News & Opinion from Adventist Today
October 4-10, 2014

NEWS

Adventist Governing Body Starts Meeting Thursday: One of the most anticipated--and feared--agendas in recent Annual Council history opened last night and continues through next week, with pivotal, periodic coverage available at atodayarchive.org....

Annual Meeting Begins with Concern, Health Seminar: Vital questions continued to surface in the opening hours of Annual Council, last (Thursday) night at GC headquarters. (This is the first in a list of daily news stories about the Council, now being published on the atodayarchive.org site)....

Court Decision in Conflict with Adventist Position: The Church’s stand against same-sex marriage in the US met a setback this week in the Supreme Court, which refused to review lower-court decisions permitting the practice....
Nine Teachers in Adventist Schools Win Awards: The names of Adventist teachers recognized from throughout North America as winners of the 2014 Excellence in Teaching Awards are published and the recipients profiled....

Adventist Historic Sites to Be Allied with White Estate: A focus on the historical properties of the early Adventist movement/church is intended to draw attention to the way the Lord has led in formative times....

OPINION

When the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Andy Hanson reviews a number of bracing (well, okay, gory) Old Testament stories that present a picture of a blood-smeared, warlike God, and wonders where that portrayal of the divine might have--could have--taken him had he studied it intently early in life....

Red or Blue Pill? A Challenge for Church Lifers: AT Opinion writer Danny Bell takes a look at two radical options that beckon Adventist Christians--the metaphorical "red pill" that encourages broad sallies outside the culture to uninhibited vistas of truth; the blue pill that limits the panorama to narrower, culture-approved slices of reality....

The Lamb's Psalm (devotional): The Shepherd's Psalm really ought to be called The Lamb's Psalm, writes Debbonnaire Kovacs. Experience the beloved thoughts with her at vespers this weekend....
FEATURES

(Available to all logged-in subscribers; to apply for a free 30-day subscription, click here)

Third Grader in Adventist School Walks Away with Top Prizes in Reading Program: A nine-year-old girl was afraid she wouldn't be able to read enough books to win prizes...but now, not to worry! This 3rd-grader has surpassed her own wildest dreams....

POETRY & THE ARTS

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? (poetry): Pastor Tom Hughes wrestles with the conundrum of why bad things selectively seem to target the righteous....

Portrait of God (visual): A five-year-old draws the face of God--and convinces one of our writers, at any rate. What do you think?

DAILY REPORTS FROM SILVER SPRING

Additional news from the annual meeting of the denomination's governing body will be posted through the weekend on the Adventist Today web site: www.atodayarchive.org

AT NEWS TEAM
Adventist Today

Adventist Governing Body Starts Meeting Thursday

By Adventist Today News Team, October 8, 2014
Updated October 10

The governing body of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is the General Conference (GC) executive committee. Its Annual Council begins tomorrow (October 9) and continues through next Wednesday (October 15). A number of important issues are on the agenda for discussion by the more than 300 members from around the world, as well as the usual planning documents, policy adjustments and reports.

Two issues dominate the agenda. One is the revision of paragraph six in the denomination's statement of fundamental beliefs. It says in part, "God is Creator of all things and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made ‘the heavens and the earth’ and all things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of the first week."

The leaders of the denomination will present a proposed revision that spells out more specifically what the days and week are. It will include language about days being twenty-four literal hours in a recent past. It will not allow for any ambiguity in the interpretation of this doctrine.

There may be controversy about the fact that some words not directly quoted from the Bible will be introduced. The actual vote to adopt this revised paragraph cannot be taken until next summer in San Antonio when the GC Session convenes. The fundamental beliefs document can only be amended by a GC Session, not the GC executive committee. Anything voted in the coming week will only be a recommendation to the delegates next summer.

The theology of ordination is probably the most discussed issue on the agenda. An entire day (next Tuesday) has been set aside for this item. The key to this issue is the question of whether women who are employed as Adventist ministers may be ordained just as are men employed as clergy. In 1881 the delegates at the GC Session voted the concept with no objections, but for reasons that remain unclear the policy was never implemented except for the fact that denominational cofounder Ellen G. White was issued credentials as an ordained minister for many decades. (For more information about the 1881 resolution, look here.)

In the early 1970s steps were taken toward the ordination of women and in the 1980s the Adventists in China began the practice. In the last two years several union conferences in North America and Europe have also voted this step despite admonitions from Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the GC.

In the last two decades opposition to the concept has grown, often rooted in a doctrine of "male headship" originated by Baptists and other Fundamentalist Christians in the United States. In some nations where the traditional role of women is quite conservative there also happen to be large numbers of Adventists and opposition to the concept is strong. Among younger church members in developed, urban areas of the world, it is considered a major failure of
social ethics that the denomination has not made the status of men and women in the clergy equal.

