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The Sacred Art of Living: Debbonaire Kovacs has a dream of attending an Adventist church that will help her develop a "Sacred Arts Committee" without shooting down "everything we try to do that hasn’t been done before." She wants a church that recognizes that each member is a whole person who responds to physical surroundings that can enhance or depress their sense of the presence of God....

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leaders during the 1960s, as Martin Luther King came into his own....

**Three Adventist Institutions Start Higher Education Collaborative in North America:** Three Adventist universities in the North American Division are exploring ways to cut costs through joint ventures and collaboration on their campuses in Nebraska, Tennessee, and Texas....

**Native American Camp Meeting:** The next in this summer's AT series on camp meetings features a Native American event near Syracuse, NY, where the Three Sisters are served up for meals, and singing is done in the Oneida language....

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Why Are Adventists Joining the Ranks of the “Nones?”

By Loren Seibold, August 26, 2013

_This is the first article in a two-part series. An increasing number of young Americans appear uninterested in being part of a church. How can we reach them?_

Andrea is 28 years old. She’s lively, fashionable and unafraid to speak her mind. She grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist family and still has generally positive feelings toward the church, though she attends only rarely. “Here’s how I see it,” she says. “I’m a spiritual person. I try to educate myself about spiritual things. But I just don’t think you need to go to church to have a relationship with God.” She reads Christian books, but admits she also enjoys studying Native American spirituality.

Her fiancé, Vince, a few years older, agrees. “I’m content where my heart is,” he says.

“But don’t you feel the need to be part of a structured church family like the one you grew up in?” I ask.

“It’s not high on my list of priorities,” he says. “As long as you’re a good person, you shouldn’t have to declare yourself in one denomination or another.”

Pastors often hear some version of this scenario, but never more frequently than now. The number of people, especially young adults, who have little interest in organized religion and claim no church affiliation is rising. Andrea and Vince are good citizens, loyal friends, loving family members and responsible employees. They aspire to a happy, loving life together. But, church doesn’t seem to them to be a necessary part of that picture.

**Who are the “Nones”?**

In a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center’s Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, they found an increase in the number of Americans unaffiliated with any faith community. Their research revealed that 20 percent of Americans listed their church affiliation as “none”—up from 15 percent in just five years. Even more startling: among the Millennial generation (born 1981-1994), 32 percent have no religious affiliation. Extrapolating that trend line, Adventist sociologist Monte Sahlin, director of research and special projects for the Ohio Conference of the Adventist denomination, sees that “by 2020 the ‘nones’ may be the majority of American young adults, and by 2050 a majority of all Americans.”

Many pastors say they have seen it coming. “Young adults tell me they love God and are serving Him in the real world, and they don’t need to be associated with anyone or any group to do that,” says Jennifer Deans, pastor of Community Praise Center, a church planting project of the Potomac Conference in Dulles, Virginia, that targets this demographic.

Raj Attiken, president of the Ohio Conference, adds that the change in attitude toward religion is reflected in the faces you’ll see in most Adventist sanctuaries. “One can surmise, from the clearly evident aging of most of our congregations, that many of the young adults who are missing are likely to be ‘nones,’” he says. “The values, world views and thinking of emerging generations are being shaped by a societal and cultural context that is increasingly foreign and distant from our church culture.”

That doesn’t mean the unaffiliated are uninterested in spiritual things. Pastor Deans insists the young adults she meets “want an honest relationship with God.”

Sahlin points to a key finding of the Pew study: “Only 2 percent of the ‘nones’ are atheists, and only 3 percent are agnostics,” he notes. “Three quarters of the 20 percent are ‘spiritual but not religious.’ They believe in God and they pray, some daily, yet they do not see religion as helpful in meeting their spiritual needs.”
Rajkumar Dixit, who for the past 11 years helped pastor New Hope Church in Fulton, Maryland, for the Chesapeake Conference, explains that even though they have spiritual interests, the “nones” process religious language differently. “When you use a term like ‘true believer,’ I understand that you mean a concrete, absolute, unchangeable theology. A ‘none’ doesn’t understand that. Their definition of truth is how it relates to their life. Whatever part of spirituality works for them is their truth.” He believes that denominational connection, seen by us as an asset, is to them a roadblock. “The effect of postmodernism, secularism and globalism means corporate identity isn’t very important,” Dixit adds. “They may still want the feeling of belonging, though not to a corporate brand, but to a group of people who have similar experiences.”

Are We the Problem?

Our pluralistic culture has played a large part in shaping these attitudes. At the same time, all of the leaders I talked to felt the church (Adventists and the others who’ve presided over Christianity during the rise of the “nones”) has to shoulder some of the blame.

Christopher Thompson, a young associate pastor at Ephesus Church in Columbus, Ohio, (part of the Allegheny West Conference), is blunt: “I believe that, at the bottom of all of this, is one main issue: the church is irrelevant to people’s everyday lives. Too many are convinced that the church is determined to ignore where they really live and what’s really going on in the world.” This disconnect hit him hard when he worked in urban Pittsburgh, a place with many Christian churches but little spiritual vitality. “The church is preaching a gospel of health, wealth and happiness, but poor urban dwellers are seeing none of it,” he says.

Rubén Ramos, multilingual ministries director for the Columbia Union Conference, sees a parallel dynamic in Hispanic congregations. “In immigrant churches, the first generation of young adults is very close to the church,” he says. But, as the church produces second and third generations, he believes these young people are influenced by American culture. “The immigrant churches don’t always meet the needs of their own new generations,” Ramos says. “So, disinterest in church affiliation is much the same as in American churches.”

Citing the Barna Group’s David Kinnaman, Attiken says, “New generations of Christians find the church to be overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive and doubtless (no tolerance for questions or doubt).” He adds, “Younger generations of Americans have been shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance. They have also been conditioned to be more eclectic in terms of religion and sources of authority. The Adventist Church, on the other hand, has offered a protective, predictable, staid experience to its members, with a high moralist content.”

Predictable and protective aren’t what the “nones” are looking for. What they value, says Pastor Deans, is authenticity. “The picture of the church they sometimes paint is of hypocrites who act one way when they are at church, and another the rest of the week—which isn’t necessarily true, but perception is 90 percent of reality,” she notes. Perhaps that’s why the “nones” are more attracted to what Pastor Dixit calls “the bare product,” which is “following Jesus, not the denominational experience, culture or brand.”

Turning It Around

How can we bring back the growing number of Americans unaffiliated with a faith community? It may not be easy, warns Sahlin. According to the Pew study, “Only 10 percent of ‘nones’ are looking for a religion that meets their needs; 88 percent aren’t. The nine out of 10 who are not looking have lost all interest in the possibility that religion might be helpful.”

What these new generations want isn’t church as usual, or they’d already be worshipping with us. Deans thinks “young adults have little tolerance for tradition for tradition’s sake,” she says. “They are in search of the journey, not dogma,” observes Dixit.

