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Merger Effort with Adventist Publishing Houses in the U.S. Comes to an Abrupt End

Submitted: Aug 4, 2013

By Adventist Today News Team

Officials at the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (GC) announced last week that taskforce assigned to develop a plan to merge the Review & Herald Publishing Association and the Pacific Press "will cease its work immediately," according to a bulletin from the Adventist News Network (ANN), the denomination's official news service. "Differing perspectives as to the interpretation" of statements by Ellen G. White more than a hundred years ago were given as the reason for abandoning the effort, although there were hints that the subject will be approached again in the future.

The problems faced by the denomination's publishing enterprise are clearly outlined in a confidential document that Adventist Today has obtained. "Rapid advances in printing technology. Widespread availability of electronically disseminated information. ... Momentum toward self-publishing [and] movement towards print-on-demand and electronic publishing [mean that] publishers must view themselves as distributors of intellectual property rather than publishers of books and magazines."

The document was evidently prepared for the officers of the GC and the North American Division, and led to the June 19 decision asking the management and boards of the two publishing houses to develop a plan for merger. In addition to the technological and economic environment within which Adventist publishing must work, the document also lays out a number of problems specific to the denomination's operations in the United States.

The problems noted: (1) There are many "very price competitive" providers of print services available and "denominational entities demonstrate a commitment to 'lowest cost' among all available options." (2) "The Literature Evangelism program is no longer a primary distribution avenue [because] door-to-door marketing of consumer products has almost completely disappeared." (3) Down-sizing of staff in local and union conferences has "reduced the promotion of local church involvement in annual ... literature distribution initiatives." (4) "Many local conferences no longer operate" bookstores. (5) The way the denomination's supply system for local Sabbath School materials is organized and intellectual property is handled.

The goal of merging the two publishers was to introduce more cost effective use of new technology and connect the institutions to the plans of the Adventist Church in North America. Both publishing houses are organizationally linked directly to the GC despite the fact that there are now 63 publishers operated by the denomination around the world and the cost of shipping paper products has largely ended international distribution.

A source inside one of the institutions told Adventist Today that almost immediately after the June 19 announcement there were widespread expressions of fear among employees about loss of employment and personal difficulties related to being asked to move to another state. Other sources refused to characterize the reactions of employees even when offered anonymity, but acknowledged that similar concerns were being felt.

A 1968 compilation of Ellen G. White quotes on "Confederation and Consolidation" has been circulated among interested individuals. The ANN story implies that this collection or the original documents were discussed by the taskforce. Extracts from about a dozen letters
written by White from 1894 through 1911 are included in the 22-page document, as well as a letter dated May 15, 1983, from "Friends of the Pacific Press" urging readers to write to certain GC officers and the union conference presidents because "in a few weeks ... the future of the Pacific Press is to be decided [and] some would have it give up some of its independence."

A line from Letter 81, 1896, is quoted stating that Pacific Press "was ever to remain independent of all other institutions." Most of the original correspondence quoted in the document is from 1894 through 1896 when White was living in Australia and there was an effort to place the denomination's publishing houses under one governing board, a concept approved in principle by the delegates to the 1889 GC Session and further developed at the next session in 1891.

Material from the letters was read to the delegates at the 1895 session, although at that point the item under discussion was the merger of periodicals, not publishing institutions nor the concept of a single governing board. (See the General Conference Bulletin for 1895.) "I have no faith in consolidating the work of publication, blending into one that which should remain separate," White had written in Letter 71, 1894. "This is not God's wisdom, but human wisdom."

Interpretation of passages such as this one becomes controversial at several levels. What specifically was she intending to address? The earlier plan to have one governing board for all the publishing houses or the immediate proposal to combine some of the periodicals? Did she intend to make statements about situations more than a century later or was she only addressing the foreseeable future? How was the 1963 compilation constructed? That was prior to the capacity to search the entire text of all White's writings which is available in digital form today.

Those who interpret the material from White most literally not only believe she has ruled out any kind of organizational merger, but also that she mandates that each publishing house own separate production facilities. The 1983 proposal put forward a concept that has been discussed again recently; to have separate publishing organizations that share one production facility. This would be more cost efficient than the current situation.

In previous news reports Adventist Today editor J. David Newman has pointed out the value to the church of maintaining a number of voices and a range of views. With an estimated 30 million adherents around the world, the Adventist movement would, in the opinion of many members and clergy, not benefit from any plan that features a single editorial operation for even North America.

Although "the taskforce will not continue," the joint statement of the GC and NAD officers said, "the nature of a restructuring relationship in whatever future format that may develop requires deeper analysis and modeling." The statement also asked that the publishing houses "try to find ways to realize economies through closer cooperation and possible shared services."

"If the publishing houses would embrace this idea and really develop collaborative projects to deal with the new technology and business models in today's media world, they could probably avoid this merger idea coming back again," a church member who has worked in media businesses told Adventist Today. "Collaborations and joint ventures as the most common way forward these days. Mergers are largely among those holding onto eclipsed technology."

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Collegedale, TN, Commissioners Approve Benefits for Same-Sex Couples

Submitted: Aug 6, 2013
By Adventist Today News Team
Update appended August 12

Collegedale became the first city in Tennessee to approve benefits for same-sex spouses of government employees in a 4-to-1 vote last night (August 5). Two city commissioners—Katie Lamb and Larry Hanson—are Seventh-day Adventists, and both voted in favor of extending benefits. Despite Collegedale's small population of roughly 9,000 residents, the decision was covered widely in the region's media, including the Chattanooga Times Free Press, The Chattanoogan, WDEF (the CBS television affiliate in Chattanooga), and WRCB (the NBC television affiliate in Chattanooga).

Leading up to the vote, the Chattanooga Times Free Press noted that Collegedale seems “like an unlikely spot for such a revolutionary and controversial policy to emerge” because the area “developed as a primarily Adventist community around the nucleus of Southern Adventist University,” a major Seventh-day Adventist institution with an enrollment of roughly 2,800 students.

Both Hanson and Lamb reflected on their political philosophies in the Chattanooga newspaper article. Lamb shares, “I don’t see it as a religious issue at all. I see it as a constitutional right that the Supreme Court has just brought down. I see it as treating all of our employees the same. And I try to keep those issues of government and church separate.” According to her Collegedale city web page, before retirement Lamb worked at Southern Adventist University (SAU) as dean of the School of Nursing, associate vice president for academics, and dean of graduate studies.

Taking a somewhat different approach, Hanson relies on biblical teaching to guide him through controversial issues such as this; however, the verse he attempts to honor (Micah 6:8) speaks to broad values rather than specific policies or issues. “What the Lord wants you to be is just, merciful, and humble. That’s my goal,” Hanson explains. “Why penalize someone when they’re born a certain way? … These people suffer enough, just give them a break.” From 1966 to 1999 Hanson taught mathematics at SAU and also chairing the mathematics department for many years, according to the city's website.

Hanson reports how various factions view the controversial issue. “We have a very conservative element in the church, and we have a very liberal element in the church, and it runs the gamut here. We have some people who think this is turning Collegedale into Sodom and Gomorrah. Others tell me, ‘Hey, you’re a city commissioner. You’re not representing the Adventist church in that job. You have to do what’s in the best interest for the city, not for your beliefs as an Adventist.’”

In contrast to both Hanson and Lamb, Edwin Reynolds
strongly opposes the measure. Reynolds is a professor of New Testament studies and biblical languages at SAU. The Times Free Press reports that Reynolds wrote an open letter to the commissioners expressing his views, saying, “Voting to give homosexuals financial benefits like normal married couples and families at the expense of taxpayers like me who believe it is morally wrong is not defending the moral position.” After publication of this story, Reynolds clarified with Adventist Today that this comment was inaccurately reported, saying it was from a private communication, not an open letter (see comment below for further explanation). He continues, “If you like the homosexual employee, you have a right to be kind and helpful to her, but not at the expense of those who do not want to see the law legitimizing such relationships.” Reynolds sees the extension of benefits as “legitimizing the homosexual relationship as equivalent to a marital relationship of husband and wife,” warning commissioners they “will have to answer to God for that, not to me or other taxpayers.”

Wolf Jedamski, a church administrator and pastor of global mission at the 3,000-member Collegedale Adventist Church, provided a pastoral perspective in the newspaper story. Jedamski stated, “Some members see this as a homosexual issue or a marriage issue. The church sees this as a city issue, and we are not going to get involved in it.” Speaking to changes within the community, Jedamski added, “It’s not really true anymore that the city of Collegedale is a city of Seventh-day Adventists. It’s grown much more diverse, and that’s a good thing.”

