be easy for God. In other words, G is saying an illusion of what is false must be created and experienced in order to know truth, so that what we think is true is false, and what is true is hidden in an illusion.

It is a serious matter for someone to teach to mistrust our thinking, our senses, and our awareness. In fact, this kind of teaching is often found in leaders who want to deceive and then control others. If the followers believe they cannot trust their thinking and senses but must rely on the leader alone, then they have no way to assess or disagree with anything the leader says. This is exactly what G is doing in this book. Any rational objections raised to G's teachings can be dismissed as coming from illusory thinking. G sets this up quite cleverly, but it should be recognized for the trap that it is.

G's Solutions

How do we advance when we are laboring under such bad teachings and illusions? We are to recognize the illusion of separateness, we are to shed outdated thinking and remember that we are God, and we are to decide what we want and create it, since we have the “original power” of God.²³ When we understand what G is saying, we are “Christed” and are like the Buddha.²⁴ As he often does in this book, G misquotes the Bible or uses quotes out of context.²⁵ One of the most blatant examples is where he states we can create like God, because we are made in His image.²⁶ But being made in the image of God means (without going into complex theological discussions) that we are made unique from nature and animals in that we have a moral conscience and the ability to conceive of, communicate with, and worship God. It does not mean we are God.

G tells teens they can create a new reality with thoughts, words, and actions.²⁷ Undoubtedly, people can change things in the environment and in society through action, but G implies we can do this in a godlike fashion. Of course, all of us would have to agree on what to create; otherwise, we will have realities competing with and crashing into each other! We must also assume that before creating a new reality, we have realized the present reality is an illusion. What prevents us from creating further illusion, however? How can we be sure we are totally out of all illusion, since there is no way given by G to measure illusion and reality? In fact, if all is one, how can there even be a distinction between reality and illusion?

There is the further problem of what should motivate us to create a new reality. Since G has stated he does not care what we do, our individual identities are not real, and there is no wrong or right, then what difference does anything make? What

are we striving for? If we are striving for peace, an end to suffering, and a healthy environment (as G implies in parts of the book), then G has once again contradicted his teachings that he has no preferences and that nothing can be wrong. If nothing is right or wrong, why should we try to improve what exists now? One may even ask, what is the point of the book?


A Dismantled G

G dismantles himself through his irrational and contradictory statements. He seems to offer hope to teens who are hurting, angry, worried about the future, having problems with parents, and who are seeking direction. But this hope is an illusion itself, since G reveals he is not perfect, loving, caring, or wise. He butters teens up by catering to their gripes, and by sympathizing with their idealism and their recognition of hypocrisy, but then tells them their individual identity is unreal and ultimately will come to an end. He urges teens to recognize they are God and have godlike power, but then admits god has no preference about what they do with this power. G expresses outrage at “religion” and beliefs he says are holding the world back; but teaches there is no right or wrong, which means any action must be accepted. Therefore, we have no cause to oppose cruel or violent actions. On what basis should an abused teen complain, if they are to believe they cannot judge an action as right or wrong? G massages egos by telling teens they are God, but then turns around to say they have all been living in an illusion and cannot trust their own thinking and senses.

Is G who contradicts himself, who openly states he does not care what we do, and who says there is no right or wrong, really God? The book reveals G actually to be more of a clever con artist, a master of mirages, one who appears to be a friend but who is actually undermining the identity, thinking, and confidence of teens.

A Real God

It is unsettling to have a god who does not recognize right or wrong, but only what works. It is fearful to have a god who is a pastiche of the various spirits of dead people, including those who have no remorse for what they have done. And to what end are we traveling in life if there is no actual goal, but only a temporary “bliss” during the constant swing in and out of a cosmic “pool of energy” in which we lose our identity?²⁸ Interestingly, G says the one thing he would change is our beliefs about who we are and who God is.²⁹ Of course he would, as that would be the only way to accept G as God.

We can present a real God to teens, not a religion, but a God who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all, one who does not lie, and does not change.³⁰ He created us as unique individuals, but he is holy and must judge sin. God loved us enough to send his son, Jesus, to atone for those sins.³¹ In trusting Christ, we are delivered from the penalty of sin and able to be with him in a place free of sorrow after death.³² This is the real God who has revealed himself in the order of nature, in his Word, and in Christ, a God whose faithfulness and power overshadow any pretenders to the throne. 