How comfortable can we make them, then, in a faith community that guards our orthodoxy so carefully? Attiken suggests that, for this group, churches will need to create “spaces where young adults can safely explore their questions, doubts and concerns;” where no conversation is off limits; where believers listen as well as teach. Because churches are by nature inertial organizations that struggle with change, that will be difficult for some congregations. Adventists are accustomed to asserting certainty and defending the truth, not to discussing doubts and uncertainties—much less hearing truths they hold precious be regarded as irrelevant.

Ramos believes securing their interest in the church starts before children reach young adulthood. “Immigrant parents have such a financial struggle when they come here that they may neglect some of those early spiritual lessons, like prayer, Bible study and church participation,” he says. “The children are influenced more by school than by their family and the church.” Ramos feels it’s about setting priorities in the new cultural setting. “Hebrews says that ‘Noah built an ark to save his family.’ But, we sometimes work ourselves to death
to buy things for our family rather than building religious values in them,” he proposes.

Making Connections

It should come as no surprise to those of us who have studied Jesus’ example that relationships are key to reaching the “nones.” Deans says, “The young adults who stay connected with a church are the ones who have been given a true voice and role to play. They’ve been able to form peer relationships as well as intergenerational relationships and feel that church is an extension of their family,” she adds.

Attiken agrees that churches would do well to make “opportunities for youth and young adults to build and maintain meaningful relationships with adult spiritual mentors who are able to influence their spiritual formation in positive, wholesome ways.” Participation is the key factor in immigrant churches too. “If the young people don’t participate, if they don’t feel ownership, then they don’t care,” says Ramos.

Therezinha Barbalho, pastor of the Brazilian Community Church in Richmond, Virginia, (affiliated with the Potomac Conference), attempts to “provide activities that can compete with the activities of the world. That’s practically impossible,” she admits, but with tremendous effort she’s organized a vigorous program of social activities—sports, ice-skating, paintball—to secure strong bonds of friendship in the congregation. “When they’re connected in social activities, they’re more open for the spiritual ones,” she says.

Some in the church have assumed that involvement means congregational leadership, such as sitting on a church board or being an elder. Others have suggested seating our young adults on denominational committees, such as a conference or union committee. These are important functions, but not necessarily where one experiences the church at its most rewarding and functional. While it may be necessary, church leadership is also the realm of power struggles, money problems, occasional harsh discussions and hours spent on mundane organizational maintenance—hardly encouraging to the skittish young person. Because they’re not as interested in the church as a “brand,” young adults value meaningful service more than keeping the machinery of the church running.

I once sat by a “none” on a flight who told me (upon learning that I am a pastor) that she had no interest in church. But, she did believe in God, and as we talked, she admitted that if she found a church that was doing serious work to lift up her community, she’d want to take her children to participate in that. She wanted the experience of happy, meaningful involvement without a lot of religion.

“The world is becoming increasingly secular,” says Sahlin. “We can’t continue to operate on the assumption that, if we give them Bible studies from a King James Version, people will get it. Yet, we can’t give up trying to reach them either, if we’re to be faithful to the gospel commission.” That leaves a challenge for us that we’ll only be able to meet with prayer, creativity and dependence upon God’s promises.

Loren Seibold is a pastor in the Ohio Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This article is republished with the permission of the Columbia Union Conference Visitor.

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A new documentary about the Adventist faith produced for release on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the United States by an award-winning film-maker from outside the denomination is being shown in communities across the country and overseas. If there is none scheduled near you, steps can be taken to make it happen. After more than a year of filming around the world, "The Adventists 2" is also available on DVD. The film is the sequel to the critically acclaimed first documentary "The Adventists, Part 1" which is now airing on PBS stations nationwide. The production crew filmed in Haiti, the Amazon region of Brazil, Malawi, China, Peru and the Dominican Republic. It explores how Adventists are addressing important health issues around the world and doing it out of a century-old tradition of medical missions. "This is the most ambitious film project we have undertaken," says Emmy-winning director Martin Doblmeier. "All of us have been inspired to see how men and women with the talent to heal give of their gifts to help those less fortunate in some of the most remote regions in the world. It’s a compelling story because it reflects the very best of the human spirit." August 31 the documentary will show at the University Church in Loma Linda, California; October 5 at Sligo Church in Takoma Park, Maryland; October 8 at Canadian University College near Red Deer, Alberta; October 10 at Pacific Union College in California's Napa Valley; October 25 in Salt Lake City; and November 16 at the Kettering Church in Dayton, Ohio. Additional showings are being scheduled daily and an updated list can be seen at the Web site of the production company: www.journeyfilms.com

The Journey Films production company has also created the documentaries on the Washington National Cathedral, the Taize Christian community, and a film about the Amish entitled The Power of Forgiveness as well as the stories of a number of noted Christian figures. The company was founded in 1983 by Doblmeier as a television and film production company specializing in religion, faith and spirituality. All together it has produced more than 25 major documentary films that have aired on PBS, the ABC and NBC television networks, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), the History Channel and other networks in the United States and abroad.

Journey’s first theatrical release, Bonhoeffer, opened in cities across the U.S. in 2003 and internationally to wide critical acclaim. It premiered on PBS in 2006. Later that spring public television aired Albert Schweitzer: Called to Africa, a docu-drama that won the prestigious Gabriel Award. To date, Journey has won five Gabriel Awards. The Power of Forgiveness won the Sun Valley Film Festival and the International Film and Video Festival. The film on the National Cathedral won an Emmy Award.

*If you are interested in seeing a showing scheduled in your community or institution, you can leave a message on the Adventist Today web site (not in comments, but in the private message area) with your location, name, phone number and Email address and AT will place this in the hands of the coordinating team.*

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Adventists Remember the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King and the Impact on the Church

By AT News Team, August 28, 2013

Adventists were present on the mall in the nation's capital in 1963 and heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., make his famous "I have a dream ..." speech. Adventists supported the civil rights movement he headed and they were there again last Sabbath (August 24) and today, remembering it after 50 years. There were also Adventists who felt that the March for Jobs and Freedom was a mistake, that were of the opinion that King was "an agitator with Communist connections," that God intended racial segregation. There may yet be some of similar views, although today they are less likely to express them. Dr. Mervyn Warren, dean of the school of religion at Oakwood University, believes that King "beta-tested" the famous speech at an event on the Oakwood campus in Huntsville, Alabama, 17 months earlier on March 19, 1962. Warren has a recording from the 1962 rally in Oakwood's gym organized by local civil rights leaders and Adventist students. You can hear clips from it at the link at the bottom of this story and those clips clearly include lines that became much more widely circulated after the 1963 speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Anna Buchanan, a member of the Dupont Park Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington, D.C., was part of the march 50 years ago at 27 years of age and shared some recollections last week in the denomination's North American Division newsletter. "Some people were concerned that there would be retaliation. However, once the buses dropped us off and we reached downtown, we came face-to-face with many different races. That day we were just one group of people that melded together for one purpose." Buchanan and her husband had experienced racial discrimination when they attempted to purchase a home in the Washington suburb of Suitland, Maryland. "The real estate company told them that the home they wanted was unavailable," NAD NewsPoints reported, and they were directed to a model home elsewhere. But when civil rights leaders arranged for "a Caucasian couple [who] went to the same neighborhood to inquire about purchasing the same home ... it was for sale." With this evidence in hand, civil rights workers met with top officials of the real estate company and the Buchanans were able to purchase the home they wanted. They "later learned that the company had a designated street in the neighborhood for African American families."