The issue of benefits for same-sex partners has been an on-going concern since 2006 when Collegedale Police Department detective Kat Cooper first made a request, reports The Chattanoogaon. That 2006 request for family health coverage and another in 2009 were both denied; however, a subsequent request last fall eventually led to Monday's affirmative vote. Given the legal situation—the Tennessee Constitution defines marriage as between one man and one woman, and Cooper and her spouse, Krista, were married in Maryland, where same-sex marriage has been legal since January 1, 2013—city attorney Sam Elliott explained that the City of Collegedale cannot legally recognize the marriage. However, Elliott told WRCB Channel 3 that the city can “recognize that a family relationship exist.” WRCB also reported that in order to receive benefits, city employees must have a valid marriage certificate from a state that recognizes same-sex marriages.

Addendum on August 12

Reynold's clarified:

"I am disappointed that you did not check your sources better before publishing the article on Collegedale’s vote. I was quoted out of context there, and you simply perpetuated the quotation to the entire Adventist community. The quoted statements from me were not from an open letter to all of the commissioners, from which nothing was quoted, but from a private letter to Larry Hansen after he responded to my open letter with his own response to the homosexuality issue, in which he expressed his personal views that homosexuals were born that way, so God should not hold them morally responsible for their behavior, and that he had met the lesbian policewoman who was requesting the benefits and she was a nice person, so he saw no problem giving her benefits. I was writing to him as a Seventh-day Adventist to remind him that we all are born in sin and have aberrant behaviors, but God still holds us morally accountable for turning away from sin and seeking His grace for overcoming power. He cannot just take his personal views and insist that everyone else pay the price for the sins that one person elects to engage in when the law of the state of Tennessee is that marriage is between a man and a woman. He should be there to uphold state law as well as, as a Christian, feeling a personal responsibility to uphold the moral law as taught in the Bible. The litigant wants to change the law to make others pay for the health benefits to her partner, who is not recognized by the state of Tennessee as a marital spouse, but the citizens of Collegedale have to pay $10,000 a year for her to receive spousal benefits. That is not a legitimate decision on the part of the commissioners, because as the city attorney stated, it is not in harmony with state law, and it is not a moral decision because it is out of harmony with the moral teaching of God’s word. By taking my statements out of context, I am made to look like a homophobic bigot, which I am not.”
Jamaican Congregation Hosts National Security Minister at Prayer Service

Submitted: Aug 5, 2013

By Adventist Today News Team

Jamaican national security minister, Peter Bunting, participated in the Mandeville Seventh-day Adventist Church's day of prayer for the nation's independence on Saturday (August 3), according to the Jamaica Observer. Bunting emphasized “the need for divine intervention to address the country's crime problem,” a theme that elicited political criticism when he expressed the opinion in April of this year at Northern Caribbean University, an Adventist liberal arts institution in Jamaica with an enrollment of nearly 6,000 students.

Despite calls for Bunting's resignation following his April speech, which had been interpreted by some to mean Bunting's forces were unable to respond adequately to criminal activity, Mandeville Church pastor Greg Baldeo spoke in support of Bunting's statement. "In essence, what he was actually doing is calling on all of God's people who are called by God's name to humble themselves, and call a fast and pray for God's divine intervention," the newspaper reports Baldeo as saying.

Baldeo insisted that his support for Bunting's message should not be misconstrued as partisan politics. “Let me state this categorically, that the only time I have ever voted in my life is in the 1980s when I entered the baptismal pool with my mother and voted to follow Jesus all the way.” He continues, “I am not defending the statement in light of the party the minister represents; I am defending it in light of the God I represent.”

CVM TV, one of Jamaica's two major television stations, reported that Bunting told the congregation on Saturday that all concerned groups need to cooperate in the fight against crime. He highlighted the “paradox that Jamaica has so many churches, but is one of the most murderous places on earth. He wants the churches to partner with other stakeholders.”

In response to his critics, Bunting released a statement on the website of the Jamaican Ministry of National Security in an attempt to clarify “misunderstandings” regarding his “remarks over the weekend at the 13th Annual Prayer and Thanksgiving Service for the security forces at Northern Caribbean University.” Bunting said his April speech was given “against the background of challenges facing the security forces and a spate of senseless domestic killings which account for so many innocent lives, and which law enfo...

rcement is almost powerless to prevent. ... It was against this background that I reaffirmed my belief in the need for Divine intervention to touch the hearts of Jamaicans to bring about a change in our culture to help win the war on crime.” Addressing the motivation for his original message, Bunting stated that he “in no way intended to signal any position of retreat, but rather an affirmation of the contribution of a faith-based belief system shared by a majority of Jamaicans.”

Baldeo likewise affirms the role of faith in improving society. According to the Jamaica Observer, Baldeo reminded the Mandeville congregation on Saturday “that the Christian battle is not carnal but spiritual,” calling “members to three days of prayer and fasting, starting yesterday through to Independence Day.”

Share your thoughts about this article:
Andrews University, a major educational institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is the only Adventist school included in Forbes' sixth annual list of top U.S. colleges and universities. Forbes ranked Andrews University 543 out of 650 schools, a sample representing approximately the top 7 percent of all institutions of higher learning in the U.S. (total of 4,495 as of 2010, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics) or top 23 percent of the 2,774 public and private four-year degree-granting institutions.

“Andrews University's unique category classification (by the Carnegie Foundation) as the only nationally ranked, comprehensive doctoral degree granting university within the Adventist system offers a visibility to Andrews for a list like this. Plus, operating as a university for five decades probably also helps,” comments Robert Weaver, vice president for marketing at the Association of Adventist Colleges and Universities.

Forbes partners with the Center for College Affordability and Productivity (CCAP) to rank the top colleges. The goal of the list is to determine students' return on investment, says Forbes. “We’re not all that interested in what gets a student into college, like our peers who focus heavily on selectivity metrics such as high school class rank, SAT scores and the like. Our sights are set directly on ROI: What are students getting out of college?”

Each school's score is based on twelve weighted factors in five general categories. The categories are student satisfaction (22.5 percent), post-graduate success (37.5 percent), student debt (17.5 percent), graduation rate (11.25 percent), and nationally competitive awards (11.25 percent). Remarking on formulas used for ranking schools, Weaver comments, “There are many ways to measure colleges and universities, and the 13 accredited Adventist colleges and universities in North America reflect that. Many of our colleges and universities are highly ranked on various criteria in the geographic region in which they operate, and we collectively celebrate and acknowledge the excellence and public recognition the schools regularly receive, including this recognition of Andrews University.”
Adventist Today

Adventist-Laymen's Services and Industries Convention Begins This Week

Submitted: Aug 7, 2013
By Adventist Today News Team

The annual convention of Adventist-Laymen's Services and Industries (ASI) began today (Aug. 7) at the Rosen Shingle Creek Convention Center in Orlando, Florida. Last year's gathering in Cincinnati, Ohio, had more than 1,800 registered attendees and 200 exhibiting organizations. ASI describes itself as a membership-based organization of Seventh-day Adventist lay people with approximately 1,000 members, ranging from business owners to individual professionals to self-supporting ministries.

The convention schedule includes sermons, ministry testimonials, seminars on outreach and prophecy, as well as time to visit the numerous promotional booths. Prominent speakers include Frank Fournier, Ty Gibson, Grace Daley, Pavel Goia, Justin Kim, Mark Finley, C.D. Brooks and Zeno Charles-Marcel.

The theme of this year's four-day event is “prophecy fulfilled.” Consistent with this theme, a Saturday afternoon panel will address end-time events. Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the denomination’s General Conference, will participate on the panel.

Asked why he is attending the convention, Pastor Walter Rogers explained, “It's a great atmosphere. It's a bunch of successful Christian businesspeople that are dedicated to using their business skills and their creativity, really dedicating their spiritual gift of business into forwarding God's kingdom. It's awesome to be in this atmosphere, rubbing shoulders with people with that kind of motivation.” Rogers is the pastor for children’s evangelism and fund-raising at the Harbor of Hope Adventist Church in Benton Harbor, Michigan.

Rogers has attended the convention four years in a row in an effort to network with leaders who are passionate about supporting inner city ministry.

Rogers appreciates the “good speakers and spiritual music,” but he says these can be found at other large events such as campmeetings. Rather, the main reason people attend the convention is “to network and to learn how to give.”

The ASI website reports that 38 projects have been selected this year to receive grants from offerings gathered at the convention, with a fund-raising goal of nearly $1.2 million. A wide variety of projects have been chosen, including education, humanitarian work, youth ministry, health care, evangelism, construction, media and technology.
After the gathering closes, video recordings of convention sessions and seminars will be posted on the organization's website, where past year's recordings are currently available – http://www.asministries.org/convention-media.