Marcia Montenegro is a former professional astrologer who taught astrology, was President of the Metropolitan Atlanta Astrological Society, and wrote for New Age Journals. She was involved for many years with Eastern, New Age, and occult practices until meeting Christ in late 1990.

(Endnotes on next page)

"Teens" (Continued from page 10)

ENDNOTES

Unless stated otherwise, all page numbers refer to the book: *Conversations with God for Teens* (NY: Scholastic, Inc., March 2002) by Neale Donald Walsch.

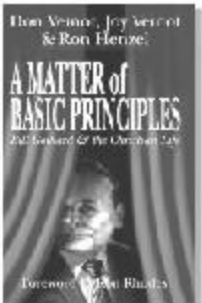
- 1.) p.9
- 2.) Chapter 13, "Drugs," pp.252-253; 178, 210
- 3.) pp.227-230; 190-192
- 4.) p.3
- 5.) p.16
- 6.) pp.115, 117ff., 120, 122, 124, 219, 226
- 7.) pp.19
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- 9.) pp.123
- 10.) pp.140, 142, 143, 261, 264, 278, 281, 296
- 11.) pp.261, 296, 314-315.
- 12.) p.127
- 13.) p.147, 153, 177, 287, 300, 302
- 14.) p.260
- 15.) pp.131, 245-246, 249, 253
- 16.) pp.28-29, 42, 196, 321
- 17.) p.163
- 18.) p.256, 264
- 19.) p.272
- 20.) p.314
- 21.) p.315
- 22.) pp.262, 295-296
- 23.) pp.37, 38, 154
- 24.) p.293
- 25.) pp.37, 118, 208, 243, 313
- 26.) p.37
- 27.) p.45, 68, 71-72
- 28.) pp.315, 317
- 29.) p.321
- 30.) 1 John 1:5; Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 6:18; Malachi 3:6
- 31.) John 3:16; John 5: 24; Hebrews 9:11-28
- 32.) Revelation 21

Controversial???

**A MATTER of
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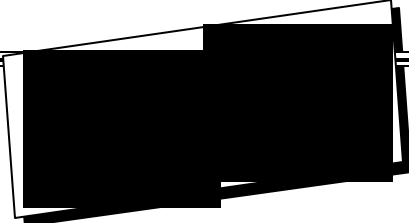
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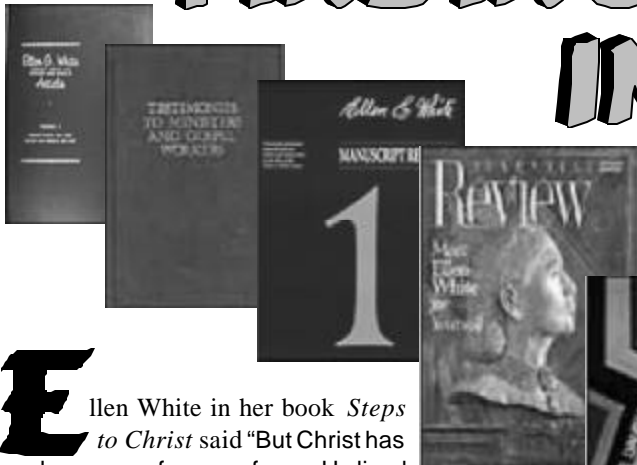
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*See You
There!*

FINDING THE GOSPEL IN ADVENTIST PUBLICATIONS

by Roger DeLozier



Ellen White in her book *Steps to Christ* said “But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.”¹ Some evangelical Christians may be surprised to see a clear presentation of the Gospel from the pen of Ellen White—considered by many to be the founder of the Seventh-day Adventists. However, as we review the writings of Ellen G. White and those of other Adventist leaders, we often see presentations of the Gospel that are clear and to the point.

Unfortunately, there are other times where Ellen White’s statements concerning the Gospel are not so clear, and even times when Adventists seem to contradict the notion of salvation by grace through faith alone.