The Adventist denomination had its own moment of confrontation a year earlier when the General Conference (GC) Session was held in San Francisco in 1962. More than a thousand people joined a demonstration that drew media attention for many days and as a result the denomination's leaders decided that they must include an African-American minister among the top officers. Pastor Frank L. Peterson was elected a vice president of the GC at that session, the first person of color to hold such a high office.

Despite what happened at the GC Session a year earlier, denominational leaders subtly tried to discourage Adventist participation in the 1963 march. The August 22, 1963, issue of the Review and Herald had a cover article by Ellen G. White with the headline, "Have Peace One With Another." Although it is not clear that White intended the piece to relate to ethnic issues when she wrote it, it told Adventists that "everything in social life must be held subordinate to the claims of religion [and] there is great temptation to speak of the supposed wrongs of some."

An editorial the previous week had told of an injustice in a New York City criminal case which had nothing to do with race but gave an opportunity to urge moderation. In the September 5, 1963, issue there was a letter from the GC president, Pastor R. R. Figuhr, quoting former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and urging "the middle of the road" as a "good philosophy for Seventh-day Adventists. ... We have had many forms of extremism and liberalism down through the years," Figuhr wrote. "The writings of Sister White are replete with counsels to avoid every suggestion of extremism."

In January (1964) Pastor Charles Bradford, then president of the Lake Region Conference who would in the 1980s become the first African American to serve as president of the NAD, wrote privately to Figuhr regarding the impact of the civil rights movement on the Adventist Church. Harold Lee and Monte Sahlin published the letter for the first time in their 2005 biography, Brad: Visionary Spiritual Leadership.

"Dear Elder Figuhr, I have a great deal of respect for you. It is my firm belief that you possess rare qualities of leadership. But with all due respect to your position as our esteemed leader, I feel constrained to say that your recent letter to the believers, in the January 2 issue of the Review & Herald is definitely out of harmony with the time in which we live, as well as, the timeless counsels of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. Having nothing positive and encouraging to say to 45,000 loyal Seventh-day Adventists of color, who live in the context of
present-day society and who must constantly battle with the stern realities of life, we certainly must not revert to the 1904-1909 era for our framework of reference. The social world of today is just as different from the world of threescore years ago as is the world of science and technology. If Jesus were here in the flesh today, He would certainly pronounce a woe upon the Pharisees who pay tithe and make disciples yet have respect of persons. The issue is moral. He quoted James 2:8-9 and he quoted from an Ellen White article in the Review & Herald of April 2, 1895, that specifically addressed "what should be done for the colored race."

Bradford quoted White to the GC president; "Is not this prejudice against the colored people on the part of the white people similar to that which was cherished by the Jews against the Gentiles? They cultivated the idea until it became deep-rooted that the Gentile should not share the privileges of light and truth that were given to the Jews. They believed that the Jews alone should be recipients of heavenly grace and favor. Christ worked throughout his life to break down this prejudice."

"We are also doing our white believers a distinct disservice when we fail to declare unto them the whole counsel of God which includes particular instruction as to how they must regard their Negro brethren if they are to be saved," Bradford wrote. "How can we be silent on the matter and present it as an "option" or non-essential when great segments of our church membership do not understand that the frown of God is upon all who do not recognize and appreciate the dignity and intrinsic worth of every man? We must teach all of our people white and black that they cannot pray our Father when wounding Christ in the person of His saints. Politics is not involved here, nor can the issue under discussion be equated with a dispute between brothers over land ownership." More material is included in the book than Adventist Today has room to publish here.

By 2010 the majority of the membership of the Adventist Church in North America was made up of ethnic minorities. A third of Adventists in the U.S. are black, at least another quarter are Hispanic, Asian and Native American. The most widely known Adventists in America are African Americans such as Pastor Barry Black, chaplain of the U.S. Senate, and Dr. Ben Carson, a pediatric surgeon at Johns Hopkins University Medical Center in Baltimore who some believe will be the first Adventist to run for president of the United States.

Many Adventists participated in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s and a number continue to be involved today. They see their involvement as directly in line with the founders of the denomination who were part of the anti-slavery movement and the prohibition movement, as well as activists for health reform, dress reform, and school reform. Others feel that because civil rights deal with social justice it is too political and Adventists should stay out of it.

"The Adventist Church was impacted by the March in 1963," said Orlan Johnson, public affairs and religious liberty director for the NAD. "It not only changed America, but it also changed the world as we knew it. ... Nothing would ever remain the same. When you look at the diversity in our churches, from the members to the pastors to the leadership ... at every level, the impact of that march is evident in every corner of the Adventist movement."

Clips from Martin Luther King speech at Oakwood College on March 19, 1962:

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Three Adventist Institutions Start Higher Education Collaborative in North America

By the AT News Team, August 27, 2013

The publishing houses operated in the United States by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination may not be able to talk merger, but yesterday the Adventist Review announced that three educational institutions are planning a collaborative arrangement to save money and strengthen their offerings. Southern Adventist University (SAU) in Collegedale, Tennessee; Southwestern Adventist University (SWAU) in Keene, Texas; and Union College (UC) in Lincoln, Nebraska; have launched the Adventist Educational Alliance (AEA)

"We believe we can achieve some efficiencies that in turn will help us keep the cost of tuition from rising as rapidly," Dr. John Wagner, president of UC, was quoted. Dr. Gordon Bietz, president of SAU, noted the rapid change in higher education, including the establishment of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) available for free from leading universities around the world. These MOOCs do not usually, in and of themselves, lead to a degree, but their availability is changing the landscape, he said. "We want to make sure that we’re not left behind," Bietz explained.

Other Adventist universities and colleges may join the consortium, Bietz said. The question of whether Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan; and Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama; will participate is a bit more complicated because those two schools are connected directly to the denomination's General Conference instead of the North American Division.

Among the steps contemplated is using one recruiter to represent the three schools when visiting Adventist secondary schools and events, along with finding a way to merge some “back office” administrative functions. These and other ideas could save money for the institutions. Bietz said SAU is aligning its school year with the other two schools in order to allow students to take online and other courses from the related institutions. Cost savings could help keep tuition costs lower.

Together, the three institutions enroll roughly 15 percent of the total enrollment in Adventist colleges and universities in North America, which was about 28,300 last year. SAU had nearly 2,700 students last year, UC 800 and SWAU about 700. Registration is currently underway at all three schools and numbers for the new school year are not yet available. These three are generally seen as the more conservative of the denomination's colleges and universities.