A report from a study committee made up of Bible scholars and church administrators will be considered at the Annual Council. A decision must be made as to what recommendation may be voted by the GC executive committee to pass on to the delegates at the GC Session next summer. Great fears have been expressed by many regarding unity in the denomination if the debate becomes too heated or significant segments feel left out.

On page 12 of the report from the study committee three options are listed. **Option 1:** “Ordaining/Commissioning only qualified men to the office of pastor/minister throughout the world Church.” **Option 2:** “Each entity responsible for calling pastors/ministers be authorized to choose either to have only men as ordained pastors or to have both men and women as ordained pastors.” **Option 3:** “Denominational leadership at a proper level be authorized to decide, based on biblical principles, whether such an adaptation [permission to ordain both men and women] may be appropriate for their area or region.”

Whoever chairs the meeting on Tuesday faces an impossible task. The debate should be about whether women can be ordained or not which was the original request. But with the introduction of option 1 the debate becomes whether women can serve as pastors and local elders. However, the Adventist denomination has already voted in 1990 that women can serve as local elders and pastors.

If Option 1 were to be voted an additional vote would need to be taken officially rescinding the policies allowing women to serve as local elders and pastors. So there are really two competing topics on the day’s agenda. Can women be ordained as pastors and can women actually function as local elders or pastors, as thousands are currently doing around the world?

An Adventist Today editor spoke to one of the GC vice presidents about how the discussion will be led next Tuesday. He assured the editor that only ministerial ordination will be open for discussion. This means the chair, if he or she is to be true to that guideline, will be ruling committee members out of order if they attempt to speak to "headship theology" and why women should not serve as local elders or pastors.

Dr. J. David Newman, the editor of Adventist Today, has sent to many of the committee members a fourth option. The three options in the committee report are all win-lose scenarios. Newman is proposing a win-win scenario by eliminating ordination from Adventist practice all together. In his paper he argues that the three levels of ordination currently practiced in the Adventist denomination (pastor, elder, deacon) cannot be found in the New Testament. Readers can access his paper at http://jdavidnewman.us/uploads/Fourth_Option.pdf.

“I would encourage each church member, and certainly each representative at the Annual Council and those who will be delegates to the General Conference Session, to prayerfully review [the work of the study committee] and then ask the Holy Spirit to help them know God’s will,” Wilson said in an interview last month.

Also on the agenda is an October 15 constituency meeting of Oakwood University, a historically black university in Huntsville, Alabama. It has operated as an institution affiliated with the GC since it was establishment in 1896. Constituents will vote whether or not to accept a request from the university’s board to transfer its connection to the denomination’s North American Division (NAD).
“Oakwood University would join the emerging NAD portfolio of major institutions, such as Pacific Press Publishing Association, whose missions specifically focus on the advancement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s work in North America,” said Dr. Leslie Pollard, the university president.

In other business, a Council on Evangelism and Witness will meet to hear reports of outreach projects in each of the denomination’s 13 world divisions; the denomination’s second officer, Dr. G. T. Ng will deliver the annual report on membership and an analysis of growth trends; and a leadership development workshop will focus on the stewardship of church offices.

Key church administrators around the world will come to the end of their five-year terms of office next year and the workshop will seek to encourage an appropriate perspective on what it means to hold one of these elected positions. “Elections are often a taboo subject, but we need to think about our term of office as one we are to vacate,” Ng said in an interview with the Adventist News Network. “For those who are then elected to the same office, it is considered a new term.”

Adventist Today has confirmed that Pastor Sandra Roberts, the president of the Southeastern California Conference, was not invited to the meeting as a committee member. She is the only woman serving in the role of conference president in the denomination and the GC officers have refused to recognize her election because she is a woman and in an indirect fashion the GC Working Policy blocks women from serving as conference presidents. Roberts will be attending the meeting simply as an observer “as if she were a lay person walking in off the street.”

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Annual Meeting Begins with Concern, Health Seminar

By AT News Team, October 9, 2014

The annual meeting of the governing body of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination began at 6 p.m. Thursday (October 9) with Dr. G. T. Ng, a former seminary dean from Asia now serving as executive secretary of the denomination, announcing that there are currently 338 members of the General Conference executive committee, as it is officially labeled. A total of 210 of these members were present. He had also invited 135 "official invitees," primarily the conference presidents and institution administrators in North America. They will be able to participate in the debates but will not be permitted to vote.