The 2014 convention will be held in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

_______________________Share your thoughts about this article:

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Knowing the Name

By Mark Gutman In a recent Sabbath School class discussion on witnessing, one of the class members stated that there is a “passage” that says people in heaven will ask Jesus what the wounds in his hands are. The member was probably referring to Zechariah 13, but Zechariah 13 refers to a false prophet, and it takes some stretching to get it to apply to Jesus. See my February 2012 column on “Reading Into Isaiah” for the issue of context for Old Testament texts. But this column is not dealing with the context of Bible verses; its concern is about why we care if people in heaven will ask Jesus about the wounds in his hands.

Some believe that people who have lived since Jesus lived on earth (in human form) and do not know about him will not be in heaven. They envision the same fate for those who lived before that time and did not offer some version of the sacrifices of the Levitical sanctuary system. When I was in college, a classmate pointed out a huge problem with any theory that allowed people to reach heaven without knowing about Jesus. “Why would we bother to send out missionaries?” Later, I took a religion class that got some publicity because the professor held this “restrictive” theory. The week of prayer speaker that fall used an Ellen White passage from *Desire of Ages* that seemed to disagree with the professor’s theory. “Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.”

My professor was quite distressed when “the other side” used this passage, and he asserted that it was a “clouded” statement because it disagreed with everything else Ellen White had written on the subject. He invited the week of prayer speaker to our class, an invitation that was accepted. As I remember events, both the professor and the speaker came away from the class with unchanged beliefs.

Will people alive today who die without ever hearing of Jesus be allowed into heaven? While I do not claim to have the definitive answer, I would point readers back to my earlier column, “The Good WHAT?” from Sept 2011. The sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 were not sorted by theology; they were sorted by how they treated people.

Uh-oh. That sounds like salvation by works. It certainly can sound like it. But to use an analogy I heard Morris Venden use: “An apple tree produces apples because it is an apple tree, not in order to become an apple tree.” Could the person in an African village who never hears anything about Jesus be living with Christian motives even though she doesn’t know all the specific rules? Might she be able to show evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched her heart? Or does that only happen if people hear the name of Jesus?

If hearing the name of Jesus is a necessity, I’m glad I chose to be born in North America. Wait a minute! I didn’t choose where to be born any more than I chose my parents or my eye color. I guess I’m just luckier than those sinners/reprobates who were born in the outback.

But doesn’t the Bible say that there’s no other name under heaven by which people can be saved?

Sometimes we read too much (or the wrong meaning) into “the name.” For instance, some fear that God will ignore a prayer that does not have the words “in Jesus’ name” included somewhere because Jesus talked about praying in his name.

Leaving aside the issue of what praying in Jesus’ name means, Jesus did not say that God would not listen to prayers that were not thus prayed. Can you imagine a loving God who refuses to listen to people unfortunate enough to be born
in the wrong locality?

But let’s carry the question to the next step: what about the people who actually hear Jesus’ name? Or going still further, What about people who are baptized members of a Christian church? How clear does their understanding of “the atonement,” “justification,” “sanctification,” or “expiation” need to be? I remember struggling to answer something about that as I neared college graduation, as the college had just instituted a new test for senior theology majors. If my getting into heaven depended on how well I explained the plan of salvation that day... Never mind; I lived long enough to gain more understanding. On second thought, I’m not sure how good my theological understanding is even now.

So to summarize my problems with the belief that only those who know about Jesus get to heaven: You get to heaven only if (1) you are lucky enough to be born in a place where Christianity has a chance to be promoted, and (2) you get an understanding that would get at least a B+ in a theology test on “the plan of salvation.” I have trouble putting that with the sheep and goats story in Matthew 25 or the Good Samaritan story in Luke 15.

By the way, don’t confuse correlation with cause-and-effect when you read about the sheep and the goats. In one of my seminary classes, Dr. Elden Chalmers informed us that the more ministers there were in an area, the higher the crime rate. His statement, of course, caused some gasps, but he quickly explained. Usually more ministers in an area means the population is higher, which usually means a higher crime rate. The ministers do not cause the higher crime rate (we hope); more ministers and higher crime rate are both caused by higher population (or higher population density). In the same way, the sheep met other criteria but happened to have helped needy people without keeping score. Sheep are more likely to help others. But helping others doesn’t make them sheep. Borrowing from Venden, animals don’t help others in order to become sheep.

So if you encounter a person who has never heard of Jesus but who acts as the sheep do, might it be that the uninformed person will be classed as a sheep? Is that too shocking an idea? Or too disgusting? Sometimes we want to draw small salvation circles. To quote Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

In Mark 9:38, John tried to draw a small circle, but Jesus told John, “He who is not against us is for us” (verse 40). I have trouble picturing Jesus as then turning to Christians and saying, “But don’t you dare call a kind person a Christian if she hasn’t heard of me or can’t give a decent explanation of the atonement.” I similarly would picture heaven as more in line with Edwin Markham’s philosophy than with John’s theology in Mark 9. Holding to good theology does carry benefits; “bad” theology does carry disadvantages. But good theology does not ensure heavenly reward, nor does bad theology rule it out. Not every sheep will be able to expound on the scars in Jesus’ hands.

1 Zechariah 13:2-6
2 White, The Desire of Ages
3 Acts 4:12
4 John 14:13, 14

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200th Anniversary of Soren Kierkegaard: Was he also a prophetic voice?

Submitted: Aug 1, 2013

By Borge Schantz

What made Soren Aaby Kierkegaard (1813-1855) one of the great Danes? He is regarded as the father of existentialism (defined as a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts). His theological work focusses on Christian ethics, the calling of the church, the differences between purely objective proofs of Christianity and the individual subjective relationship to Jesus. Kierkegaard wrote in a Danish language 200 years ago only spoken by less than one million people. His books and articles are in a style with long complicated phrases often difficult to understand. He could write sentences of more than 120 words. Often, you have to very slowly read a sentence several times to understand what he wanted to say. Fortunately, a number of authors in Danish, English and German have shared their research and summaries of Kierkegaard's academic contribution and outstanding works on the many topics he addressed.

The Theologian

Soren Aaby Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen in 1813 as the youngest of seven children. His father had a humble background, but became a great merchant and real estate speculator. At his death he left Soren funds that made it possible for him to devote his entire life to writing. Soren matriculated from High School in 1830 and began theological studies at the University of Copenhagen, where he received his degree in theology in 1840. However, although he was a theologian, he was never ordained as a pastor in the Danish Lutheran State Church.

As a religious writer and Christian philosopher Kierkegaard became known as one of the world's original and leading existentialist. His work is clearly based on the Lutheran biblical positions on areas such as sin, repentance, confession and forgiveness and is in this way permeated with his characteristic understanding of the Gospel. The center of the Christian message is also the core of Kierkegaard messages. Faith requires that you walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and being a Christian involves personal involvement, even sufferings. No doubt martyrdom is reserved for Christ and the apostles. But as Jesus Christ lived and died in shame and disgrace, that must also be the fate of the followers. This view reveals a marked difference between the triumphant, well-established Danish State Church and the picture of the struggling "biblical" church.

Kierkegaard defines a significant difference between the subjective (inner emotional) and the objective (external rational, impersonal). In the Christian belief the difference between objective, which is focusing on ethics, the church as an institution and evidence of Christianity's rationality, is in some ways in contrast to the simple, subjective faith which is a relationship with Christ that leads to a Christian life and practice of charity.

Events marking his lifework

Kierkegaard's responsible and emotional beliefs were strongly influenced by four major and diversified happenings in his life. The influence of these events can be traced in his comprehensive authorship.
1. His father had told the family that he was a shepherd boy on the Jutland heath. His life was marked by poverty, hunger and exhaustion which led him to climb a small hill and curse God. Furthermore as a well-to-do business man he seduced and made the housemaid pregnant. He felt that with these two sinful acts he had sinned against the Holy Spirit. It is believed that these two incidents, together with the loss of his father who died in 1838 made a lasting impression on Soren. His father was a melancholic personality, intelligent but also a religious doubter. Soren, no doubt, inherited the father’s intelligence and imagination but also his melancholic dispositions.

2. In 1840, Soren (27 years old) met the cheerful, 17-year-old Regine Olsen. They were engaged the following year. He hoped she would help him in his melancholy. However, as Soren thought about the engagement, he asked himself, could he make her happy? Would Regine’s life with him be tolerable? He came to the conclusion that the relationship would become a lifelong burden for her. The engagement was dissolved a year later at Soren's request. This made him more closed and shut off from human relationships. Regine later married the governor of the Danish West Indies and lived until 1904. But Soren never married and he loved her until his death.

