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Ohio Conference Delegates Vote to Close Mount Vernon Academy

Monte Sahlin

By AT News Team, Jan. 15, 2015: On Sunday (Jan. 11) delegates to a special constituency meeting of the Adventist denomination’s Ohio Conference voted 257 to 82 to close Mount Vernon Academy (MVA) unless $3 million is raised by March 10. MVA is the oldest Adventist boarding secondary school. It began operations in 1893. Only the day academy in Battle Creek, Michigan, has operated longer.

If the $3 million in donations does not come in, MVA will cease operations at the end of the 2014-15 school year. The deadline was recommended by the conference’s executive committee after a special commission took a hard look at the financial condition and enrollment possibilities of the school.

Although the delegates voted to place “great value on providing long-term Adventist secondary education for the constituents,” it insisted on fiscal responsibility. The $3 million must be raised without sale of real estate or other assets and if it comes in a plan must developed by March 15 “a sustainable future” for the school.

If MVA is closed down, the conference executive committee was assigned to “develop alternative options for secondary education for current and future Ohio Conference students including funding options and scholarships.”

“It takes $3 million to operate Mount Vernon Academy annually” said a statement from the Ohio Conference. “If that money can be raised by March 10 … the school would enter the 2015-16 school year debt free with the necessary working capital.”

“Whatever happens, secondary education remains a priority in the Ohio Conference, and we will continue to seek ways to provide the opportunity for our young people to access quality, Adventist Christian education,” the statement continued. “The situation … has precipitated a conversation about Adventist education that we will continue to pursue—with union and division leadership and locally within the Ohio Conference family. Together we need to figure out how to make Adventist education viable—now and in the future.”

Enrollment in Adventist schools across North America is in decline simply because of the aging of the Adventist membership. A smaller and smaller percentage of Adventist families have school-age children with the majority of members now over 50 years of age. Although some have ascribed this decrease to a decline in dedication to Christian education, surveys taken in 1985 and 2004 show the same level of support among Adventist parents for sending their children to Adventist schools.

Surveys have shown that fewer Adventist parents are now willing to send children to a boarding school during their early teen years. The market for boarding school for teenagers has nearly disappeared among Adventists in North America.

Readers who would like to give financial support to MVA may contact Ohio Conference interim treasurer Lyle Litzenberger at (740) 397-4665, or by Email at treasurer@ohioadventist.org or by paper mail at Box 1230, Mount Vernon, OH 43050. Donations can also be made online at www.ohioadventist.org (earmarked for “secondary education—special”).
Monte Sahlin

By AT News Team, Jan. 10, 2014: It is the Christian magazine with the largest circulation in the United States, but *Christianity Today* (CT) has published almost nothing about the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in recent decades. The January-February issue of the journal broke its silence with “The Season of Adventists,” page 18.

The article acknowledged that the Adventist faith has become “the fifth-largest Christian communion worldwide, after Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism and the Assemblies of God.” It reported the rapid growth of the Adventist movement. “In 2014, for the 10th year in a row, more than 1 million people became Adventists, hitting a record 18.1 million members.”

It quoted Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the Adventist denomination, about the fear that the movement may be too successful and in danger of losing its “distinctive biblical truths.” It also quoted an independent ministry with the same concerns and stated that Wilson listed “people moving ‘independently’ from the main church” as one of the “ways that Satan is attacking Adventism.”

The reporter evidently interviewed Wilson as well as had access to the transcript of his sermon in October during the annual meeting of the denomination’s General Conference (GC) executive committee. Other concerns that Wilson shared with CT included Adventists who identify with the larger Christian community, “cheap grace,” making it easier to join the Adventist faith, and “advancing Pentecostal worship styles.”

The article also quoted David Neff, the recently retired editor of CT, who was raised in the Adventist denomination and served as an Adventist pastor until the early 1980s when he was hired as an editor by Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, the Evangelical campus ministry. The report also attributed tension between the GC and the denomination’s North American Division (NAD) to similar issues.

“Many NAD members are seeking more dialogue with mainstream evangelicals,” the article stated. “The NAD has also overwhelmingly approved women’s ordination, despite a global denominational ban.”
Conference Officer in Malawi Accused of Sexual Misconduct with a Child

Monte Sahlin

By AT News Team, Jan. 14, 2015: The second ranking administrator in the Central Malawi Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination has been arrested for sexual misconduct with his 13-year-old niece. The Nyasa Times and the Maravi Post both reported that Pastor Harrison Juwa was being held at the police station in Lilongwe late last week.