Ng reiterated the concern of top officers that the denomination stay mission-centered, perhaps a reference to the increasing number of internal debates and growing cultural diversity of the Adventist movement which now has more than 30 million adherents worldwide. He read the mission statement adopted in 2009 which defines the purpose of the Adventist denomination as "to make disciples of all people, communicating the everlasting gospel" through ministries of "preaching ... teaching ... healing [and] discipling [defined as] continued spiritual growth and development."

Potentially divisive issues on the agenda concerning gender equality and other topics led to an opening appeal for respectful diplomacy. Pastor Ted Wilson, the denomination's top officer, read a statement in which his fellow officers joined him. "We ... appeal to all ... attendees to accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of some differences of opinion that may be evident on certain subjects. ... We ask for Christ-likeness and humble respect for each other in our words and activities during this [meeting] and beyond."

Ng also announced that this was the first annual meeting where the committee members could access the agenda materials through an online system. Hard copies will also be available for those who want it. In the first items of business, the committee voted to appoint a steering committee and a nominating committee, as well as adopt a daily schedule running through next Wednesday.

A leadership development seminar then began, focusing on Adventist health ministries. Committee members, mostly church administrators, were implored both to establish public health projects for the community and to set an example of healthful living. Three presentations from leading public health experts completed the evening. "Suffice it to say that so much information was presented it will have little effect upon the attendees," observed a reporter on site for Adventist Today.

Dr. David Williams, professor of public health at Harvard University, delivered a lecture on the need to address underlying issues related to health, including income inequality, ethnic injustice, stress and depression. The pinnacle example of community health work by Adventists, he said, was a mission center in Chicago established in 1893 by...
Dr. John H. Kellogg. The mission offered meals and shelter for the homeless, a medical clinic, a rescue center for prostitutes, a maternity home for unwed mothers and a drug re-habilitation facility.

Kellogg established the center after reading the book *The Ministry of Healing* by Ellen G. White, a cofounder of the denomination, Williams stated. “The book ... is our textbook in comprehensive ministry, and we need to go back to the wonderful advice we have been given that can help us deal with challenges that we face,” Williams said.

Dr. Fred Hardinge, an associate director of health ministries for the denomination, gave an overview on scientific studies funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) which focused on Adventists because of their remarkable longevity. He said Adventists tend to live eight to 10 years longer than the general population. Avoidance of meat, especially red meat, was a key factor, he said, although other factors are also involved.

“Science is shouting out the message to us through the most modern scientific journals, with evidence-based approaches, that flesh foods are not good for us,” Dr. Peter Landless, the denomination's director of health ministries, told the committee. “I wish and pray that we will move to a plant-based diet, with a balanced Christ-like approach, not placing ourselves at various rungs of sanctification because of the diets we consume, but following what is the best we can do in the environments we find ourselves.” He emphasized balanced living.

The meeting came to a close with Pastor Ian Sweeney, president of the denomination's British Union Conference, offering his testimony about recent lifestyle changes that brought him down to a healthier body weight. In the past two years, Sweeney said he had lost 75 pounds and received cheers for his slimmer physique when addressing a large crowd of church members. He decided to eat healthier food and exercise more after giving a book about health to a neighbor and realizing the irony. “I hadn't preached a sermon on health ... for 15 to 17 years because it would have just been hypocrisy,” Sweeney said.

*Adventist Today* will report daily on the developments at the annual meeting in Silver Spring, Maryland. *An Adventist Today reporter is on site, observing the meetings and we will include information from the daily bulletins of the Adventist News Network (ANN), the denomination’s official news service.*

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Court Decision in Conflict with Adventist Position

By AT News Team, October 6, 2014

Monday the United States Supreme Court announced a decision to turn down appeals from five states where lower courts have cleared the way for same-sex marriage. A total of 30 of the 50 states now allow same sex marriage, placing the position of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in conflict with what is fast becoming the norm for Americans.

The top court for the country has decided not to review rulings against laws prohibiting same-sex marriage in Virginia, Utah, Oklahoma, Indiana and Wisconsin, a surprising decision that shows the court is comfortable with the expansion of such unions throughout the nation. Canada and many countries in Europe have already legalized same-gender marriages while some African nations have recently strengthened laws against homosexuality.

The American court's decision came without explanation and puts off a decision about the constitutionality of same-gender marriage that would apply to the entire nation. But it sent a clear signal that a majority of the justices do not feel the need to overturn lower court decisions that found state prohibitions were unconstitutional. Marriages had been on hold in the five states and can begin immediately.