For example, on other occasions Ellen White said:

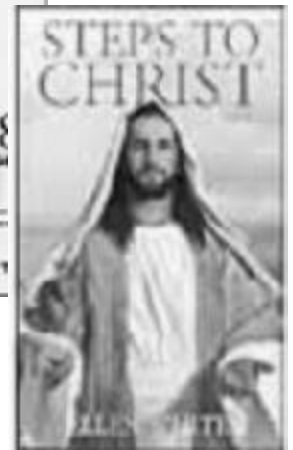
1) “Thus this question was forever settled in regard to every seeker after truth. God works; but man must co-operate with him in the great plan of salvation. The condition of eternal life is not merely to believe, but to do the words of God.”²

2) “God holds up before us as a high standard—perfect obedience to His law. Only through obedience, and faith in the Saviour, can we gain eternal life.”³

3) “The cross of Calvary represents what God has done for us. In the gift of his only begotten Son he has insured to us eternal life upon condition of our faith and obedience.”⁴

4) “Faith and works go together, believing and doing are blended. The Lord requires no less of the soul now, than he required of Adam in paradise before he fell,—perfect obedience, unblemished righteousness. The requirement of God under the covenant of grace is just as broad as the requirement he made in paradise,—harmony with his law, which is holy, and just, and good. The gospel [sic] does not weaken the claims of the law; it exalts the law and makes it honorable. Under the New Testament, no less is required than was required under the Old Testament. Let no one take up with the delusion so pleasant to the natural heart, that God will accept of sincerity, no matter what may be the faith, no matter how imperfect may be the life. God requires of his child perfect obedience.”⁵

Because of this situation, many Adventists throughout the history of the church have been confused and have not fully embraced the Gospel. They view salvation as being contingent on obedience



to the law. The problem is that many Adventist ministers present the plan of salvation in a way that obscures the Gospel. Ellen White saw this problem in her day. She explains “The ministers have not presented Christ in his fullness to the people, either in the churches or in new fields, and the people have not an intelligent faith. They have not been instructed as they should have been, that Christ is unto them both salvation and righteousness.”⁶

The purpose of this article is to point to sources in Adventist literature that would be helpful in leading an Adventist (who has not fully embraced the Gospel) to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Our focus should always be on the Scriptures when presenting the Gospel, but these quotations can be used to supplement our discussions on the relevant biblical texts.

The 1888 General Conference

SDA historian George Knight said, “One of the greatest theological ‘events’ in Seventh-day Adventist history took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during October and November 1888 at the annual meeting of the General Conference.”⁷ What happened at this conference? Ellen White explains: “The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones. This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God. ... This is the message that God commanded to be given to the world. It is the third angel’s message, which is to be proclaimed with a loud voice, and attended with the outpouring of His Spirit in a large measure.”⁸

The 1888 conference is extremely important to Adventists. During this conference, two Elders—Waggoner and Jones—presented lectures on justification through faith and on the relation-

ship between law and Gospel. Therefore, the 1888 conference provides us with a wonderful means to initiate a discussion on the theme of righteousness through faith. Even more important is that Ellen White declared this to be the “third angel’s message.” Adventists see themselves as God’s special remnant church. They believe they have been given a special message by God to declare to the world in the end times. Understanding the “third angel’s message” is, accordingly, central to accomplishing the prophetic role they believe has been assigned to their church by God.

Therefore, we can benefit by understanding what Ellen White and other Adventists said about the 1888 conference and about the third angel’s message. This information will be very helpful at initiating conversations with Adventists on the theme of justification through faith.

Useful Quotations:

Ellen G. White

“Several have written to me, inquiring if the message of justification by faith is the third angel’s message, and I have answered, ‘It is the third angel’s message in verity.’”⁹

“The present message—justification by faith—is a message from God; it bears the divine credentials, for its fruit is unto holiness. Some who greatly need the precious truth that was presented before them, we fear did not receive its benefit. They did not open the door of their hearts to welcome Jesus as a heavenly guest, and they have suffered great loss. There is indeed a narrow way in which we must walk; the cross is presented at every step. We must learn to live by faith; then the darkest hours will be brightened by the blessed beams of the Sun of Righteousness.”¹⁰