All together there are 16 Adventist institutions in the United States and Canada. Loma Linda University is the denomination's health sciences center, the only one with a medical school. Two of the others--Kettering College in Dayton, Ohio, and Adventist University of Health Sciences in Orlando--are operated by health care organizations affiliated with the denomination. Oakwood University is the only Adventist institution among the historically black colleges and universities in the U.S. Andrews University (AU) in Michigan is the home of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, as well as a business school and other graduate programs. Griggs University operates as an extension branch of AU. La Sierra University, Pacific Union College and Walla Walla University (WWU) are spread about equidistance along the Pacific coast where the largest Adventist population resides. WWU is the only Adventist institution with an engineering school and Canadian University College in Red Deer, Alberta, is the only Adventist institution in Canada. Washington Adventist University is located in the U.S. capital and has a large, non-traditional enrollment, including graduate programs, as well as a traditional college program. Weimar College in the mountains near Sacramento is a very small, independent and unaccredited institution which surprised everyone recently by announcing that it is seeking accreditation. Atlantic Union College in Massachusetts lost its accreditation and ceased operations, then announced non-accredited Bible worker training courses and recently announced that it continues to seek approval to reopen.

Dr. Larry Blackmer, education vice president for the NAD, voiced his approval of the new collaborative. "The future of Adventist higher education lies in finding ways to collaborate and work together to enhance the instructional value to students and to facilitate the mission-driven focus of Adventist education," Blackmer told the Adventist Review. "The alliance … is exciting and at the same time challenging. Anytime change is in the wind, it is always unsettling. These administrations need to be supported and encouraged to build the best higher educational system we can for our young people."
A previous collaboration among the denomination's higher education institutions in North America, Adventist Colleges Abroad, has by all accounts been very successful. Over the years, the question has been raised a number of times as to whether the Adventist community has sufficient resources to sustain all of these institutions.

Portions of this report are from an Email bulletin released by the Adventist Review, written by its news editor, Mark Kellner.

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My church, My mother, My god

Submitted: Aug 26, 2013

By Danny Bell I haven’t always been in the church. As a young and naive twelve-year-old SDA kid, I decided I wanted to discover the world and what it had to offer. I was in for a rough and deadly ride.

Sex, drugs and rock-n-roll were only part of it. There is an underbelly. The loneliness, the fear, the self loathing, feelings of being lost, feelings of escape, feelings of suicide—all there waiting for anyone who wishes to tangle with the dark side.

While in the world however, I didn’t expect this—God did not leave me. All along he was there, and thankfully he gave me a final call to come back to him at the age of twenty one. I grasped at the opportunity, and he took me in like the prodigal son of old. No judgement, just big love. 1985 was my new birthday.

Attending church was like being close to God. Church life was as much my saviour as Jesus was, it seemed. Don’t get me wrong, I was having a true conversion, and Jesus guided me through many minefields—much to learn and much to unlearn. The problem for someone like me, though, was coming from such an extreme lifestyle to a clean, vegetarian, suit-wearing one. I embraced it with white knuckles. I never wanted to go back and so immersed myself in Adventism lock, stock and barrel.

I wanted to put distance between myself and the world so much that I turned from it in ways I now see were not helpful. I was so wrapped up in my own personal journey that I could not see that it wasn’t all about being saved. Immersed in church life, I became unwittingly devoted to getting a reputation as a “good clean Adventist young man.” I found acceptance and status in my new world of comfort, and the church, like a mother, gave me a warm place to grow.

Conservative members were quick to “teach me” the ropes. I was heavily into our doctrine (which I still am) and embraced certain lines of thought on offer if you wanted to be a true SDA—tying a Windsor knot, veganism, tithing, quietness in the sanctuary, spending three hours a day with God, the evil of drums, and the wicked, wicked world out there. Church life made me want to stay forever and never change the system of belonging and reward. I was somebody now, but in the world I was nobody.

But alas, the church had not only become my mother, it had become my god.

It would take being in the church for a further 28 years to see more clearly Gods plan for me. I have now transitioned from being church-centric to God-centric. I no longer feel the need to gain all comfort from my church, as important as that is. It is God who comforts; the church helps but I no longer feel the need to breast-feed.

In my journey, I saw how easy it is to get ‘stuck’ in a maternal relationship with the church. The truth is many of us don’t come to church to be transformed, but to participate in comforting rituals that have changed little since our childhood.* One can get stuck and not progress because there is a strong reward for participation and sameness. High achievement can be seen as having a position in the church that gives a sense of purpose and status. The feeling is that God is blessing if we and our children are in the church, and they are doing well at school, and they marry other Adventists to produce perfect babies.

I became disquieted. Surely this was not the ultimate? I started asking questions. I began to gravitate away from domestic church life and found myself asking God what the next step was? I had a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo, not happy just to float along in a cocoon insulated from the world. Are we to just keep coming to church once a week going through the motions? Is being happy and comfortable in the church my goal? Is it all about personal piety and waiting for the Second Coming, or is there something else that needs to be done? The world was calling me once again, but in a different way. I had sympathy for the lost and could no longer justify that the world was a place to be feared and resisted.
My previous time in the world helped me see certain things more clearly than if I had never left the church. I’m not advocating we become part of the world to gain this insight, but we do need to be in touch with it. I would be lying if I said I didn’t secretly wish my fellow church compatriots had time in the world for a bit of it to rub off on them. My experience in the world for all of its danger has made me know extreme good and extreme evil which is a thing I find church lifers struggle to understand. You can’t know what it’s like to be lost, without hope, without God unless you have been there—it’s horrible. To be rescued by God from this nightmare is an experience some will never know. I have never forgotten the hole from which I was rescued.

Passion for lost souls runs deep with those who were once lost themselves. They know what it’s like, and so they have mercy and see great potential and an urgency to bring sinners in. When the church was my mother and god, the world was the enemy. People coming into the church from the world with new ideas meant change, and change meant danger. If you are trying to change my church, you are trying to change my GOD and HE is unchangeable! So I thought.

We need to ask ourselves, Why is change met with a lot of opposition? If the church has become our god, then those who seek change are trying to change God! In this sense, church-centric people resist the world so strongly that they lose passion for the lost, settling for a small, selfish vision of comfort and reward.

An old song I used to listen to came on the radio the other day. I never really listened to the words when I was younger but I was blown away by the depth of meaning of "Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd. The song asks:

Did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts? Hot ashes for trees?
Hot air for a cool breeze? Cold comfort for change?
Did you exchange a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?

For me the song can be easily about being stuck in a church-centric culture. It talks of the exchanges that are made in order to stay safe. Have we traded our Bible heroes for modern day ghosts of success? Have we coveted the useless ashes of fame and popularity for the trees of heaven? Did we prefer the cold comfort of an ordered lifestyle rather than life-giving change? Have we missed the best offer in the world by trading a walk on part in God’s war for a safe place with a narrow view?

My favourite grandmother once said:

* We are soldiers of Christ; and those who enlist in His army are expected to do difficult work, work which will tax their energies to the utmost. We must understand that a soldier’s life is one of aggressive warfare, of perseverance and endurance. (E.G. White, Testimonies, Vol. 6, p. 140

If church is our god, then we are in a cage. There is a war going on right now, and the battle noise is getting closer. Being gently rocked in a perch by our god-mother is not realising our full potential. Church life is important, but there are souls lost and dying outside of our walls. Who will go, and who will say, “Here I am. Lord send me!”?