Because freedom of religion is protected by the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution, the decision does nothing to impinge the position of the Adventist denomination. It continues to be entirely legal for Adventist pastors to refuse to conduct same-sex marriages as required by denominational policy. And local churches continue to have the right to refuse to allow their facilities to be used for same-gender weddings in compliance with Adventist standards.

The decision will likely expand same-sex marriages to other states covered by the appeals courts that already have ruled that the bans are unconstitutional, including Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, West Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina. "It is a watershed moment for the entire country," said James Esseks, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union.

Cultural liberals believe that the tipping point has been passed and "the battle is won" to permit same-sex marriage, but cultural conservatives point to a blip in a recent poll as evidence that the majority of Americans are not ready for this. Opponents of same-sex marriage said the fight is not over. "The court's decision not to take up this issue now means that the marriage battle will continue," said Byron Babione, a lawyer for the Alliance Defending Freedom, which has been active in defending marriage prohibitions. "The people should decide this issue, not the courts."

Some of the laws against same-gender marriage that have been struck down by the courts were voted by a majority in general elections in some states.

There are cases on this subject in every state in the country. The Supreme Court could still take up the issue later this year after more states weigh in. The court in June 2013 struck down part of the Defense of Marriage Act, which had
denied federal recognition of same-sex marriages performed in states where it was legal. Although that decision did not touch on whether state bans were unconstitutional, a long line of federal court decisions have ruled since that the reasoning in the decision demands such a finding.

It takes only four votes to grant a review of lower court decisions. So that means at least one of the justices who previously voted against the concept was unwilling to force the court to take up the issue in these cases or at this time. Some of the justices who favor the concept that prohibitions of same-sex marriage are unconstitutional have said that the courts should move incrementally on such controversial social issues.

Adventist tradition has long had the notion of "testing truths," doctrines that are different from the social norms such as keeping the Sabbath by not working from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday when most of the Christian population only takes a couple of hours for church on Sunday. If this decision is the social marker that liberal commentators think it is, then Adventists in the United States will have a new "testing truth" in terms of how to relate to same-gender marriages.

Adventist Today has previously reported on an Adventist minister who participated in his daughter's same-sex wedding and was disciplined for it. Increasingly, American Adventists will be faced with decisions about whether to attend similar occasions involving their own adult children or other close relatives.

No major Adventist spokesperson has commented on this development so far. At least one independent ministry has announced an event where the featured speakers are "former homosexuals" who offer training in how to "lead gays to Christ." Heartland Institute has been at odds with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in the past, both publishing condemnations of the denomination and being the subject of critiques published by the denomination. It represents a Fundamentalist alternative for Adventists.

Some information in this story was found in the Washington Post, the major news operation in the capital of the United States.

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Nine Teachers in Adventist Schools win Awards

By Adventist Today News Team, October 9, 2014

Six women and three men faculty members in Adventist elementary and secondary schools across North America have been announced as the 2014 winners of Excellence in Teaching Awards. The honors come from the Alumni Awards Foundation, an organization which has raised more than two million dollars for Adventist K-12 schools.

This year's award winners are:

Anne Blech, who teaches grades one through three at Linda Vista Adventist Elementary School in Southern California. She has demonstrated the ability to help students learn by unlocking their own creative potential. For example, she created the Museum of Living History, a walk-through exhibit where every student researches and dresses as their assigned historical figure and delivers a short presentation.

Elticia Buisson, social studies teacher at Miami Union Academy in Florida. She has brought history to life using technology. While on a music tour in Europe, she posted pictures and videos on social media to create geographical scavenger hunts for her students. Buisson also offers free tutoring after school both in her classroom and by Skype.

Carmen Esposito, grade one teacher at John N. Andrews School in Takoma Park, Maryland. She is bilingual and has increased the Hispanic enrollment in the school to 43 percent through her recruiting efforts. Esposito preaches at Hispanic churches, speaks to parents one-on-one and promotes Christian education on a Sabbath morning radio program sponsored by the area Hispanic churches.

Robert Fetters, science and math teacher at Richmond Academy in Virginia. An advocate for innovation, he was an early adopter of Richmond Academy’s Connected School, a video platform called “distance learning” that delivers classroom instruction to remote locations in real time. Fetters acquired partner schools, conducted research and trained teachers to help set up the Connected School.

Derek Hansen, science and math teacher at College View Academy in Lincoln, Nebraska. He has worked to engage students in the learning process in various ways, the most popular being the catapult contest in a physics class, which is an event that the entire school is invited to watch. Students build catapults and launch projectiles across the ball field. Winners are determined by distance and accuracy.