Arthur G. Daniells¹¹

“The message of Righteousness by Faith came clearly and fully into the open at the General Conference held at Minneapolis, Minn., in November, 1888.”¹²

Rejection of the Message

Unfortunately, many Adventists were reluctant to accept the message preached in 1888 by Waggoner and Jones. Daniells explains, “they feared that the emphasis placed upon this theme of righteousness by faith would cast a shadow upon the doctrines that had been given such prominence from the beginning of our denominational history; and since they looked upon the preaching of those distinctive doctrines as the secret of the power and growth of our movement, they were fearful that if these doctrines were overshadowed by any teaching or message whatsoever, our cause would lose its distinctive character and force.”¹³

Despite this, many Adventists assume they have a clear understanding of the Gospel. However, several Adventist leaders, including Ellen G. White, have accused the church of not fully embracing the Gospel. This information may help Adventists to come to a point where they are willing to question if they have truly embraced the Gospel.

Useful Quotations:

Ellen G. White

“As a people, we have preached the law until we are as dry as the hills of Gilboa that had neither dew nor rain. We must preach Christ in the law, and there will be sap and nourishment in the preaching that will be as food to the famishing flock of God. We must not trust in our own merits at all, but in the merits of Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁴

“For nearly two years we have been urging the people to come up and accept the light and the truth concerning the righteousness of Christ, and they do not know whether to come and take hold of this precious truth or not. They are bound about with their own ideas. They do not let the Saviour in.”¹⁵

Arthur G. Daniells

“How sad, how deeply regrettable, it is that this message of

righteousness in Christ should, at the time of its coming, have met with opposition on the part of earnest, well-meaning men in the cause of God! The message has never been received, nor proclaimed, nor given free course as it should have been in order to convey to the church the measureless blessings that were wrapped within it.”¹⁶

Robert S. Folkenberg¹⁷

“A few years ago a Seventh-day Adventist magazine published an article ... The article argued that as a church we have been negligent in teaching our people the essence of the gospel, particularly justification by faith. Thus thousands—maybe even millions—of our members don’t understand this most basic truth of Christianity. ... I heartily agree with this premise. Too many Seventh-day Adventists don’t understand or haven’t experienced the great news that Christ is our substitute and surety, who guarantees our salvation. For them, verses like ‘knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ’ (Gal. 2:16) or ‘therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law’ (Rom. 3:28) are incomprehensible theological pronouncements.”¹⁸

Morris Vendon¹⁹

“At a camp meeting in the Northwest several years ago, the editor of the *Adventist Review* stood up and asked the audience some questions. He said, ‘How many of you believe that you are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone?’ A few hands went up and then quickly back down. Then he asked, ‘How many of you believe that you are saved on the basis of your works?’ A few other hands went up and then quickly back down. And he asked, ‘How many of you believe that you are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, plus your good works?’ And all the rest of the hands went up and stayed up and waved in the air! He said, ‘I hope by the time this morning’s sermon is over, you will have changed your minds!’ And he went on to prove that we are saved by faith in Christ alone. Period.”²⁰

Clear Gospel Presentations

Clear presentation of the Gospel can be found in many Adventist publications. Through these discussions of the Gospel, many who are members of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination have come to accept the true Gospel and enjoy a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, we should not assume an Adventist is not a born-again Christian.

However, other Adventists may be confused about the Gospel. They may be like those who Ellen White declared had “not let the Saviour in.” These quotations can be very useful in discussions of justification by faith with these Adventists, who need to understand the true Gospel and to establish a relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ.

Useful Quotations:

Ellen G. White

“The thought that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, not because of any merit on our part, but as a free gift from God, seemed a precious thought.”²¹

“Faith is the condition upon which God has seen fit to promise pardon to sinners; not that there is any virtue in faith whereby salvation is merited, but because faith can lay hold of the merits of Christ, the remedy provided for sin. Faith can present Christ’s perfect obedience instead of the sinner’s transgression and defection. When the sinner believes that Christ is his personal Saviour, then, according to his unfailing promises, God pardons his sin, and justifies him freely. The repentant soul realizes that his justification comes because Christ, as his substitute and surety, has died for him, is his atonement and righteousness.”²²