3. A literary feud with a satirical Copenhagen magazine Corsair, that Kierkegaard actually began, ended up seriously humiliating him. The fairly extensive controversy between Corsair where Kierkegaard was ridiculed in both words and caricatures stopped when the editor backed off. However, Kierkegaard was deeply hurt. Cartoons in connection with articles depicted him as a “street philosopher” with physical infirmities, such as a hunchback with thin legs and trousers legs of unequal length. This wounded Kierkegaard to such a degree that he from then on was reluctant to walk on the Copenhagen lanes and became even more reclusive.

4. In his later years, Kierkegaard became a fierce critic of the bishops and priests in the Lutheran State Church. His criticisms focused on the observation that they were theologically correct in their interpretations of Scripture as revealed in their Sunday sermons, but did not practice what they preached in their daily lives. Kierkegaard never revealed any major disagreements with Lutheran theology. However, his admonition to let private praxis be in accordance with the words in Sunday sermons was an implicit critique of the clergy. To Kierkegaard the established was not a "Christian" church. He made a distinction between “Christianity” and “Christendom” and made the point that the clergy had left Christianity and was practicing Christendom.

Kierkegaard's use of words, often in complex and knotty phrases, betrays a subtle logic, great learning but still a simple description of what he understood by God. He could even write in an enjoyable way and use simple and graceful sentences. He has been aptly described as "a writer who prostrated himself in the dust to what is sacred, but was not impressed by anything else." Passion and simple-minded talk, humor and irony were often Kierkegaard's main method of communication. As a strategy in dialogues, where he dealt with both philosophical and theological themes, Kierkegaard used pseudonyms. He could use his rich imagination to describe fictional rivals in debate with each other in magazines, as a unique strategy to get people to think. But he often ended the debate by writing under his own name, thereby getting his Christian views into focus.

The Existentialist

It is impossible to survey Kierkegaard's diverse and outstanding contributions in a short article. One way, however, to get a glimpse of his fundamental thesis of existentialism is to look at the categories of people based on how aware each individual is of his or her own existence.

*Philistine.* The smug and ignorant person with no understanding of artistic and cultural values lives in an established social framework and believes that things are all right as they are. Kierkegaard believed that humans were separated from animals and plants by having a self, a consciousness, a spirit. This awareness gives them the ability to relate to themselves and make choices about life, but it does not necessarily require them to do so. The philistines have not become self-aware and exist in dull uniformity and habit.

*Aesthetic.* Sooner or later the philistine will one way or another be forced to relate to his or her self. However, there are those who resist self-awareness by trying to escape from his/her own existence, for example, by pleasures, consumption and wastefulness.

*Ethical.* This is the stage with honest responsibility. The person has started to exist and does not deny his/her self-awareness. However, there is still a lack of meaning to life with the result that he/she is obsessed by existential anxiety.

*Religious Phase.* This is the last stage listed by Kierkegaard, who classifies it in two kinds. (1) *Religiosity A:* The conformable Christian...
who faithfully attends church, having evening prayers, but does so more by routine than choice. To Kierkegaard this kind of religiosity is not acceptable as it is not by one's own personal choice but controlled by religion as an institution. This was part of Kierkegaard’s critique of the State Church. (2) Religiosity B: The passionate and spiritually demanding faith is the ultimate stage where the person realizes the paradox and absurdity of the Christian concept of God: that God is born as a man (Jesus) to die on the cross and rise again so that humanity may be saved from their sins.

Kierkegaard believed that the Christian does not as a matter of course gradually move from stage to stage. It is a personal choice by leaps in faith.

In terms of theological and philosophical reflection, the book Fear and Trembling (1843) includes the celebrated section where Kierkegaard develops variations on the story of Abraham, who was told by God to sacrifice his own son Isaac. This story is for Kierkegaard precisely the expression of the Christian faith as a "leap out of the 70,000 fathoms of water." Kierkegaard's description of the thoughts of both Abraham and Isaac seeks to show how a totally reckless act (murder of his own son) will be disregarded and the religious issue becomes more important than ethical requirements. God has his own ethics. Abraham became a "hero of faith" because he without understanding or justifying God's command, simply was obedient.

Kierkegaard as Chastiser

In his last period, Kierkegaard directly chastised the existing Lutheran church, which he bluntly stated was immoral and un-Christian, the enemy of true Christianity. It had for generations watered down and tampered with the Christian faith to such a degree that very little was left. The priests, who on Sundays could deliver good sermons, in their personal Christian life were far from living up to what the church stood for. Without hesitation they by baptisms and confirmations made all kinds of people “Christians” without asking any questions.

Without a doubt, he spent his last years embittered about Christianity as expressed in his intense and comprehensive attack on both the church and the clergy. Interestingly, the 200 year anniversary of Kierkegaard is today celebrated by the Danish National Evangelical Lutheran Church. It is a paradox, because in his last years he labeled the church an enemy of true Christianity. Even on his deathbed Soren Kierkegaard refused the visit of a clergyman.

Global Influence

Over a period of 12 years, Kierkegaard produced about 40 books and numerous newspaper articles. He, like his contemporary, Hans Christian Andersen, put Denmark's name on the world map, but not the world of fairy tales. In particular, he has been instrumental in that various forms of existentialism globally use his theories. This is reflected in the translations of his writings into many languages such as German, French, English, Spanish, Hebrew, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Japanese and Chinese. There are today Kierkegaard scholars who study the Danish language in order to be able read his original works. Among them there are, together with Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and scholars adherent to other religions.

Global Missionary Influence

That interreligious fact could be a hidden, but interesting "mission project." Kierkegaard is considered to be the first existentialist philosopher in the world. His extensive writings are considered the basics of existentialism. However, Kierkegaard can only be understood when one has a thorough knowledge of the Lutheran/Christian worldview upon which all of his authorships are built.

It is, however, a sad fact today that emphasis is placed on his thought on the topic of existentialism. His "prophetic messages" are sidetracked. His evangelical call to complete surrender to God and living a life based on Christian principles, which is actually the basis for his philosophical ideas, has cunningly been classified as being of less importance. Soren Kierkegaard after 200 years also has a message for Seventh-day Adventists, both leadership and church members. We still, after 150 years of existence, should hold the balance between the objective tasks of maintaining beliefs, practices, administrations and organization, while at the same time emphasizing the subjective measures that are present in the individual spiritual journey with Christ and daily living the Christian life.

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A Rock Bottom Success

By Andrew Hanson

Sarah Andrews is a mystery writer and friend whose previous Em Hansen mystery novels have established her national reputation as a novelist, science writer and geologist. While Sarah was doing research for her new book, Rock Bottom, I received the following email. The concern she expressed along with my response may have influenced an important sub plot in the book. A brief outline follows:

The protagonist, Em Hansen, a newly married wife, is on a raft trip through the Grand Canyon with Fritz, her husband, and his son by his previous marriage, thirteen-year-old Brendon. Brendon has attended a fundamentalist Christian church since birth. He believes the Grand Canyon eroded during a universal flood 4,500 years ago. Em is a geologist and has very different ideas about how the Canyon was created. Em’s dilemma: how to answer Brendon’s questions about the Canyon’s sedimentary layers while honoring Brendon’s religious faith.

I highly recommend Rock Bottom

While there is occasional adult language, adults use the words, and I didn’t find any of the dialogue offensive. It is a book I will make available to my grandchildren when I hear them asking Brendon’s questions.

In addition to an intriguing mystery, the reader experiences the Grand Canyon through the eyes of a geologist. The Grand Canyon is an amazing place. This book does it justice.

Caption: Sarah Andrews, physically and spiritually refreshed at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

The following letter is published with the author’s permission:

Andy,

The Grand Canyon mystery will probably interest you extra special. It was going to just be about the rocks, but after spending two days with the Outreach Coordinator at the canyon picking up on various details of natural history that the National Park wanted me to put into the mix, I asked if there was anything else that was on her mind personally. Very thoughtfully, she said that yes, she was troubled by some questions certain Park visitors kept asking. Specifically, these questions came from people who had taken raft trips down the river with a group that advertises “Christian” trips. Well, you know part of where this is going: This group instructs participants that the layers of rock
are sediments that fell out of the waters of Noah’s Flood, and that the Canyon was carved as the waters receded. I was thinking that I had already said my piece on all of this, but then she said, “What really troubles me is that the people who come to me are frightened because they are told that Noah’s Flood proves that if you don’t believe exactly as they do, God will be angry and will kill you and send you to hell.”

I trust that this view of what this river trip group espouses is oversimplified, but I am hoping you can fill me in a bit on this. No, that’s not quite true; rather, I am hoping that no one has ever pushed the idea of a punishing God on you. I have heard my share of intellectual discussions about a hot-tempered God of the Old Testament, some at my mother’s knee, as she gave me her interpretation of Christ’s teachings. I took my mother’s explanations to mean that Christ was doing his best to clarify God’s message and help people understand that God wasn’t wrathful.