Geoff Heald, teacher for grades seven and eight at Lake City Junior Academy in Couer D’Alene, Idaho. While teaching from an outdated textbook, Heald realized the need for a change in his Northwest History class. He devoted his summer to reworking the course, resulting in an improved curriculum that included excerpts from a college-level textbook and incorporated both written and visual primary sources.
Norma Howard, principal and teacher at Needles Adventist Christian School in California. She has used innovative teaching strategies to keep her students interested. These have included having students collect water samples from the Colorado River, nearby puddles and the rain in order to compare and contrast them under a microscope, doing gardening, a number of field trips and even cleaning the local church.

Mechelle Peinado, teacher for grades five through eight at Mount Elliss Elementary School in Montana. She has shown a unique talent for working with a diverse group of students with varying learning disabilities and challenges, providing them with the attention they deserve. Instead of focusing on where students may fall short, she is known for constantly praising them for their accomplishments.

Shirley Ann Thomas-Laurence, principal and teacher at Whispering Pines Adventist Elementary School in the New York City metropolitan area. After being unanimously selected by the board to become principal, she created a new vision for the school. In the first year of her leadership, enrollment jumped from 35 students to 96 students, with a projection of 115 or more for the next school year.

Each of the awards was presented during a local ceremony with representatives of the foundation, the conference and the churches sponsoring the school. Each teacher was presented with a framed certificate, a medallion and a $2,000 cash gift. Sponsors of the awards this year, with the foundation, included Andrews University, Loma Linda University, Oakwood University, Southern Adventist University, Union College and The Concerned Group.

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Adventist Historic Sites to be Allied with White Estate

An independent, nonprofit organization that owns a number of historic sites related to the Adventist faith has entered into a unique relationship with the Ellen G. White Estate that brings together important elements of the Adventist heritage. The Estate board voted last week to approve a request from Adventist Heritage Ministry (AHM). Beginning in January, AHM, which owns four properties related to founders of the Adventist movement, will have a full-time executive director who will also serve as an associate director of the White Estate. White was the most prominent co-founder of the denomination.

AHM began in 1981 with the purchase of the Deacon John and Betsey White home in Battle Creek, Michigan, where the denomination was officially organized in 1863. AHM has since purchased properties that once belonged to William Miller and Hiram Edson in New York, as well as the Joseph Bates boyhood home in Massachusetts. John and Betsey White were the parents of James White, another co-founder of the denomination and Ellen's husband. James served as primary church administrator during the formative years of the denomination.

Dr. James Nix, the director of the White Estate, said AHM is an “important ministry for the Adventist Church to support because once visitors see the consecration, commitment and dedication of the early pioneers, it makes a difference in their own lives.” He stated that AHM is both an evangelistic and educational ministry.

About 12,000 people visit the four sites each year, reported Pastor Thomas R. Neslund, president of AHM. “I'm proud of the Church for doing this. ... It gives the organization what it needs to be part of the Church's ministry.”

As it grew over the years, AHM has struggled at times and once nearly had to disband. It was launched in 1981 as Adventist Historic Properties Inc. and changed its name in 1993. In 1984 the organization purchased 25 acres of what was William Miller’s farm in Low Hampton, New York. Miller was a Baptist evangelist who started the modern Adventist movement in America by predicting that Christ would return in 1844. After a disastrous disappointment late that year, a number of young adults in the movement began a critique of established Christian theology which resulted in the formation of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination over the next two decades.

In 1989, the organization purchased 17 acres that were originally part of Hiram Edson's farm in Port Gibson, New York. Edson has been cited by historians and theologians as the first person to sketch out the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary among Adventists. The doctrine is described in Paragraph 24 of the denomination's Statement of Fundamental Beliefs.

In 1995, AHM began developing the Historic Adventist Village in Battle Creek, Michigan. The village is a three-block area which includes several homes belonging to the White family, as well as other properties related to early Adventists. Pathfinder Clubs, an Adventist organization for ages 10 through 15, across North America raised funds to...
support this project.

In 2004, AHM nearly had to close due to a lack of donations to fund the maintenance of the properties it owns as well as the utilities and operations. Neslund said the denomination’s North American Division assisted the organization financially to assure its survival.

In 2005, AHM purchased a portion of Joseph Bates’s boyhood home in Farhaven, Massachusetts. Bates was a sea captain and anti-slavery activist who became a co-founder of the denomination with James and Ellen White. He was the first to introduce the idea that the seventh-day Sabbath as described in the Bible is still a valid observance for Christians.

Neslund said several of the denomination’s 13 world division are investing in historic preservation in their own regions. “It’s very important for members to know where this denomination came from,” he stated. “If you don’t know your roots you don’t know who you are.”