* Why Men Hate Going to Church, Murrow, pg24

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Chapter 23 of *The Monastery of the Heart* is called “Sacred Art.” In it, Joan Chittister speaks of the fact that historically, the great monasteries were centers of art and literature, seeing in art an attempt to capture at least a few slivers of reflections of the sublime and indescribable beauty that is God. She says,

> Basic to monasticism are the very qualities art demands of the artist: silence and contemplation, discernment of spirit and humility.

> Basic to art are the very qualities demanded of the monastic: single-mindedness, the search for beauty, immersion in praise and creativity.

I will never forget the day I received a flyer for a Sacred Arts Conference that would be hosted by the First Friends Church of Akron, Ohio. I had never seen the words “sacred” and “art” put together. This seems extraordinary to me now. At the time, I stopped in my tracks, halfway from the mailbox to the house, my heart literally beating faster. Sacred Arts! I loved the very sound of the phrase!

The flyer had a background of light, greenish-gray stones, like flagstones. It made me think of a castle courtyard, open to who knew what secret gardens. I tugged hastily at its fastenings, and it opened to a large sheet, beautiful in itself. It didn’t just talk about art, it displayed it. I saw a mission statement which, as far as I can remember, was something like “We, the Sacred Arts Committee (the Sacred Arts Committee! This church has a Sacred Arts Committee!) exist to discover and reclaim the place of the arts in worship, and to seek to reach the hearts of artists in our community.”

They’d reached me, that’s for sure!

The flyer contained a grid of dozens of classes and seminars in everything from worship music to pottery, storytelling to dance, ways to use art to enhance worship spaces, painting, drawing. . . I discovered I was holding my breath. I had to go to this! What were the dates? Was it possible? I had to go!

I did. That was the beginning of my dream of creating a homestead (here in Kentucky, as it turned out) where I could explore what I came to call “the sacred art of living”—close to nature, close to God, close to others. There was born in me a desire, today greater than ever, to see sacred arts “discovered and reclaimed” in my own denomination. When you think of it, probably all art of every kind was originally meant as worship. Sometimes, like everything else on this planet, it was used in worship of the fake imposter instead of the One True God. Does that disqualify all art for worship?

When the early colonists came to North American shores, they had seen enough of corruption and ostentatious display to last several
lifetimes. They knew too much about supposed church leaders who enriched the cathedrals and themselves at the expense of God’s beloved children. They wanted simplicity. So the white clapboard New England meetinghouse was born. That’s a thing of beauty in its own right. Simplicity is good. It’s art, or it can be. But it’s not the only art.

My dream is to attend an Adventist church that will let me have a Sacred Arts Committee without shooting down everything we try to do that “hasn’t been done before,” that recognizes that we are whole persons, not just minds, and that our physical surroundings can enhance or depress our sense of the presence of God. Imagine a church where the worship committee that meets each week makes sure the altar display, the art on the walls, the banners, if any, the music—all of it—the Bible readings, the children’s moment, and the sermon are on one beautiful, Biblical theme. Imagine that kinesthetic and visual, as well as auditory people, could find and worship the Spirit who created all art and all artistic natures. I do attend a church where all that happens. But my Adventist one is not open to such unseemly displays.

I have only one question: Do we really think so all-fired much of ourselves that we think we invented painting and dance and poetry and vision and sculpture and scent and drama and fragrance and color and . . . well, do we??

_______________________ Share your thoughts about this article:

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The Role of Culture When the Bible Has No Clear Command: Missiological Consequences

By Borge Schantz, August 28, 2013

An important global committee dealing with the issues of women’s ordination, consisting of 106 leading theologians and administrators, has, halfway through their deliberations, reported that a clear “thus says the Lord” has not been found in the Bible. This could mean that the final and decisive vote on the important question would have to be based on extra-biblical sources as committee members (and later the General Conference delegates) to a great extent will have to cast their vote on their personal “interpretation” of Bible texts which will be strongly based on their worldview, culture and customs. The role of women in the more than 1,500 cultures in the world differs tremendously, with the majority of Adventists living in areas where the ordination of women will be on top of the agenda.

Pope Francis, with some interesting and revolutionary suggestions for an “updated” Roman Catholic Church, seems on this issue to take a firm conservative stand. Most Roman Catholics live in continents with cultures where the role of women does not include whatever ordination bestows.

Palestinian Culture and Jesus

Perhaps there is a lesson in the biblical narrative of Christ's meeting with the Samaritan woman in John 4? God loved the world, including the people in all cultures, and gave His Son for their salvation. Christ came and lived among men and women. The Jewish community of Palestine, with its religion as well as its customs and culture, was chosen for His life on earth. In this way the incarnation made Jesus Jewish in all aspects. This implied some submission to human culture, even the following of the excessive interpretations of laws some of the Pharisees had introduced. However, in all His dealings Jesus was always obedient to Divine law. [1]

The strict Jewish rules on relationships between men and women were a part of the Jewish worldview of the time. When women in Palestine went about activities outside their homes, they were expected to cover their faces and be unobserved in public. A man was not allowed to be alone with a woman nor even look at a married woman. Christ followed these customs while in Palestine.

Christ did not openly stand up against Jewish cultural practices, not even those which perhaps were not completely “kosher.” However, Jesus, in a non-provocative way, went as far as He could in displaying some “counter-cultural” attitudes relative to the role of women in Jewish society. He granted women a place among the disciples (Matthew 12:49), revealed compassion for a despised woman (John 8:1-11), challenged women to higher levels of spirituality (Luke 10:38-42), shared with them in their grief (John 11:30-32) and accepted their grasp of theological issues (John 26:6-13, John 4:7-12). Jesus in His parables and illustrations mentioned incidents where women played important parts. [2] These texts are evidence of His positive attitude towards women. It can be seen that in His careful loyalty to the Jewish cultural framework, Jesus still revealed a full acceptance of the dignity and value of women.

Lessons from Samaria
“Now he had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4, NIV). At the well in Sychar a Samaritan woman came for water. Jesus asked her for a drink, which in itself indicated a kind of “meal fellowship” not in agreement with Jewish law. In obedience to His divine call He became engaged in an important dialogue with the Samaritan woman.

This incident is the first time Jesus in His ministry met and communicated with people in a culture different from the Jewish. Syncretistic elements in the Samaritan religion had influenced their customs in such a way that there existed a liberal and cosmopolitan atmosphere relative to the Jewish culture in which Christ was raised.

In Samaria Jesus and the disciples were outside the control of rabbis and other keen enforcers of Jewish customs, He could talk freely to a woman. He could not have done that in Jerusalem. It was a matter of cultural differences. Jesus was able to clearly distinguish between human cultural patterns and divine absolutes.

"Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'” (John 4:27 NIV)

In Samaria His disciples experienced the same freedom as Jesus. They were also free to follow “neutral” Samaritan cultural traits. However, they were still in their minds directed by a Jewish worldview and consequently faithful to Jewish culture and customs. Their reaction shows that they silently questioned His conversation with a woman.

**Did Peter also miss the lesson from Samaria?**

Peter was no doubt one of the “surprised” disciples in Sychar. In the Acts of the Apostles we have five evangelistic sermons where Peter, taking various angles, preached to different groups of people about the cardinal point in the Christian faith, the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

In the Resurrection narratives heavenly angels, supported by the risen Savior, told women to bring the great message to the disciples (Matthew 28:5-10; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:10-18). This means that one of the most important messages to the world was first revealed to women who became the primary messengers of the greatest event in human history. And Peter was the only disciple who went to the grave to confirm personally the message the women shared. However, he does not in any of these five sermons give credit to the women who first saw Jesus alive after the resurrection.

There could be two reasons for Peter not mentioning the important role of the women in the Resurrection message. Was he still guided by his Jewish view on the secondary role of women in society? Or was Peter practicing “instinctive missionary anthropology” in accordance with the excellent principle put forth by Paul, an important principle in cross-cultural soul-winning even today: "I became like a Jew... I became like one under the law... I became all things to all men that I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9: 20-22).

**The Seventh-day Adventist Global Church**

In our evaluations and attempts to establish a fair role for women in the Adventist Church, we should, based on the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4, diligently consider what elements in the Old and New Testaments are Jewish culture and therefore not binding for churches in a non-Jewish setting today. At the same time we must keep in mind that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2013 is operating in more than 200 countries with more than a thousand languages and cultures. The majority of church members are from areas that in varying degrees are struggling with equality issues.

How would a positive decision on women’s ordination influence our main task, to bring Christ to “every nation, tribe, language and people?” Are we prepared to take into consideration the historic customs of the people in each of these cultures, which in some cases are far from the cultural contexts and customs in the West? Many of them are, on the question on the role of women, more like the Jewish culture of Bible times.

People cannot and should not be hastily overruled in their cultural patterns. If improvements and changes are called for, they should be dealt with carefully. This is where much patience, education and understanding are needed. Dealing with age-old cultural issues regarding equal rights and other negative sentiments will require time.
In missionary, evangelistic and ecclesiastical situations, debate and decisions on the role and ordination of women, important as they are, could at initial stages be a hindrance to shepherding activities, soul winning endeavors and administrative patterns. It could completely overshadow the greatest message for any race or culture, namely that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead and is the Savior of men and woman.

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Native American Camp Meeting

by Debbonnaire Kovacs, August 28, 2013

This is a continuation of a series on different kinds of camp meetings in North America.

Chairman Ray Halbritter Speaks in the Main Meeting Tent

“Unity with our Creator” was the theme for the Native Spiritual Weekend held near Syracuse, New York, August 9-11, 2013. The keynote speaker was Brian Cladoosby, President of the Swinomish Tribal Community and of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest American Indians, whom readers may remember for two stories that have appeared in AT in the past two years. [Native American Tribal Chairman, Intertribal President and Adventist Elder: Adventist Native Leader Introduces President Obama]

President and Elder Brian Cladoosby and his wife Nina
The flyer for the camp meeting featured a cover picture of Jesus directing the way of a Native man in full historic dress. According to Bruce Wilkinson, who is in charge of Native American Ministries in New York and Vermont, (and who pastors three churches in VT and two in NY!) they try to make the meetings and the atmosphere very appealing to Native American people, though they have many non-natives attending, as well. “We try to make sure our featured speaker is Native American. We also make sure that our food lends to the native taste—corn soup, fry bread, the ‘three sisters’—corn, beans, and squash. Strawberries. . . we have lots of food local native people love.”

They also sing in Oneida language. The bulletin for the Sabbath service, which featured “Native Culture in Worship,” contained the Oneida words for “Wonderful Words of Life.” Syracuse and its vicinity is the center of what are known as the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy: Seneca (the “gatekeepers”), Oneida, Mohawk, Onondaga, Tuscarora, and Cayuga.

Wilkinson says this camp meeting has been running for about 18 years. “I came on board to upstate New York in 1997 and took over Native American Ministries and the camp meeting. They had just started at that time; I think they had had about two camp meetings. We’ve had them every year since then.”

Wilkinson said the camp meeting has had one ongoing challenge—that of finding a place to meet. He reeled off the names of a dozen places where it has met over nearly two decades. When they were able to stay in the same place more than a year or two, they grew to more than 200 attendees, but moving around was always difficult, and numbers dropped sometimes.

However, as of two years ago, they now have “a site we can call our own, in Cleveland, New York. One of our church members purchased 500 acres of land and is allowing us to use that. He has built a pavilion for our food operation, he brings in a very large tent for main meetings, and then we use other buildings he has there for classes and so on. He’s even dug a pond we use for our baptisms.” Because they can stay in one place, and because that place is fairly near to the two local, active, largely Native American congregations, Wilkinson reports that they are growing in numbers again.

What meant the most to Wilkinson, though was something he was told by some people who “do the camp meeting circuit, going from camp meeting to camp meeting all summer long. They said our camp meeting was the most spiritual of all the ones they’d gone to. We were really honored by that!”

For more info and to see more pictures from the camp meeting, go to the new website, www.onondagasdaindianchurch.org
You have heard a great deal about the number 666, (Revelation 13:18) and no doubt you might consider anything associated with that number as a portent of terrible evils to come. There is no shortage of opinions as to the meaning of this number – numerous emperors, presidents, popes, generals, religious leaders have all had the opportunity of having that number applied to them – by sincere Christian believers nonetheless. Prophetic speculators have for years had an absolute heyday of promoting their speculations as unassailable certainties.

Far too often the entertainment and sensationalism potential of such applications of the number 666 has exceeded the credibility of solid Biblical research in “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Though the number 666 occurs only once in scripture, in Revelation 13:18, you will find many of the decoding principles for this number in the book of Daniel. It is significant to note that the Babylonian numerological system was sexagesimal, meaning that it was based on the number six. This was unusual, unlike other societies that normally follow the decimal system. It is from the Babylonian sexagesimal system that we have 60 minutes, 60 seconds, 360 degrees, et cetera. The number 666 is thus peculiarly of Babylonian vintage.

There are individuals with a superstitious mindset who will do anything to avoid the occurrence of the number 666, no matter where this number may occur: telephone numbers, bank account numbers, license plates, house numbers, vehicle identification numbers (VIN), Social Security numbers. Do we honestly believe the avoidance of this number will protect us from the coercive measures in the coming time of trouble when no man can buy or sell, except the one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:18)?

Would you be willing to agree to this one Bible principle, namely, that the Bible is its own interpreter, and that the meaning of this number should first and foremost be found by a diligent search of comparing Scripture with Scripture? Do you believe that God’s word, the Holy Scriptures, is sufficient to adequately prepare you for all last-day events? If so, would you be willing to lay aside for a few moments all previous conclusions that you have held about this number 666, no matter how dearly cherished, and look at the Bible alone for answers? Would you agree that a solid Biblical interpretation of 666 must take precedence to any other interpretation you may have held? “Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: his number is 666” (Revelation 13:18).