On Friday (Jan. 9) the nation's cabinet minister that oversees child protection enforcement, the Hon. Patricia Kaliati, discussed the case in a news conference, which also included the nation’s ranking child protection officer, Inspector Alexander Ngwala. Kaliati described the alleged conduct of the Adventist minister as “barbaric and disgusting,” according to the newspapers.

“I am deeply shocked to learn that a pastor has been defiling his late brother’s daughter since 2011,” stated Kaliati. “We are going to ask the court and the police not to grant bail.” Under the law “the maximum penalty for the offense committed is 14 years in jail,” Kaliati said. She also alleged that Juwa impregnated the girl and that there is a two months old baby.

“The [niece’s] mother knew about this and kept it a secret,” Kaliati further alleged. She stated that law enforcement is also taking action against the parent “for others to learn a lesson.”

Ngwala confirmed the arrest of Juwa and said the child was being taken care of by the suspect after the demise of her father. Stating that “the case is in the court and we cannot say much on it,” Ngwala declined to answer other questions.

There are nearly 3,000 Adventist congregations in Malawi with a total of about 600,000 adherents in a nation with a total population of 17 million. The denomination operated nine primary schools with a total enrollment of 3,300 and seven secondary schools with about 1,100 students, according to the most recent Annual Statistical Report. It operates three hospitals and 17 clinics in the country, as well as Malawi Adventist University, a publishing house, and a radio and television station.

"Each and every contributor brought things that we would not have come up with if we had simply sat down to write a book on this theme," shared Nathan Brown, who co-edited the volume with Joanna Darby. "The call to justice is complicated, multifaceted and best responded to in community," explained Brown, "so we hope the book models that kind of working together to come up with better ideas and real responses."

Stephen Chavez declared in his positive review of Do Justice for the Adventist Review that the book does not merely seek "to persuade its readers about the correctness of living justly in a complicated world–it is a call to action." Additionally, "it provides inspiration for marrying truth in belief and practice in ways that enhance our witness."

"Justice" is a broad topic that can be viewed from many perspectives. Brown described to Adventist Today how the theme is understood in this work: "To borrow someone else's line, 'justice' is how the world ought to be. So 'doing justice' as we are called to throughout the Bible—Micah 6:8, as an obvious example—is about working with God and with others to restore the world to all the goodness God intended. He will ultimately re-create, but we act in accord with that promise today. When we prioritize this call, it will change things in our lives, in the lives of those around us in our communities and our world, particularly those who suffer most from injustice, oppression, poverty and inequity."

ADRA Australia supported the development and initial distribution of the book, and ADRA International president Jonathan Duffy wrote the book's foreword. Brown clarified, however, that "this is bigger than an 'ADRA thing,' something that must be a higher priority in our understanding of what it means to be the people of God in our communities and world." ADRA, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, is the humanitarian agency of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Brown hopes the collection of essays will contribute "to raising the priority of 'justice doing' in all aspects of the life of the church and church members." "We have a strong biblical and Adventist heritage for this kind of practical faithfulness," said Brown, "but we need to recognize it more as core to our identify as the people of a justice-loving God (see Psalms 146)." For Brown, successful outcomes of this book would be "as simple and profound as a hungry person being fed, a young person learning to read, a trafficked person rescued or prevented from being trafficked to begin with, advocacy for all of these people in public and political ways, and so much more—all in the name of Jesus, as an enactment of the kingdom of God." In Brown's view of Isaiah 58, "this is what revival looks like."
Do Justice is currently available as a Kindle e-book (link),[2] and the paperback will soon be available in local Adventist Book Centers across North America.

[1] www.artsmanifest.info

College Library Director Builds School in Ethiopia

A atoday.org/college-library-directors-builds-school-ethiopian.html

Jeff Boyd

From ANN, Jan. 13, 2015:  Adu Worku received a hero’s welcome last month from thousands of people in rural northwestern Ethiopia, where he began life more than half a century ago as a shepherd boy before moving to the United States as an adult.

Worku, director of Pacific Union College's (PUC) Nelson Memorial Library, visited his native land and was honored at a two-day festival attended by some 6,000 people for providing funds and direction for the construction of a large, multi-building school campus. He said the facility is a key institution in allowing qualified students to move from a high school education to college and university. The school campus sits on 15 acres of land.