“Many are losing the right way, in consequence of thinking that they must climb to heaven, that they must do something to merit the favor of God. They seek to make themselves better by

(Continued on page 14)

“Adventist” (Continued from page 13)

their own unaided efforts. This they can never accomplish. Christ has made the way by dying our sacrifice, by living our example, by becoming our great high-priest. He declares, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’ If by any effort of our own we could advance one step toward the ladder, the words of Christ would not be true.”²³

“Since we are sinful, unholy, we cannot perfectly obey the holy law. We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God. But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.”²⁴

Arthur G. Daniells

“It is through faith in the blood of Christ that all the sins of the believer are canceled and the righteousness of God is put in their place to the believer’s account.”²⁵

“Abraham had found righteousness. But how—by what method? Paul tells us: ‘If Abraham were justified [accounted righteous] by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God.’ Rom. 4:2. Made righteous by works is a suggestion, a proposal,—if such a thing could be. Is that the way by which to obtain righteousness? ‘What saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it [his belief] was counted unto him for righteousness.’ Rom. 4:3. This statement settles forever the way by which Abraham obtained God’s righteousness. It was not by works; it was by faith. ... Having settled the question as to how Abraham secured the righteousness of God, Paul proceeds to show that that is the only way any one else can obtain righteousness. ‘To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.’ Rom. 4:5.”²⁶

Repentance

The Bible is clear. We are not saved by our works. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”** Many people who reject this concept are reluctant to directly contradict God’s Word. They teach the concept—that man is saved by his works—but they use other words to express this. For instance, they may say repentance is necessary for salvation and define *repentance* as *forsaking your sins*. This is a clever way of teaching salvation by works without using the phrase *salvation by works*.

Ellen White warns us, not to put this requirement before people, but to urge them to come to Christ as they are. However, repentance is part of the Christian life. As Christians we should forsake our sins. This is part of the sanctification process. We need to differentiate between the repentance that occurs before we can be saved and that which occurs as a result of our salvation. Ellen White’s comments can help Adventists to see the difference between the repentance that comes before salvation (which she explains involves feeling the need of a Savior) and that which occurs after you become a Christian.

Useful Quotations:

Ellen G. White

“Just here is a point on which many may err, and hence they fail of receiving the help that Christ desires to give them. They think that they cannot come to Christ unless they first repent, and that repentance prepares for the forgiveness of their sins. It is true that repentance does precede the forgiveness of sins; for it is only the broken and contrite heart that will feel the need of a Saviour.

But must the sinner wait till he has repented before he can come to Jesus? Is repentance to be made an obstacle between the sinner and the Saviour? The Bible does not teach that the sinner must repent before he can heed the invitation of Christ, ‘Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.’ Matthew 11:28.”²⁷

“If you see your sinfulness, do not wait to make yourself better. How many there are who think they are not good enough to come to Christ. Do you expect to become better through your own efforts? ‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.’ Jeremiah 13:23. There is help for us only in God. We must not wait for stronger persuasions, for better opportunities, or for holier tempers. We can do nothing of ourselves. We must come to Christ just as we are.”²⁸

“Jesus loves to have us come to Him just as we are sinful, helpless, dependent. We may come with all our weakness, our folly, our sinfulness, and fall at His feet in penitence. It is His glory to encircle us in the arms of His love and to bind up our wounds, to cleanse us from all impurity.”²⁹

Obedience

Requiring obedience for salvation is another way of saying you are saved by works. Once again, we see the concept is the same, only the words are different. The concept of obedience to the law, more than any other theme, confuses the Gospel as it is understood by many Adventists. However, Ellen White was very clear that obedience to the law was the result of salvation, not the means by which it is attained.

Useful Quotations:

Ellen G. White

“We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith.”³⁰

“If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact. While we cannot do anything to change our hearts or to bring ourselves into harmony with God; while we must not trust at all to ourselves or our good works, our lives will reveal whether the grace of God is dwelling within us.”³¹

Perfection

Ellen White said, “The condition of eternal life is now just what it always has been,—just what it was in Paradise before the fall of our first parents,—perfect obedience to the law of God, perfect righteousness. If eternal life were granted on any condition short of this, then the happiness of the whole universe would be imperiled. The way would be open for sin, with all its train of woe and misery, to be immortalized.”³² Some Adventists understood this to mean one must achieve perfection in this life—coming to a point where they perfectly obey the commandments—in order to inherit eternal life.