There is a very close relationship between Daniel and Revelation, as well as between Babylon and the beast (Revelation 17:1). You will notice, in the book of Daniel, numerous experiential applications for discerning the operations of both Babylon and the beast. Dr. Leslie Hardinge on many occasions stated that the book of Daniel is a most important key to understanding Revelation, and that the narratives in Daniel are the primary decoding keys for the prophetic
passages. Notice the following allusions and/or applications to the beast as found in the book of Daniel.

- The “beast” -- God judged king Nebuchadnezzar for his beastly behaviors by turning him into a beast for a seven-year period.

- The “image to the beast” -- the proud monarch erected a custom-designed image to himself, compelling the worship of others to augment his insecure identity and self-worth.

- The “number” of the beast in the dimensions (sixty by six cubits) of the golden image. The golden image of Nebuchadnezzar is mentioned in the book of Daniel six times (3:5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 18). The warning in Revelation against worshiping the beast and his image occurs six times (Rev 13:15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). God’s perfect judgment on the proud monarch consisted of a seven-year period of insanity.

- You will also find the underlying principle of the “name” of the beast in the name of king Nebuchadnezzar who, attempting to make a name for himself, exclaimed, “Is this not the great Babylon that I have built!” (see also Genesis 11:4).

**Biblical Uses of the Number SIX**

Throughout the scriptures the number *seven* is often an inspired designation for perfection and completeness. Similarly, the number *six* refers to incompleteness. Whatever man touches, produces, and seeks to accomplish often has the number *six* attached to it, signifying God’s rating of man’s work of do-it-yourself-religion as imperfect and incomplete. Note Ellen White’s comment that “the principle that man can save himself by his own works lay at the foundation of every heathen religion” [1] and how this principle has infiltrated even the Christian faith. Look for a moment at these Biblical uses of the number *six*, remembering that it is the *number of man*.

- Man was created on the *sixth* day (Genesis 1:31).

- It was on the *sixth* day that man crucified the Creator, Jesus Christ (Luke 23:54).
- At the wedding feast of Cana there were *six* water pots of stone, no doubt signifying the very best work of the host to make this wedding an event to be remembered (John 2:6).
At Jacob’s well in the town of Sychar in Samaria, Jesus engaged a Samaritan woman in a conversation. She had been married five times, and the relationship she was currently in was not a marriage. Jesus knew all about these multiple relationship failures and told her so, “…for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband…” (John 4:18). So this woman was currently in relationship number six with men, when she is about to meet Man number Seven, Jesus Christ, who as the Messiah totally transformed her life.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man pleads to return to warn his relatives still on earth. “I have five brothers... ” he said (Luke 16:28). So there were actually a total of six brothers – all headed in the wrong direction.

At the time of Christ’s crucifixion, evil men gave Him six trials before they sent Him to the cross for execution: (1) First there was a trial before Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest; (2) next there was a trial before Caiaphas, the high priest, (3) followed by a trial before Pilate, (4) who sent Jesus to a trial before Herod, (5) who sent Christ back to Pilate, and (6) who seeking to avoid political entrapment by the Jewish leaders deferred the final decision to the people, who cried out, Crucify Him!

**Biblical Uses of the Number SEVEN**

Consider next some examples of the Biblical use of the number seven. In many places in the Scriptures when the number seven is used it designates wholeness, completeness and perfection.

- Having completed the work of creation, God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3).

- Having completed His redeeming work on Calvary’s cross, Jesus Christ rested in the tomb on the seventh day.

- Notice the prominence of the number seven in God’s instructions on how to defeat the city of Jericho – “…and seven priests shall bear before the ark seven trumpets of rams’ horns: and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times, and the priests shall blow with the trumpets. (Joshua 6:4).

- The prophet Elisha instructed Namaan to dip himself in the river Jordan seven times for the healing of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:10).
• We are to forgive others an infinite number of times \([\textit{seventy} \text{ times } \textit{seven}]\) for their offenses against us (Matthew 18:22).

• The prophecy of the Messiah in Daniel 9:24-27 speaks about the \(\textit{seventy}\) weeks or \(\textit{seventy}\) periods of \(\textit{sevens}\).

• In the New Testament, the number \(\textit{seven}\) occurs a total of 88 times, 55 of which are found in the book of Revelation. The number \(\textit{seven}\) is embedded throughout the entire book of Revelation (seven churches, seven lampstands, seven stars, seven horns, seven seals, seven spirits, seven trumpets, seven vials, seven thunders, et cetera). John, it seems, molded the entire book of Revelation around the number seven.

Does it not now appear that according to scripture, God uses the number \(\textit{six}\) to designate man’s work, even his best work, and He uses the number \(\textit{seven}\) as His rating scale for His own perfect work? Look for a moment at this scene from the heavenly courtroom (Revelation 5:1-12) where the witnesses – the 4 living creatures and the 24 elders – assembled for the inauguration of Jesus Christ as the Executor of the covenant, declare affirmatively with joy that the Lamb is worthy to receive these \(\textit{seven}\) things in worship. “\textit{Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!}” In light of the above, consider thoughtfully these questions concerning the judicial proceedings in heaven’s courtroom as described in Revelation chapter 5.

• Do you agree with the judicial depositions by the witnesses, jury and spectators in heaven’s courtroom that Jesus Christ is the only One qualified to open the seals of the covenant?

• Would God bring witnesses into heaven’s open courtroom who would be telling lies about sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work on the cross?

• Do you agree that the Lamb is the only One qualified, by virtue of His death on Calvary’s cross, to take the scroll and open its \(\textit{seven}\) seals?

• Do you believe that, according to the proceedings in heaven’s courtroom, Jesus is the only One authorized to save?

According to Revelation 13:6, the beast power engages in “blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven.” Is it then not then possible that we may be joining the beast in his work when we attack the sufficiency of Christ’s name (His character), the completeness of His atoning sacrifice (His tabernacle) and cast doubt on the
fact that through Christ’s work we as believers are now seated with Him in heavenly places?

Remember how Jesus was accused by the religious authorities of blasphemy because He forgave sins. Did Jesus have the authority to forgive sin? Of course He did, and so their accusations were groundless. Now if you and I seek to obtain heaven’s forgiveness in exchange for some good works of our own devising, but without having heaven’s authority, are we then not also blasphemers? Is it not blasphemy to say that the sacrifice of Jesus for sin is not good enough? This is the work of the beast, the antichrist. Be careful lest you agree with the lies of the beast! Do not ever seek to do the work of the Lamb while employing the methods of the beast.

Do you remember from your school days how teachers employed various scales for the rating of student performance, utilizing ratings of 1-100, or letter grades of A – F? From our study of the Scriptures it also appears that God has a rating scale of 1 – 7, but primarily He uses the numbers 6 and 7.