Pastor Garrett Caldwell, an assistant communication director for the denomination’s headquarters near Washington DC and a board member for AHM, said the organization is seeking to collaborate with other Adventist historic sites worldwide, such as Ellen White’s “Elmshaven” home in St. Helena, California, and her “Sunnyside” home in Cooranbong, Australia.

The Adventist News Network (ANN) is the official news service of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

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When the Walls Came Tumbling Down

by Andy Hanson, October 9, 2014

When I was baptized at the age of ten, I was given a Bible. I was also told that I had assumed the responsibility to take care of it properly, such as making sure that no other book, magazine, or anything else, was ever to be placed on top of it. It was sacred. It was God’s word, and millions of Christians valued its message more than life itself.

That responsibility was kind of scary, and I was relieved when I learned that I didn’t have to read the Bible exactly, and it could remain “safe” on my bookshelf. I could learn what I needed to know in Sabbath School. David was a brave shepherd boy; Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived; Esther was a Jewish girl who won a beauty contest because she had a nice smile; and Jesus died for my sins.

One of my favorite stories was celebrated in a song I sang loudly and lustily when given the chance: Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho. But the pictures in the books and the flannel board illustrations never mentioned what happened after “the walls came tumbling down.”

Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. Then the Lord said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in.”

When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.¹

If the unspeakable conclusion of this battle sounds like what happens after an ISIL victory, Christians need to acknowledge that “Islam is rooted in the Abrahamic tradition, and especially with respect to the code of war, the teachings of the Torah invite comparison with Muslim law. In chapter twenty of Deuteronomy some elements of a code of war are given.” ²

But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let
anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God.

If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siege works against the town that makes war with you, until it falls.

In some instances, the code even sanctioned murder.

Then Samuel said, “Bring me Agag king of the Amalekites.”

Agag came to him in chains. And he thought, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”

But Samuel said,

“As your sword has made women childless, so will your mother be childless among women.”

And Samuel put Agag to death before the Lord at Gilgal. 3

I wonder how Samuel killed him? The author doesn’t say.

Today, I read and appreciate the Old Testament as Jewish literature. My favorite books are Proverbs, Job, and Ruth, even though I have a question or two about what happened during the night she spent with Boaz on the threshing floor.

The God of Old Testament history comes across as a malevolent figment of the imagination, and I know that I slept better as a young person because I only began reading the Old Testament when I took a Biblical Literature class from Alice Babcock at Pacific Union College.

PS: Isn’t it obvious why Jesus had to show up?

________________________________________
1 from Joshua 6

2Islam and Just War Theory
Hau Muhammad Legenhausen
http://www.academia.edu/2522530/_Islam_and_Just_War_Theory_

3 from 1 Samuel 15

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Red or Blue Pill? A Challenge for Church Lifers

by Danny Bell, October 9, 2014

This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.

– Morpheus.

In 1999 the cult film The Matrix¹ was featured in cinemas across the world, portraying what could be an alternate reality of life as we know it. The plot deals with humanity’s being taken over by artificial intelligence that destroyed the real world and created a false simulation existing in the minds of those who were enslaved to the Matrix.² Those who are controlled believe everything they see, do, touch and feel is real. One human city exists, however, deep underground. It is called Zion, and those who are freed from the Matrix reside in it.

Neo, the main character in the movie, is offered the choice between a red pill or blue pill. The blue pill would allow him to remain in the fabricated reality of the Matrix, living the illusion, while the red pill would lead to his escape into the real world and the truth about everything. The movie seeks to show that the pills represent choices we make between embracing painful truth or remaining in blissful ignorance.

Using the Matrix as a metaphor, I see uncanny parallels with western church culture and its relevance to Lifers³ - those who have grown up within the safety and comfort of its walls with unquestioning loyalty. The Matrix and other alternate reality films such as Pleasantville⁴ always follow a similar line, where people are living in a bubble but when change is brought to bear, it's not without trauma. Lifers can have a resemblance to those who would choose the blue pill. They are born into matrix-like structures and usually express grave fears about upsetting the delicate balance already in place. Typically, they rise up and protest against new ideas that threaten their security, and these passive “nice” people can suddenly change and turn rabid on their opponents, as cracks appear in their normally benign personalities.

In the Matrix, the answer lies in taking the red pill – an antidote to become free from the system and fear of the real world. Blue pill poppers (lifers) don't understand such freedom because they have a limited capacity to think outside their environment or empathize with
anyone not of their persuasion. The red pill is painful to swallow and cuts across ambitions, career, status….dealing coldly and frankly with anyone who takes it. It makes sense to lifers to oppose whatever threatens the environment where they are catered for in tastes, social needs and religious styles. The red pill frightens them and represents a big risk, but it is the “pearl of great price” that requires giving up everything to obtain an authentic life.