However, when we look at this quote in context, we see Ellen White is talking about the *need* for salvation, not the *means* of our salvation. She goes on to say, “Since we are sinful, unholy, we cannot perfectly obey the holy law. We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God.”³³

So what is the solution to this problem according to Ellen G. White? She explains: “But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.”³⁴

“Adventist” (Continued from page 14)

Her solution to this problem was to accept the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is the only way we will survive the judgment of God and gain eternal life. White explains: “Only those who are clothed in the garments of his righteousness will be able to endure the glory of his presence when he shall appear with ‘power and great glory.’”³⁵ In light of this, we must reject the idea that Ellen White meant men must achieve perfect obedience to the law in this life in order to gain salvation.

Of course, we cannot live in Heaven forever and continue to sin. Our sin nature must be eradicated. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:50-57 that we will be raised in the last days and “*we shall all be changed.*” At that time “*this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality.*” Christ will make us perfect! Ellen White explains: “He is not only the Author, but the Finisher of our faith. It is Christ first and last and always. He is to be with us, not only at the beginning and the end of our course, but at every step of the way.”³⁶ Christ will one day take away our sin nature, to make us fit to live forever with Him. However, we will not achieve perfection in this life.

Ellen White taught that one sign of Christian maturity was to realize your own sinfulness. This directly contradicts the idea that mature Christians achieve perfection—coming to a point where they perfectly obey the law of God.

Useful Quotations:

Ellen G. White

“There are those who have known the pardoning love of Christ and who really desire to be children of God, yet they realize that their character is imperfect, their life faulty, and they are ready to doubt whether their hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. To such I would say, Do not draw back in despair. We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus because of our shortcomings and mistakes, but we are not to be discouraged. Even if we are overcome by the enemy, we are not cast off, not forsaken and rejected of God. No; Christ is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Said the beloved John, ‘These things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.’”³⁷

“The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature.”³⁸

“No deep-seated love for Jesus can dwell in the heart that does not realize its own sinfulness. The soul that is transformed by the grace of Christ will admire His divine character; but if we do not see our own moral deformity, it is unmistakable evidence that we have not had a view of the beauty and excellence of Christ.”³⁹


Eugene Lincoln⁴⁰

“God doesn’t confront us with impossible tasks. Let’s just take a glimpse of a few Bible characters whom God counted as perfect, without fault, or some other adjective meaning the same thing. If they made the grade, so may we. ‘Noah was a righteous man, blameless [the KJV says ‘perfect’] among the people of his time.’ (Genesis 6:9) But after the flood Noah got soured from using the grapes in his vineyard for the wrong purpose. Is this ‘perfection’? Asa, Judah’s king following the evil Abijah, ‘did what was right in the eyes of the Lord’ (1 Kings 15:11). ‘Asa’s heart was fully committed [‘Asa’s heart was perfect,’ KJV] to the Lord all his life’ (verse 14). But though he ‘got rid of all the idols his fathers had made’ (verse 12), he failed to ‘remove the high places’ (verse 14), areas of worship to false gods.”⁴¹

Conclusions

Seventh-day Adventist literature contains many clear presentations of the Gospel. Unfortunately, we also find many statements

that obscure or apparently contradict the concept that salvation is based solely on faith. Many in the Seventh-day Adventist church have embraced the true Gospel and should be considered as brothers and sisters in Christ. Others have been confused by those statements that obscure or apparently contradict the clear Gospel message and have failed to fully embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When reaching out to those within Adventism, who have not fully embraced the true Gospel, we should concentrate on presenting the biblical truths contained in God’s Word. However, the writings of Ellen G. White and other Adventists can be very useful—helping those who are confused to see the light. Therefore, we urge Christians to become familiar with this material as an aid to witnessing to those Adventists who need to realize salvation is based on faith alone, and not on obedience to the law. 