The idea of a punishing God makes no sense to me. My limited awareness of God has always been one of undiluted love, kindness, compassion, a perfection of balances. At my worst moments I once feared that God didn’t know I existed, but I quickly became aware that that worry had everything to do with my mindset and nothing to do with what was being transmitted. My experience thus is that hell is that place we create right here when we let fear and anger take root. We do evil if we try to split away from our fears and anger rather than own these difficult emotions and deal with them through constructive meekness. The “us vs. them” “you’re with us or against us” game looks to me like part of that splitting.

Enough of my rant here. I’m just wondering if this punitive God idea is common among literalist sects or is just this group that runs raft trips. Thanks, Andy!

With love, Sarah

Response:

Sarah,

I think I understand why many Christian fundamentalists are so fearful and unhappy. They have been told that they have to choose to believe either the story of the creation as found in Genesis (There are actually two radically different stories in the first two chapters, but that doesn’t seem to phase these religious know-nothing authorities.) or an evolutionary story that denies the existence of God. These are the only choices available, and denying the first will keep them out of Heaven and could land them in everlasting fire.

Fear can override reason in the general population in times of economic uncertainty, natural calamity, and/or war. This fear is intensified if fundamentalist leaders tell their followers that these events are God’s punishment for behavior that demonstrates unbelief.

Imagine trying to believe that the universe was created 6,000 years ago.

Imagine trying to believe that the Grand Canyon was created by a universal flood that covered the highest mountain 4500 years ago and all fauna, with the exception of life in the sea, are the descendants of creature pairs that only survived because of their ride in Noah’s ark that ended up on top of Mt. Ararat in Turkey.

Imagine trying to believe that personal unbelief delays the Second Coming of Jesus?

Imagine trying to believe that scientists are used by the Devil to destroy the faith of children.

I believe that the people asked to believe these things can’t do it by themselves. They have to chant the words of charismatic leaders, and can only drown their common sense in irrational groups that occasionally take float trips.

The life and teaching of Jesus is rarely mentioned. It’s what happened on the cross that’s important to these people. His death was required
to pay the penalty for human sins that offended a legalistic and angry God, and only Jesus’ sacrificial death made it possible to save a human “elect” who worship God correctly.

Depending on the survey, 50-90% of educated young people from Christian homes apparently lack the required “imagination” and are currently not attending church. That trend will continue.

Love and best wishes, Andy

PS: Your view of God and Hell eloquently expresses my own.

_______________________ Join in the discussion:

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Jacob’s Ladder, Rung One

Submitted: Aug 7, 2013

By Debonnaire Kovacs

Chapter 21 of *The Monastery of the Heart* begins with something of particular interest to Adventists. Chittister is speaking of a “twelve-runged ladder that leads to God” and says that it is called “the steps of Humility.” She goes on to say that “the interesting thing” is that the Rule encourages monastics to embrace their physical humanity. So many people, for so many centuries, have accepted the Platonic concept of a separate soul that temporarily inhabits a body, that it is often difficult for them to understand how one might consider the acceptance and love of one’s body as an aid to spiritual growth. I am not presuming to speak for Chittister here, but it is possible that this is what she’s thinking.

In contrast, Adventists have said from the beginning that we are *one*. Our body and breath equal our soul—who we are. It was some years ago that I read in Plato’s *Phaedra* his argument against his friend Simmias’ idea about the soul—that it is like the music produced by the harp. Break the harp, and the music is no more. Break our bodies, and our soul is no more. Plato proceeded to prove (to his own satisfaction, not mine) that this was a nonsensical idea, but I was struck by it. It’s a really good analogy, I think. The unique music of each soul is known only to God, and can be recreated when that self is recreated. Until then, it only lives as a “memory,” if you will, inside God.

So it’s no confusion to us to read, as Chittister goes on:

*Our humanity, the Rule implies,*
*is the clay upon which*
*the Divine Potter*
*and the heat of life’s kiln*
*work to shape and glaze*
*our pliant selves*
*into vessels of the God-life within.*

This is exactly what we, as Adventists, believe, and teach.

Or is it?

*Humility*
*is the antidote to the myth*
of perfectionism
*that eats away at the heart*
of the spiritual life . . .
*It is, as well, an antidote*
to an achievement-driven, image-ridden, competitive society that is the hallmark of the modern age.

And, dare I say, the hallmark of at least some faces of our denomination? Chittister says that Benedict’s ladder “links, without apology, both the spiritual and the material dimensions of life and makes them one.” In this, her Adventist brothers and sisters would agree. Then she says that the first step is to “keep ‘the reverence of God always before our eyes’ and never forget it.” Here, again, we would willingly agree.

To realize the presence of God—whatever our own moral state—makes the spiritual life a companionship with God, not God a trophy to be won by perfect adherence to all the rules of life—of which we are obviously perfectly incapable.

Well. At least there’s something we’re perfect at!

Somebody once gave this bit of theology in a nutshell: God is God and I am not.

What else do we need to know?

_______________________Share your thoughts about this article:

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Psalm 15 Prayer

By Andrew Hanson

Lord
Who will live next to you in Heaven?
Who will be your neighbors?

Those with integrity
Those who do right because it is right
Those who tell the truth
Those who speak well of others

Those who are true friends
Those who treat their neighbors as themselves
Those who do not associate with evil
Those whose lives reflect your graciousness

Those who stand by their word at any cost
Those who loan money without interest to those in need
Those who cannot be bribed to harm the innocent
Those whose characters are honorable

Our prayer today
Is to be invited to live forever
In your neighborhood

Amen
Discerning the Roots of Apostasy

Of all the sins listed in the Ten Commandments, which sin has the greatest potential of deceiving us to such an extent that, while sincerely believing we are on God’s side, we would actually be working against Him, but we would be the last ones to know?

When reading the Ten Commandments as a list, it is ever so easy to check them off, one by one, saying to ourselves in a self-congratulatory manner, “I certainly have no problem with that commandment.” Even the apostle Paul, in rating his pre-conversion law-keeping, wrote that concerning the righteousness which is in the law, he considered himself blameless (Philippians 3:6). But his post-conversion assessment of himself, when he came face-to-face with the 10th commandment, “You shall not covet,” produced in him an intense conviction about sin. So much so that he could later write, that no “covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesians 5:5).

The first and the second commandments of the Decalogue pinpoint the root of all sin. It is a contest about identity – who is God, and who are we? In the preamble to the Ten Commandments, God defined His own identity, as well the identity of His people.

\[
\text{I am the Lord} \quad \text{His identity} \\
\text{Your God} \quad \text{their identity as found in Him} \\
\text{Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage} \quad \text{their identity was based on God’s act of delivering them from Egyptian bondage.}
\]

Our identity is not self-determined. And when we start to think that the source of our identity is something we do, or make, or achieve, we are thereby challenging the identity of our Creator-Redeemer God, who has said, “I am the Lord your God!” When God says, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” it is as if He were really saying, “There are no other gods, and the deliverance I performed for you at the Red Sea is incontrovertible evidence of that; you are not your own. You were there at the Red Sea, you saw how I defeated Pharaoh’s armies, and you rejoiced and worshiped Me. Why do you want to disbelieve and contest what you saw with your very own eyes?” Idolatry is not, as many believe, the bowing down before religious objects by ignorant people in developing countries. Idolatry, at its core, is a contest about the source of our identity. Is our identity determined by what God says about us? Or is our identity determined by what we think and what we do?

Definitions of Idolatry

Far too often we have defined the 2nd commandment in terms of the worship and adoration of images. But there is a far deeper meaning to this commandment that we ordinarily do not readily
recognize, for even God Himself used images as aids in worship. Remember the uplifted bronze serpent and the cherubim overshadowing the Ark of the Covenant. Idolatry is really about how we think about God and about ourselves. Consider for a moment these definitions of idolatry:

- Idolatry is when anyone or anything receives more glory, honor, and praise than God and His Son, Jesus Christ.
- An idol is a picture of a god as we fashion him to be. It is man making a god in man’s image.
- Idols are our man-made replacements for the living Creator-God, created in our minds when we do not believe that our God is doing His work according to our expectations.
- Idolatry is the attempt to control our lives by using a god (or gods), custom-designed in our image, to do God’s work in our lives, when we believe the lie that God is not BIG enough to handle our difficult situations.
- “Idolatry: trusting people, possessions or positions to do for me what only God can do.” - Bill Gothard.[1]

What Went Wrong at Mt. Sinai?