Red pill poppers, on the other hand, are a different breed and are often seen as rebellious within church communities. Many have had time outside the church in that wicked, wicked place called “the world,” and because of their experience don’t conform easily.

5 They can smell freedom and know what it feels like to be totally unfettered from rules, even God’s rules. There is a distinct difference in how red pill poppers and lifers do their Christianity.

In the Matrix, though, it is not the rebellious who are of concern, but the placenta-loving hordes that have enslaved themselves to what keeps them warm and cozy in a lullaby on continuous playback. In their world of order and conformity, they are passive partakers of whatever the system feeds them, and like mindless soldier ants, they attack whatever agitates the colony to repel it.

In the history of the church, many red pill poppers have been change agents, suffering within matrix-like systems, battling danger, scorn and even death. They would argue that living in, at times, a painful reality is better than playing along in a false world of peace that delivers only temporary comfort and gratification. Their lives are not ruled by a how to win friends and influence people approach, but a “thus saith the Lord,” which usually means going against popular church culture.

There are many examples in scripture that describe a matrix culture. Jesus often argued with the church elite in his day over tradition vs real worship. One time, blue pill leaders questioned Jesus why the disciples were doing things differently and not washing their hands like the other conformists. Jesus’ reply was swift and cutting:

*Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.” You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions - Mark 7:6-8(NIV).*

Jesus nailed it in that last sentence. They were plugged into their own concocted world and failed to see the big picture. The blue pill poppers, the lifers, had become too familiar and dependent on the system of rules and teachings for their own selfish emotional fulfilment. They had worshipped the church, its buildings and its benefits instead of the One who gave them those things. They worshipped the gift and not the Giver.

Over and over Jesus tried to free religious people from this form of idolatry that enslaved and blinded people to reality and duty. In his parables he labored to bring out that - if they were not careful - the stranger, the centurion, the Samaritan, prodigal son, foreigner or even the slave….the red pill poppers (dare I say it), would go into the kingdom ahead of them. In most of the parables and the encounters Jesus had with those outside “the system,” he found
greater faith, appreciation and more wisdom than among those on whom he had bestowed all of his blessings.

If you are a blue pill popper, and church life has become your god, where you regularly avoid the discomfort of plain duty, choosing to hide behind a facade of religion, then reality will bite harder in the end than if you took the red pill and were done with it. If we throw off our fears and risk all in an effort to be real and authentic with ourselves and God, we will experience a great roar of freedom in our hearts, and then, unplugged from the Matrix, join the rebellion in Zion.

1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mx-9QRDwzLw – but note, this is not available in the United States

2

The Matrix was an incubating machine that the artificial intelligence created where all humans were plugged into unconscious, living perfect lives in their minds.

3

Lifers are generally those who have never left the church system. They have never rebelled or had time in the world but from cradle to grave have always been immersed and dedicated to the system that has raised them.

4

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrEAfkY9ods

5

There are some who come from being non-Christians that do morph into lifers in an incredibly spectacular way for reasons unexplained. These usually have so immersed themselves in church culture that it is hard to tell them from genuine lifers after conversion.

6


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The Lamb’s Psalm

By Debonnaire Kovacs
Submitted October 8, 2014

The One who Is, Was, and Will be—the very Beingness of Being—is my beloved guide and cares for me as a mother for her child. What could I possibly have to worry about?

The One brings me to quiet places of peace and convinces me to stop dithering, lie down and be still. The One hushes me and gives me eternally flowing, eternally pure Water of Life to drink.

The One breathes new life into my soul—fills the heart of my heart with rushing Spirit life—and then gets me up from the tranquil rest and we walk on. The One puts warm arms around me and assures me, “I love you for your sake, but even more for mine. You are inexpressibly precious to me.”

Sometimes our path walks nowhere near quiet places, but instead through dark and howling wastelands of death and terror. I huddle close under the warm arm and listen for the beating of that great heart. “I am afraid, but not afraid, oh beloved One. I am comforted to know that you are always here, and that you know how to defend and protect me, and have all you need to do so.”

Then—right there! In front of the scary demons and hobgoblins that make me so miserable!—you spread a picnic cloth, overflowing with food and drink fit for angels. You quiet me again, anoint me with oil of grace, urge me to eat. “More! Have another! There is plenty for every need you have; dream bigger!” you exclaim.

It is more than I can take in!