Roger DeLozier recently went home to be with the Lord. Our prayers go out for his wife and family. He will be missed by many.

Roger has written a companion piece to this article entitled *1888: A Message That Demands Your Attention*. This is a presentation of the Gospel specifically designed for Adventists. It uses not only the Scriptures, but also many of the quotations of Ellen G. White and other Adventists—to explain the Gospel as understood by the evangelical Christian church. This may serve as an illustration on how the quotes in this article can be used to present the Gospel to an Adventist in need of salvation. It also can serve as a supplement to be given to Adventists after discussing this material. Our hope is that this will be a blessing to those Adventists who have “not let the Saviour in.”

ENDNOTES

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- 3.) White, Ellen G. *Manuscript Releases Volume 5* Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990 MR No. 318 p.250
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- 7.) Knight, George *A User Friendly Guide to the 1888 Message* (Hagarstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998) p.19
- 8.) White, Ellen G. *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1962) pp.91-92
- 9.) White, Ellen G. *Review and Herald* April 1, 1890 par. 8
- 10.) White, Ellen G. *Review and Herald* September 3, 1889 par.10
- 11.) Arthur G. Daniells was an Adventist elder who was commissioned by the Ministerial Association Advisory Council to do a study “on the writings of Mrs. Ellen G. White’s on the subject of Justification by Faith,” This study was published in the classic work *Christ Our Righteousness*.
- 12.) Daniells, Arthur G. *Christ Our Righteousness* Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1941 p.41
- 13.) *ibid.* p.42
- 14.) White, Ellen G. *Review and Herald* March 11, 1890 par. 13
- 15.) *ibid.* par. 11
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- 17.) Robert S. Folkenberg was the president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist at the time when the *Adventist Review* article quoted below was published.
- 18.) Folkenberg, Robert S. *Adventist Review* April 1997 p.16
- 19.) Morris Vendon is a contemporary Adventist writer.
- 20.) Vendon, Morris L. *95 Thesis on Righteousness by Faith* Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1987 p.24
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- 26.) *ibid.* pp. 15-16
- 27.) White, Ellen G. *Steps to Christ* Hagarstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977 p.14
- 28.) *ibid.* p.18
- 29.) *ibid.* pp. 34-35
- 30.) *ibid.* p. 41
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- 33.) *ibid.* p.42
- 34.) *ibid.* p.42
- 35.) White, Ellen G. *Review and Herald* July 9, 1908 par.18
- 36.) White, Ellen G. *Steps to Christ* Hagarstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977 p.47
- 37.) *ibid.* pp.43-44
- 38.) *ibid.* p. 44
- 39.) *ibid.* p. 44
- 40.) Eugene Lincoln is a contemporary Adventist writer.
- 41.) Lincoln, Eugene *How Good Is Good Enough for Heaven* Hagarstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996 pp. 18-19



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Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.
 P.O. Box 455
 Lombard, IL 60148-0455
 Phone: (630) 627-9028
 E-Mail: info@midwestoutreach.org
 President: L.L. (Don) Veinot, Jr.
 Director: Joy A. Veinot

Spring Hill, Florida

Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.
 3338 Landover Blvd.
 Spring Hill, FL 34609-2619
 Phone: (352) 684-4448
 E-Mail: dgholson@atlantic.net
 Director: Diane Gholson

Salisbury, North Carolina

Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.
 1229 E. Council Street
 Salisbury, NC 28146
 Phone: (704) 630-9379
 E-mail: gadfly7@aol.com
 Director: Jonathan Miles

Lohrville, Iowa

Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.
 408 Main Street
 Lohrville, IA 51453-1004
 Phone: (712) 465-3010
 E-mail: mco@cal-net.net
 Director: Jeff Hauser

Scranton, Kansas

Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc.
 P.O. Box 201
 Scranton, KS 66537
 Phone: (785) 793-2143
 E-mail: mcoscranton@usa.net
 Director: Randall Birtell

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IN THIS ISSUE!

The Church in Crisis Page 1
 By Don and Joy Veinot, Ron Henzel

Don't Talk to Strangers: Book Review Page 8
 By Marcia Montenegro

Finding the Gospel in Adventist Publications Page 12
 By Roger DeLozier