We may wonder, how could the Israelites, after having been eyewitnesses to God’s glory and power, both at the Red Sea and also at Mt. Sinai, engage so soon in idolatry? When the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, they turned to Aaron, Moses’ brother, and said to him, “Come, make us gods that shall go before us: for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what is become of him” (Exodus 32:1). After having received gold and other ornaments from the people, Aaron then fashioned these into a golden calf. And the people said, “This is your God, O Israel, that brought you out of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). After everything that God had done for them, how could they do this? Was the real problem the golden calf? Or, was there something more sinister residing in the twisted thinking of the people that caused this departure from faith into idolatry?

1. **Discontent.** Idolatry occurs when we become dissatisfied with God’s involvement in our lives. Rather than seeking Him, they now sought and made for themselves a god-replacement, a god-substitute. Discontent with God and His work in your life can often lead to covetousness, the violation of the 10th commandment. This may be motivated by anger and hurt arising from thoughts rooted in personal disappointment. Have you ever come up with “if only” statements such as *if only such and such would happen, my life could be so much better*?

2. **Forgetting.** They “forgot” or conveniently chose not to remember God’s mighty acts on their behalf over the past several months.

3. **They made idols in their own image,** that is, according to their expectations of how they wished God could do a better job for them. The people rejected the evidences of their miraculous deliverance from Egypt, and fashioned an idol in the image of their warped covetous expectations. You engage in idol-making by choosing another god (object, activity, relationship, possessions, position, power) to fulfill the covetous lusts of your
mind, a god who you think will do a better job than the Creator-God. You make that other god [idol] in your own image of your covetous expectations, and in the process this idol imprints its image on your life [breaking the 2nd commandment], and you become just like the idol you serve.

The problem with idolatry is not usually the object, but rather the twisted thinking that confers upon the idol (as an object of a pursuit) expectations of how God could and should do a better job. Is God threatened by an object made out of gold or an image fashioned from wood? Really, idols are not living, breathing entities. There are no other gods anywhere in the universe. God’s enmity against idols occurs because idols steal away His people’s affections from the living Creator-God. Hence, God’s jealousy arises, not because He thinks He isn’t getting enough glory, but because the glory of God, residing in people He has created, is now reduced in a way that damages the image of God in people’s lives.

**Idols Reduce our Self-worth**

The power of idolatry does not lie in the idol itself, but more in the thoughts, or lies, we tell ourselves about our idol. We are essentially investing our idols (our golden calves or angry beasts) with tasks they are unable to perform because they are not God. Idolatry is the pursuit of the lusts of our hearts with no regard to how this may destroy us or damage the lives of others. Far too often, the more we try to control our lives through idolatry, the more we lose control. What you choose to attribute your ultimate worth to—what you choose to worship—depends on what you fear the most. If you fear loneliness, you worship relationships. You depend on them to save you from a meaningless life. If you fear not being accepted or esteemed, you worship your social network, the way you look, the car you drive, or the amount of money you make. You depend on these things to validate your existence. If you fear insignificance, you may end up worshipping your career or your accomplishments. Behind everything you worship is some fear that, without this person or thing, you’d be lost. We’re all worshipers—but God is the only reliable object of worship because nothing and no one extends to us these things like God does in the person and work of Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, anything we worship—other than God himself—is an idol. Idolatry is centering our attention and affection on something, or someone, smaller than God. In fact, most idols are the good things in our lives that we turn into ultimate things, things that take God’s place as we unconsciously depend on them to give our lives meaning and security. Idolatry is really worshipping lesser gods, and those who worship idols in turn become children of such lesser gods. How BIG is your God?

**The Life-damaging Effects of Idolatry.**

The problem with idols is not in the object, but in the effects of idol worship upon the worshiper.

1. We create our idols, but the idols then return the favor and shape us in their own image.
2. Idols are unable to hear, speak, see, and according to Psalm 115, “those who make them are like unto them.”

3. Behind every idol hide demonic spirits waiting to take possession of the idol-worshipper.

4. The effects of idolatry are transmitted by us to our children to the 3rd and 4th generations.

5. The most deceptive idols are those who masquerade as aids in our religious life. Such religious idols could be a church standard of conduct, adherence to which may be an ultimate sign of loyalty to the church. It can be the policies of the church, its organization, a certain style of music, diet, dress, adornment, all of which may be used to make a name for ourselves by portraying us as loyal members, when really our hearts are far from God. Have you ever heard anyone say something like this: “We are a special people raised up for a special time with a special message, and it is time for us to cleanse the camp, for there is far too much sin in our midst.”

6. We make idols to control our lives, but the end result is that we become dependent on our pet idols, often in the same ways an addict becomes addicted to the drug of his choice to reduce his pain and anxiety. Remember how the Biblical text says that all nations have drunk of the intoxicating wine of Babylon (Revelation 14:8). Both idolatry and adultery carry with them the trait of addiction. Addiction is a pathological relationship to any substance, activity or person for the purpose of escaping or dulling pain, and which has life-damaging consequences.

When counseling those in marital infidelity, counselors and pastors will often testify to the addictive nature of such relationships in that the guilty parties (a) are unable to see the damaging results of their courses of action (they are psychologically blind), and (b) even if they see it they are often unwilling and even unable to break off the relationships – even when confronted with Biblical truth. (Calling sin by its right name does not always work!) The addictive nature of idolatry is such that idolaters are unable to see the wrongness of their choices and course of action, and they are unable to break free without God’s intervention. Question: Can you think of any addictive sins (non-alcoholic relationships or activities) in your life on which you depend for self-worth and significance?

Our Creator wants us to discover our secure identity and to build our lives on what God thinks of us. The truth about our identity is that it is who we are which determines what we do. And who we are is determined by what God thinks about us.
Sources of Identity

Here are some possible and common sources of identity and personal significance. Your search for a secure identity through any of these will never bring you the lasting joy and fulfillment that God desires for you.

- What you buy. Where you buy it.
  - What you drive.
  - What you wear – designer labels are preferable to non-name brands.
  - Who you hob-nob with.
  - Where you vacation.
  - Your financial portfolio.
  - The church you are a member of.
  - The selective church standards you uphold.
  - What position you hold in your church.
- What you earn.
- Where you work.
- How much education you have obtained. What degrees you hold.
- The good works you do in your church, if such are primarily designed to make you look good rather than bringing glory to God.

Isn’t it tragic that we should become so dependent on comparisons with others to find our worth and identity? Rather than being engaged in pursuits to discover “who we are,” let us discover that our Creator-Redeemer God has already told us “whose we are.” So often we try to remake or improve our personal image so that it reflects the “real me,” but we forget that the “real me” is found in a relationship with Him who created us for His own pleasure and who redeemed us at Calvary’s cross at such infinite cost. Why not let the Creator-God be in charge of your image management? Instead of trying to discover ways whereby we can make a name for ourselves, we can trust rather in all God’s glorious names as the source of our sufficiency and identity. Eugene Peterson has rightfully observed, that…

“...our lives are not puzzles to be figured out. Rather, we come to God, who knows us and reveals to us the truth of our lives. The fundamental mistake is to begin with ourselves and not God. God is the centre from which all life develops. If we use our ego as the centre from which to plot the geometry of our lives, we will live eccentrically”[2]

In his book The Contemporary Christian, John Stott sums up our uniqueness as humans: “Our greatest claim to nobility is our created capacity to know God, to be in personal relationship with him, to love him and to worship him. Indeed, we are most truly human when we are on our knees before our Creator.”[3]

What is idolatry? Simply put, idolatry is settling for shadows. An idol is a picture of a god as we fashion him to be. It is an image, not reality. It is a shadow, not substance. It is a representation, but always less than God or other than God. Idolatry is settling for shadows. Shadows are not substance. While they may cast the outline of something, they are not what is pictured. Why focus on the shadow, when we can see the real thing?
Legalism as Idolatry

A most subtle kind of idolatry occurs in the church under the name of legalism. It appears to be utterly legal, but it is illegal, because it replaces a relationship with God through His covenant in Christ, with man’s own attempts through his own performance to make himself acceptable to the Almighty Creator God. Legalism denies the love and power of God in Jesus in the Gospels. Legalism has certain distinct features in the Bible and today:

2. Legalism emphasizes the externals and becomes preoccupied with trivia (Matthew 23:5, 6: 24-25).
3. Legalism makes things other than God absolute (Mark 7:5-9)
5. Legalism is insensitive to human need (Mark 3:1, 2; Luke 10:25-37).
7. Legalism develops into a religion of experts (Matthew 15:3-6; 23:3; 18:1-4).
10. Legalism denies your freedom to make your own decisions based on your personal experience with God (Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-7).

Legalism needs to be named for what it really is – idolatry, pure and simple. And to deal with idolatry, why not first take the “idolatry test.”