No matter what happens, no matter where I go, I am surrounded by your goodness, covered by your mercy, wrapped up and cuddled in your endless love. From my cradle to my gray hairs you have carried me, and I know I dwell in your house, a child at your table, now and always. Always.

Alleluia!

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Third Grader in Adventist School Walks Away with Top Prizes in Reading Program


By Debbonnaire Kovacs
Submitted October 8, 2014

Ranch Readers Program
A book is a thrift store treasure — especially a free book! The Idaho Youth Ranch is offering a free book to any child (up to age 17) who visits an Idaho Youth Ranch thrift store.

Each free book comes with a special Ranch Readers bookmark. When you finish the book, write the name of the book on your bookmark and bring it back to the store, and we'll give you another free book (valued at $1.95 or less) and a stamp on your bookmark!
Every child who reads five free books and fills up their Ranch Readers bookmark with all five stamps can come back to the store for a special prize—and a new Ranch Readers bookmark to start the process all over again.

Come in today! A bounty of beautiful books awaits you.

So reads the website at http://youthranch.org/whats-new/post/ranch-readers. The Ranch Readers program was launched in the spring of 2013. That summer, a woman named Jennifer Meyers was volunteering at the Ranch’s Twin Falls thrift store (one of 29!) and learned about the program.

She told her nine-year-old daughter, Amy, who was in third grade at Hilltop Seventh-day Adventist School. Amy was intrigued, but also nervous. Could she read enough books to get prizes?

Only, it turns out, enough to get into the local news! Two hundred books, to be precise. Amy said she read through book after book, starting with easy ones and going on to harder ones. Her teacher is happy because she now reads at the fifth-grade level. (Then again, this news is some months old; Amy is presumably in fourth grade, and who knows how high her reading skills have gone?) Amy’s mother is happy because she never heard the dreaded summer words, “I’m bored! There’s nothing to do!” Amy is happy because she’s learned to love reading.

And Idaho Youth Ranch is happy because reading success leads to success on many more levels as young people grow.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t get any of the links on the main page at www.youthranch.org to work at all, but I can tell you that the Idaho Youth Ranch is a “non-governmental, not-for-profit organization” which relies on donations to help it work for Idaho’s youth and families.

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?


by Pastor Tom Hughes
Submitted Oct. 8, 2014

Why do bad things happen to good people?
We really want to know
If there is a God in the universe
How can such things be so?

The real question lurking under the skin
Is where was God and why didn’t he jump in?
How can he just sit upon his throne?
And leave all suffering humanity alone?

Every once in a while something tragic stuns me
And I notice the suffering from which I’ve been free
Imaging how God feels; high above it all
Hearing each prayer when for help they call

For a glimpse into his world, into his mind to see
You have to simply look to a place called Calvary
Why did he just stand by and let his son die?
Why did he forsake him? Didn’t he hear Jesus cry?

For God so loved the world he gave us his son to be
A sacrifice for our sins, crucified for all the world to see
The hill of the skull, a cruel place to lose a son
Sometimes tragedy cannot be undone

This one thing I know; God sees it all
He hears every prayer; every helpless call
He treasures free will so much, our freedom has a cost
Sometimes those with freedom choose to inflict loss

Of this I can attest, the God I truly know
Will one day make it right, even on the earth below
Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven I say!
Soon Jesus will come; Justice is on the way!
So when bad things to good people come
Don’t lose hope, or let faith come undone
For Jesus promises to come again and take us to his home
Where no demonic killers live, and all bow before his throne!

So God must allow this sad earth to run its course
Let Satan and his evil kin do their very worst
In the end love endures it all and stronger still it stands
No matter what may come, may we dwell forever in God’s hands.
No doubt you’ve heard the story of the child (sometimes it’s a boy, sometimes a girl) who is drawing studiously. A (sometimes a parent, sometimes a teacher) asks, “What are you drawing?”

“God,” replies the child, drawing busily.

“But,” objects the jaded adult, “nobody knows what God looks like!”

“They will in a minute!” promises the child.

I was in a bad way, the day a five-year-old (now much older, and remaining anonymous) at church handed me a picture and said, “I made this for you!” Tears filled my eyes as I contemplated this simple art. God is helpfully wearing his God t-shirt. Presumably the square on his head is a crown. But the face! The open arms!

It’s God. No doubt about it. Personally, I hold that it’s the best portrait of God (aside from shining in human faces and human lives) that I’ve ever seen. It holds a special place, framed, beside my bed so I can always remember that God’s arms are held out to me, God’s face shining with an open, welcoming smile of love.

You, too! God loves you. Now. Really. You do truly know that, right?