Question: If God were to use the number of 1-7 to rate His own work (creation – “it was very good,” and the cross – “it is finished!”), what number would He employ – a six or a seven? The 7th day Sabbath was thus designated as a day to celebrate that what God had made was indeed “very good.” Would you agree that everything that God does, including Christ’s redeeming work, could symbolically bear the number ‘7’ to designate its completeness, perfection, and sufficiency?

The Completeness of Christ’s Atoning Sacrifice

Consider now these observations from Ellen G. White about the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning death for sin on the cross. And then, based on these comments, along with numerous Bible references, how would you rate or grade Christ’s atoning sacrifice for sin. Would you give Him a ‘6’ or a ‘7’?

“He [Christ] planted the cross between heaven and earth, and when the Father beheld the sacrifice of His Son, He bowed before it in recognition of its perfection. "It is enough," He said. "The Atonement is complete” [2]

“The Father demonstrates His infinite love for Christ, who paid our ransom with His blood, by receiving and welcoming Christ's friends as His friends. He is satisfied with the atonement made. He is glorified by the incarnation, the life, death, and mediation of His Son.” [3]

“The Father gave all honour to His Son, seating Him at His right hand, far above all principalities and powers. He expressed His great joy and delight in receiving the Crucified One, and crowning Him with glory and honour. And all the favours He has shown to His Son in His acceptance of the great atonement are shown to His people. God loves them as He loves His Son. The seal of Heaven has been affixed to Christ's atonement. His sacrifice is in every way satisfactory. In Him mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. The Father embraced His Son, and in this included all who receive Him.” [4]
If God the Father is satisfied with Christ’s redeeming work, should we not also be satisfied with His redemption? So when as worshippers we sing, “Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it” – are we telling the truth about God’s salvation by our reception of and participation in the benefits thereof? When we sing, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine”, or “O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood” – are we telling the truth about the sufficiency of Christ’s redemptive work accomplished on the cross of Calvary? Does our singing express our rating, and also God’s rating, of giving Jesus a ‘7’? Or, are we in our hymns perpetuating false doctrine? Is there an authentic congruence between our facial expressions, the joy of our singing, and the words we are singing? Anything else is pure hypocrisy.

Here are some questions about God’s grading scale – and the use of the ratings of six or seven.

1. If you were to rate yourself for your own performance of good works up until today, what rating would you give yourself? Six or seven? What rating would God give you? (Remember, God does not grade on the curve. He requires nothing less than absolute perfection).

2. If you trust in Jesus to be your Savior, and believe that His righteousness is sufficient atonement for all your sin, and that this righteousness has been credited to your account because of the atonement of Jesus Christ, what rating does God give you now? Six or seven?

3. Do you agree with the rating of Jesus, the Lamb, by the witnesses in heaven’s courtroom? (Revelation 5:12).

4. How does God rate your life when you are in a covenant relationship with Christ? A six or seven?

5. How would you rate God’s work of redemption in Christ? Would you give Him a grade of six or seven?

6. What rating does God give you when you have accepted the righteousness of Christ as the basis of your salvation? A six or a seven?

7. Are you so gratefully satisfied with the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and His spilt blood that you would accept God’s rating on you as a seven because of the work of Jesus Christ? Do you believe that because of Jesus’ righteousness you are now complete in Him? (see Colossians 2:8).

8. What rating (or grade) would you give God for having given you a rating/grade of seven? (see Revelation 15:3, 4).

So when you on Sabbath mornings participate in worship with your local congregation, how are you rating your God and His Christ? Do you exhibit a God-motivated enthusiasm in your participation in the worship service, particularly the singing? Remember, in our worship we are joining the heavenly throng, who in heaven’s courtroom continue to declare their affirmation of the sufficiency of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. The core issue is this: Do you believe the Lamb is worthy, and that your righteousness is found in Him only?
The Key Issue in the Great Controversy: Worship

Because the key issue in the great controversy between Christ and Satan is about worship (not just the day of worship, but also the way of worship), could it be that one of the best ways to defeat the lies of the beast, an agent of Satan, is to engage in joyful and enthusiastic worship based on the truths of Christ’s accomplishments at the cross? Satan absolutely hates such worship, because such worship is to him a continual reminder of his defeat at Calvary some 2,000 years ago. This is how the worship of the Lamb becomes the best protection against the beast, because in worship we register our total trust in Christ’s complete and perfect salvation as well as our agreement with the innumerable witnesses, already assembled in heaven’s open courtroom, who declare “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain” (Revelation 5:12).

Have you ever used the expression, “I’ve got his number!” – meaning that you have substantially figured a certain person out? Considering that 666 is a symbolic number, would you be able to say about Satan, or any of his followers, “I’ve got his number!”? As soon as you come across any of the deceptions of Satan, blasphemous do-it-yourself substitutes for the complete saving work of Christ, would you instantly be able to say, “I’ve got his number,” – meaning that you have detected the deceptiveness of anyone who claims to offer salvation that is based on anyone or anything other than Jesus Christ? But please don’t be confrontational in telling this to the person to whom you think this number applies. Please keep it to yourself, and apply it primarily to yourself.

Life Applications
Text to Remember:
“I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust... His truth shall be your shield and buckler” (Psalm 91:2, 4).

Questions to Ponder

1. In what ways has your knowledge of the application of 666 to the historical beast of Revelation 13 enriched your daily walk with the Lord? How will this knowledge enable you to go through the coming time of trouble?

2. Martin Luther once said “I am more afraid of my own heart than of the pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great pope, Self.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

3. If you know of the application of 666 to the title, “Vicarius Filii Dei,” then ask yourself, Do I ever live as if I am a vicar of the Son of God, trying to do God’s work for Him?
4. Reflect on this statement – “Self is the enemy we most need to fear. No form of vice has a more baleful effect upon the character than has human passion not under the control of the Holy Spirit. No other victory we can gain will be so precious as the victory gained over self.” [5]

5. From where do you draw the greatest assurance of your readiness for the final conflict – knowing about the deceptions of the beast, or knowing about sufficiency of the Lamb?

**Truths vs. Lies:**

Replace the lies or half-truths of the enemy with these truths that will set you free:

**Lies or half-truths**  
My knowledge of the historical beast is indispensable knowledge that will give me a distinct advantage to be an overcomer in the coming time of trouble.

It is impossible that the number 666 could apply to myself, because I am not Catholic.

My knowledge of the doctrinal errors of other churches can substantially change my life for the better.

I must deny the traditional application of 666 to the historical beast.

**Truths**  
My knowledge of the Lamb and His accomplishments provides a secure basis for all overcoming.

It is possible that the number 666 could apply to me experientially, if I do not trust in Christ alone for His perfect salvation.

To detect the self-deceptive strategies of my own heart can be a significant step toward genuine change in my own life. “Who can understand His errors? Cleanse me from secret faults” (Psalm 19:12).

It could enrich my assurance of salvation to add the Bible-based experiential applications of 666 to my understanding of the traditional application of 666 to the historical beast.
Endnotes