The Idolatry Test

It is fairly easy to detect the presence of idols in your life, that is, if you really want to know. Just ask yourself the following questions:

- What are my expectations of this idol (object, pursuit or activity)? Apart from providing for the necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter), do I expect that this object/activity/pursuit will provide for me those positive and ultimate assurances of security and satisfaction that only Jesus Christ can provide?

- What happens to me when someone touches my favorite idols, whether these may be objects, activities or pursuits? What kind of person do I become when someone seeks to topple my idol? Defensive, angry, retaliatory? (In the community where I live, I have noticed pick-up trucks with bumper-stickers saying, “you toucha my car, and I puncha you face in,” or “this truck insured by Smith & Wesson.” Have you ever met believers with similar attitudes, “You toucha my church, and…”?) Are there any “golden calves” that have been grazing contentedly in my life? When someone touches and topples such idols, they may turn out to become raging beasts.
• Do I view my success in life as being dependent on my idols or god-substitutes?

• Has my idol (object, activity or pursuit) invaded my life to the point that is now an addiction? An addiction is a pathological relationship to any activity, relationship, or pursuit designed to dull or remove pain that has life-damaging consequences. It is a stronghold (2 Cor. 10:1, 2) - something that I am unable break away from even though I know it is a sin. All beast worship (idolatry) leads to bondage and captivity, the spirit of Babylon. What is my beast? Do I become like a beast when someone touches my idol?

• Can I still live a joyful and fulfilled life that glorifies God even when my god-substitute (idol) is removed? Job said, “The Lord gave, the Lord took, Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21) Remember that it was not Satan who challenged God, but it was God who challenged Satan to consider Job’s conduct whether it spoke the truth about God even in the midst of adverse circumstances (Job 1:8).

Proclaiming the Second Angels’ Message

More than 200 years ago, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote about sin as building your identity – your self-worth and happiness – on anything other than God. Christian pastor and author, Tim Keller, in commenting on Kierkegaard’s statement, thus sees the Biblical definition of sin as idolatry…

“that puts the emphasis not as much on ‘doing bad things’ but on ‘making good things into ultimate things.’ Instead of telling them [people] they are sinning because they are sleeping with their girlfriends or boyfriends, I will tell them that they are sinning because they are looking to their romances to justify and save them, to give them everything they should be looking for from God. This idolatry leads to anxiety, obsessiveness, envy, and resentment. I have found that when you describe their lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not give much resistance. Then Christ and his salvation can be presented not (at this point) so much as their only hope for forgiveness, but as their only hope for freedom.”[4]

Every person must find some way to justify their existence, and to stave off the universal fear that they’re a “bum.” In our contemporary individualistic culture, we tend to look to our achievements, our social status, our talents, our love relationships. There is an infinite variety of identity-bases. This is where insecurity comes from, because we can never be sure that our personal idol will deliver what we expect, and that sets us up for disappointment. Continues Tim Keller…
“If you lose your identity through the failings of someone else, you will not just be resentful, but locked into bitterness. If you lose it through your own failings, you will hate or despise yourself as a failure as long as you live. Only if your identity is built on God and his love, says Kierkegaard, can you have a self that can venture anything, face anything. …An identity not based on God also leads inevitably to deep forms of addiction. When we turn good things into ultimate things, we are as it were, spiritually addicted. As in all addictions, we are in denial about the degree to which we are controlled by our god-substitutes. And inordinate love creates inordinate uncontrollable anguish if anything goes wrong with the object of our greatest hopes.”[5]

Our witnessing to others about our faith should not focus so much on telling people about their sins, but it is rather to tell them about the true source of their identity, in the hope that in the everlasting gospel they will discover the futility of their flawed methods of establishing their personal identity.

Notice how Ellen G. White similarly commented on how to address the role of idolatry among people today.

“The people of the world are worshiping false gods. They are to be turned from their false worship, not by hearing denunciation of their idols, but by beholding something better. God’s goodness is to be made known. "Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, that I am God" (Isaiah 43:12).”[6]

“Instead of disparaging Jacob’s well, Christ presented something infinitely better…He offered the woman something better than anything she possessed, even living water, the joy and hope of the gospel of His kingdom. This is an illustration of the way in which we are to work. It is of little use for us to go to pleasure lovers, theatergoers, horse racers, drunkards, gamblers, and scathingly rebuke them for their sins. This will do no good. We must offer them something better than that which they have, even the peace of Christ, which passeth all understanding.”[7] “These poor souls are engaged in a wild chase after worldly pleasure and earthly riches. They have no knowledge of anything more desirable. But games, theaters, horse races, will not satisfy the soul. Human beings were not created to be satisfied in this way, to spend their money for that which is not bread. Show them how infinitely superior to the fleeting joys and pleasures of the world is the imperishable glory of heaven. Seek to convince them of the freedom and hope and rest and peace there is in the gospel. "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst," Christ declared.”[8]

The Gospel Solution to Disunity in the Church

If the church is to give an authentic and credible witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, it must first overcome the disunity and fragmentation that so often exists with its own community. The major cause of disunity and strife in local congregations is, more often than not, based on the idolatry of the establishment and maintenance of personal identities based on our own works and accomplishments. Let go of all idolatry, the parading and promotion of our make-believe identities, and let self be lost in Jesus Christ and His cross. Unity will only come when we exalt,
live and preach the cross of Christ as Paul did.

- “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20 KJV).
- “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world (Galatians 6:14 KJV).

The Security of Your Identity in Christ

When we grasp the sufficiency of the cross, there is no longer any need to live in a paralyzing fear of the coming time of trouble. We belong to Jesus, and He will take care of us. Neither will there be a need to live competitively against other believers. Here is a listing of a few of the covenant benefits available to us now, and which Jesus freely dispenses to us on basis of His covenant fidelity. These benefits will securely guard us against all the deceptions of the enemy, for such deceptions sprout in the soil of building and chasing identities based on our own accomplishments.

In Christ we have…

- **Identity** which is unassailable and rock-sure. Because Christ has purchased us with a price, we are now His and we belong to Him forever. We know who we are because it is rooted in who He is.

- **Security**, an assurance of salvation built on God’s word and not our own performance.

“*This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all he has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day*” (John 6:39,40).

- **Victory** as Jesus shares with us His victory. Though we were not present in person at Calvary’s cross, yet in Christ as our representative we were legally present. The victory of the Lamb *there* is so secure, that we can literally say, We won! and celebrate that in Christ we are seated with Him in heavenly places. Our legal position in Christ is so secure that the enemy cannot touch us.
dignity because we know that God has created us in His very own image, and we thus derive our self-worth and significance from what He thinks of us, expressed in both creation and Calvary’s cross. “Kneeling in faith at the cross, he [the believer] has reached the highest place to which man can attain.”[9]

a new history because He with His precious blood, blots out our old history with all the sins of our past, and gives us a new history based on the accomplishments of Jesus Christ. His history now becomes our story as signified through baptism where we are dead, buried, risen, and ascended with Christ.

a new destiny, not only a place in His kingdom, but a custom-designed life purpose, that the rest of our life may now be our best life for Him.

An understanding of your secure Bible identity, accompanied by an honest processing of all the events of your past history, will be the most secure protection against all idolatry, which of all sins is the most subtle and besetting.

“Our confession of His faithfulness is Heaven's chosen agency for revealing Christ to the world. We are to acknowledge His grace as made known through the holy men of old; but that which will be most effectual is the testimony of our own experience. We are witnesses for God as we reveal in ourselves the working of a power that is divine. Every individual has a life distinct from all others, and an experience differing essentially from theirs. God desires that our praise shall ascend to Him, marked by our own individuality. These precious acknowledgments to the praise of the glory of His grace, when supported by a Christ-like life, have an irresistible power, that works for the salvation of souls”[10]

The world does not need our doctrinal formulations or theological constructs. It just needs to hear the story of Jesus told as your very own story. The credibility and effectiveness of our work rests on this. Share with others how Jesus gave you victory to overcome the deceptiveness of both Babylon and the beast, basing your identity on your own attainments, and then tell them about the joy and freedom that is now yours in Jesus Christ.

Life Applications

Points to Ponder –

1. What were your previous views on the Biblical meaning of Babylon? Did that view include “idolatry?”
2. Give your own definition of idolatry.

3. What are the sources of your identity as a person?

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*Note: If you are enjoying these chapters and wish to have Dr. Thomsen come to do a seminar at your church or organization, please visit www.streamofhealing.org.*
Summer Special: Ohio Camp Meeting, Re-Imagined

Submitted: Aug 7, 2013
By Debonnaire Kovacs
This is the second in a series of stories on camp meetings in the North American Division.