While there are many elementary schools in rural Ethiopia, Worku said the area in which he grew up didn’t have a school that provided high school education.

“Completion of high school is a requirement for acceptance to a college or university education. That’s the reason this new high school is important,” Worku said in an interview at the PUC library, located in the town of Angwin in California’s Napa Valley.

The honor Worku received while in Ethiopia was also a tribute to the years of struggle he went through to educate himself, at a time and in a place where even an elementary education was generally not available.

“The pattern of a man’s life where I lived, was that you shepherded sheep and goats from about age seven until you were 12,” Worku said. “At about 12, you ‘graduated’ to work on the family farm. And that was it for the rest of your life; you became a farmer and died as a farmer.”

Worku worked as a shepherd in the rolling green Ethiopian hills, not far from the headwaters of the Blue Nile river with seemingly no chance at an education. He now holds three master’s degrees and a university-conferred honorary doctoral degree.

But his road to education began, literally, by accident.

While walking with some friends through brush one night, he was struck in the eye by a tree branch that had been pulled aside to allow passage of a friend ahead of him. The blow led to blindness in that eye and a trip to a distant hospital.

At the hospital there was also a school. “I saw what ‘learning’ was for the students there, and that it was available to anyone simply through using one’s mind. I fell in love with education,” Worku said.

Without returning to his family home, he began seeking entry into one elementary school after another, most of which required a tuition fee he didn’t have. He begged for board and room in return for work among families near the schools he wanted to attend. He found firewood-gathering and grass-cutting jobs to meet tuition and school book expenses. He said he “devoured” his school books and successfully tested out of several school grade levels, which...
moved him along rapidly. At age 20, with a sixth-grade education, he was hired as a school teacher.

During the course of Worku’s drive toward educating himself, a Seventh-day Adventist missionary couple at an Ethiopian Adventist mission hospital met him and saw the promise of his bettering his life through education.

“That physician and his wife told me that if I really wanted an education, they would sponsor me for just as far as I wanted to go. They have kept their word, and I was able to keep on educating myself,” Worku said. “Our coming in contact with each other as we did, and their decision to invest in my life, was a miracle to me.”

He now holds master’s degrees in history and education from Andrews University, located in Michigan, and a master’s degree in library science from the University of Southern California. He was also conferred an honorary doctorate from Southwestern Adventist University, located in Texas.

Through successful appeals to friends and two grant-making foundations over the past five years, Worku raised some $600,000 for the Ethiopian school, which now bears the name Worku Memorial Academy. The school’s first graduation of students will take place later this year.

Now, because of the blindness of three of his Ethiopian friends, and that of many others in the area where he lived, Worku is starting to recruit eye doctors in the United States to visit his old village and perform cataract surgery in a nearby clinic.

“My hope is that we will be able to interest eye specialists to take short term, unpaid periods of service there,” Worku said. “In addition to providing great clinical experience, it will give those who serve a great sense of having helped others.”

Worku will deliver a video report of his recent visit to Ethiopia at 10 a.m. on Saturday, January 24 in the Paulin Choir Room of the Pacific Union College Seventh-day Adventist Church.
My Take: On Being Distinctive

A atoday.org/take-distinctive.html

Webeditor

by Raj Attiken, January 14, 2015: Under the heading, “The Season of Adventists,” the January/February 2015 issue of CT (Christianity Today) magazine offers a review of sorts of the church’s relation to the wider culture. Claiming that Seventh-day Adventism is the fifth-largest Christian communion worldwide, the author describes what she sees as a current tension within the denomination between two ideologies: one wanting to be more separatist and the other wishing to be more evangelical. Those quoted in the article for their separatist stance appeal to separatism as Adventism’s essential tactic for maintaining its distinctiveness. The article ends with a quote that juxtaposes distinctiveness and love, implying that our distinctiveness and uniqueness create barriers to loving all people.

The CT article has captured well the essence of what some among us argue: namely, that our Adventist identity is characterized by that which is distinctive and unique about us, and that preservation of these distinctives is our essential task. This is best achieved, it is proposed, through separation and isolation from the world around us.

We are Adventists, certainly, on account of specific Adventist convictions, including understandings about the unfolding of biblical prophecy. But, we are Adventists also because we are inextricably linked to the masses of humanity, and hold common convictions and engage in common practices with them. Our Adventist identity incorporates both particularities and commonalities. We, along with many others, see reality both as visible and as transcendent, giving primacy to the transcendent. We, along with many others, make claims to what is true, just, and good for all humans, irrespective of place and culture. We, along with many others, offer a diagnosis of the human problem and sketch a way out of it. We love. We hurt. We rejoice. We mourn. We feel compassion. We seek safety. We desire fulfillment. We hold all this and more in common with people everywhere.