Bloggish Bit:
Last week I shared some memories of Ohio camp meetings in the 70s and 80s. I have been so far unable to collect hard data on those camp meetings and why they changed. What I remember is that in the 90s and early 2000s, conference leaders began warning constituents that offering (and possibly tithe, but I’m not sure if camp meetings are paid for with tithes) had dropped low enough that the future of camp meeting was in jeopardy. After a few years of these warnings, one year it was announced that there would be no camp meeting the following year.

Remember, this is only my own memories at this point. I recall what an uproar there was, and I recall pointing out (in some irritation, I admit) that we had been warned for some time, and that if we really wanted camp meetings, we needed to put our money where our mouths were.

I think it was a fairly brief time that there were no camp meetings—2-3 years, maybe? Then we had a weekend camp meeting or two, and some regional ones. This year, I had the opportunity to go back to Ohio camp meeting, and I was shocked at first—no locating, no parking problem, all meetings in the academy chapel?!

However, I was extremely impressed by my experiences there, and it was because of that that I decided to write this series. This week, Ohio’s turn to explain about their --

Camp Meeting Re-Imagined

A few years ago, some pastors came to Ohio Conference President Raj Attiken with some ideas. They really wanted to recreate camp meeting. Attiken, author of a small book called refreshed: A New Paradigm for Church Leadership, has advocated for years that conferences should be “congregation-centric”—that is, ideas and missions should be led by local congregations and individuals, rather than “from the top down,” as is our traditional model. He and his conference colleagues have pretty much reinvented Ohio Conference actions to reflect this conviction. So he said, “If you can do it yourselves, go for it.” He gave them backing, approval, and much prayer.

A small committee of pastors and others who were willing to volunteer their time gathered to make plans, and a new camp meeting was born—one that brought only hundreds instead of thousands of people together, and took a great deal less money (largely because all speakers and teachers are volunteers), but one in which the spiritual gains were as impressive as ever they were at a multi-thousand-attendee camp meeting.
I talked with the three committee members I saw up front the most: Toledo First Church Pastor Mike Fortune, Wooster Church Pastor Lori Farr, and Heidi Shoemaker, who wears several hats at once at the Ohio Conference: Communications Secretary, Assistant to the President, and Women’s Ministries Director. I asked each one five basic questions. Their answers are below, along with occasional comments or clarifications from me, in italics.

**AT: What was your goal in beginning a new form of Ohio camp meeting? Why was it important to you?**

Fortune: My goal in beginning it again was to connect my children with the Jesus-focused, grace-based Adventist pastors and storytellers I met when I first arrived in Ohio in 1997. These guys like Roy Nelson and Ed Marton and Victor Brown "get it" and I wanted my children to hear more about Jesus and the Adventist church specifically from them.

Farr: One of our main goals was to invite people to Jesus, and we especially wanted a family-oriented environment. It was awesome to see families come together. Especially this year, [their third] everything seemed to just come together. We had 90 kids including the young adults, and they really got involved and participated. The intergenerational worship* seemed better than other years. We had done that from the beginning, but this year it really was exciting.

*Each morning and evening, the camp meeting offered an intergenerational worship for all ages. Everyone sang “kids’ songs, old people songs, and young people songs”—by my definition. Kids often went en masse to the front to lead, especially if actions were required. DLK*

Shoemaker: I wasn’t here when they’d discontinued camp meeting; I wanted to help facilitate what the pastors wanted to see happen. It was great, watching the intergenerational relationships grow and people being blessed.

**AT: What is your personal role in the new, smaller camp meeting?**

Farr: I serve on the planning committee, teach a class, and am in charge of the information booth. I also do the early morning meeting, Soul Café. I plan a theme that goes along with the camp meeting theme [this year, More About Jesus], make handouts and so on, and teach it.

Shoemaker: As assistant to the president, I’m kind of the conference representative. I do the coordination and liaison with the academy [Mt. Vernon Academy, where Ohio Camp Meeting has been held for decades] and with churches and so on. Also, as communications director, I’m in charge of all the publicity that goes out there—website, marketing, Visitor information, and so on. I’m also in charge of the Women’s Tea, with my Women’s Ministries hat on!
Fortune: I am a member of the camp meeting planning committee which consists of willing pastor friends and conference employees and church members who donate their time planning then implementing a full week of camp meeting the second full week of June each year.

[Fortune also served as general moderator, announcement maker, and drummer-up of volunteer campers for such things as night watch, helped with the juniors and with afternoon activities and mission projects, and, with some other pastors, even babysat so women could go to the tea.]

AT: What kinds of responses are you getting from attendees?

Shoemaker: They really like the family feel. They like the variety of speakers, the topics covered, the worship together, most just say it’s getting better every year, and that they all come back home with a feeling of spiritually having their cups filled and feeling blessed. Maybe that sounds clichéd, but it’s what really matters most.

Fortune: Those attending love it. Especially the kids. I was especially proud of this year's camp meeting since it wove together so many interesting contributions from various congregations in Ohio about the 150th anniversary of the Adventist Church. Former Ohio pastor Dr. Merlin Burt, head of the White Estate (or whatever his real title is) was our featured weekend speaker. But Akron First's puppet children’s story [Sabbath morning] about the Great Disappointment captivated the kids. Pastor Mike Barnett's connections through Biblical storytelling yielded Kharinne Shenaul dressed as Ellen White, Her presentation of two visions from our heritage in vivid language earned her a definite invite back. And Lancaster SDA Church's Trina Schone moved everyone present with her specifically written-for-camp meeting songs and piano concert Saturday night. How she's not playing on Christian radio right now next to Mark Schultz I have no idea!

Farr: Positive! One of the cool things that I’ve appreciated is the comments from people. We’ve done surveys at the end each year, and we’ve done everything we can to implement every suggestion we can. People appreciate it, and feel like they’re contributing

AT: Give me a couple of examples of problems you’ve faced and the results.

Fortune: Well, this year weather forced us to re-arrange our afternoon service projects and field trips. And those camping and in pop-up RVs had to tear down for one day as 60mph sheer winds were forecast. So we had one interesting night camping in the Mount Vernon Academy tornado shelters. But school officials took over ahead of time and clearly told us what to do and everyone survived including all the pets! Since this is a volunteer camp meeting, we've learned to rely more on the lay people who in the feedback forms have told us pastors they're willing to help. So
this year, background-checked and pastor-recommended laypersons led and assisted in children's divisions, hall monitoring the dorm hallways after lights out, chaperoning field trips, even leading two of the featured presentations this year; one on inductive Bible study and another in a cooking school.

[I can testify to the excitement and nerves of tearing down all camping and spending the night camping out in the cafeteria basement, watching TVs that showed thousands of lightning strikes per hour along the storm front, heading our way at an unnerving velocity. I’ve wondered if that night, and the resetting up of tents and so forth that ensued the next morning, actually added to the sense unity we felt at this camp meeting.]

Farr: Even when people have had negative feedback, they’ve been positive about things they didn’t like and added suggestions. For example, in the afternoons, at first, we only had activities or mission projects. But we had some elderly people who didn’t want to go swimming or bowling, and couldn’t really help with mission projects, either. They said they ended up sitting around a lot. They wanted an afternoon speaker instead, so we got that. In fact, this year we had two afternoon speakers.

Shoemaker: The biggest issue we’ve had is trying to make sure we have enough people to cover everything. We’re just volunteering, and there are so few of us. We want to make sure everyone has their needs met—we’re customer service based. It can get tricky.

**AT: What’s your favorite thing about the new camp meeting?**

Farr: Soul Café! Am I allowed to say that, even though I teach it? I just love it! I don’t want to be the preacher. I don’t want to just stand up there and do a presentation. I love the conversations that go on all over the room [Soul Café is done at tables in the cafeteria.] I want to hear everyone getting into the word and sharing why it moved them and what it meant to them and how God’s word is moving in them and changing their lives.

Shoemaker: I especially love the musical times—I loved getting together with other musicians from all over the state. I had a blast Sabbath afternoon when we jammed in the gazebo.

Fortune: My fave thing was hearing my (now 11-year-old) daughter gather the courage required to sing about Jesus being her "All in All" on Sabbath afternoon during the Ohio Has Gifts concert featuring the spiritual gifts of people of all ages from Ohio's congregations.

Speaking as a last-minute attendee, I can attest that this tiny, different kind of camp meeting definitely filled my cup! It’s not that the old camp meetings weren’t family-friendly—of course they were. But it reminds me of the difference between the small women’s retreats we used to
have at the church camp, and the big, glossy ones we’ve had more recently at conference centers—both a blessing, both empowered by the Holy Spirit, but different kinds of blessings. God bless camp meetings, big and small!