A self-understanding that postures us as distinct and unique instills a degree of complexity to our ability to relate to those not of our faith tradition and to engage in our world as responsible citizens. Uniqueness implies that there is nothing else like it. Uniqueness implies exclusivity, exceptionality, and inimitability. It gives us a false sense that we have a preferred status among people in our communities and world. It allows us to hold a diminished view of others.

Although our claims to uniqueness might make us feel special and important, the claim rings hollow to others. Worse yet, it makes us appear arrogant. If the world sees us as unique and ascribes that quality to us, let us acknowledge it with genuine humility, giving God the honor. But until then, let us be restrained in our assertions of self-importance. The Bible reserves the concept of uniqueness to Jesus, “the unique One, who is himself God” (John 1:18 NLT).

Adventist exceptionalism may appeal to some within the church, but it is doubtful that it impresses anyone outside. If not restrained, it can inspire arrogance, judgmentalism, and intolerance among us. In the geo-political arena, religious exceptionalism has increasingly manifested itself recently as repressive totalitarianism. Unable to face the reality of a pluralistic global community, exceptionalists attempt to insert what they consider to be their religious distinctives into the public arena, often with rigid authoritarianism. All other forms of religious expression are forbidden. Human rights, especially for women, are jettisoned. The global community is, for the most part, united in denouncing and rejecting such religious exceptionalism.

We, in the church, can and must be able to say with confident conviction, “This is how we see things — about God, about life, about faith, and about eternity.” We can say all this, however, without any conceits about being unique and exceptional. It is time we abandoned our obsession about being distinctive and unique. It is time we celebrated our commonalities as much as our particularities. That’s my take!
Your Job Description

A atoday.org/job-description.html

Debbonnaire Kovacs

Debbonnaire Kovacs, Jan. 14, 2015

A new format for your job description and mission, taken from Isaiah 49:2-7

The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me (insert name).
He made my (insert skill or gift) like a (insert image or simile), in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, “You are my servant, (insert name), in whom I will be glorified.”
But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; (insert description of times you’ve been discouraged)
yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God.” (Insert Hallelujah, and say it like you mean it! (sic))
And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to (insert what you were formed to do),
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—
he says, “It is too light a thing that you should (insert early responsibilities);
I will give you (to do what? Pray and ask!), that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, (this is Jesus, not you, but you can relate in the ways you have been put down or discouraged)
“Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, (not to you, to God, but perhaps in part because of your faithfulness to your charge)
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” (Emphasis added.)

Post this where you can see it regularly.
What About Universalism?

A atoday.org/universalism.html

Webeditor

By Ron Corson, January 13, 2015:  “There really is evil in the world, and wickedness, and every brand of stupidity. There’s meanness and heartlessness and...I don’t even know which of them is me.” (Mr. Graff in Ender in Exile by Orson Scott Card, page 317)

Has it ever bothered you when you think about the idea that God grants salvation based on what someone knows or believes? What of those who have no way of knowing what seems to be the important part of attaining this salvation, due to mental capacity or cultural relevance or simply how a person was or was not raised? There are simply too many factors in play to accept the idea that God grants salvation based merely upon what someone believes.

In the early centuries of the Christian church this idea of salvation by believing the right things was first written about, but the Biblical concept of a loving God suggested to some that there must be another way of understanding salvation. The concept of how God can fail to save when that is His goal led to a number of interesting quotes found in Church Fathers on Universalism.

Noted Christian author William Barclay presents his Biblical reasons for Universalism as

"First, there is the fact that there are things in the New Testament which more than justify this belief. Jesus said: ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself’ (John 12:32). Paul writes to the Romans: God has consigned all men to disobedience that he may have mercy on all’ (Rom. 11:32). He writes to the Corinthians: ‘As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive’ (1 Cor. 15:22); and he looks to the final total triumph when God will be everything to everyone (1 Cor. 15:28). In the First Letter to Timothy we read of God ‘who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,’ and of Christ Jesus ‘who gave himself as a ransom for all’ (1 Tim 2:4-6). The New Testament itself is not in the least afraid of the word all." I am a Convinced Universalist, by William Barclay1

Some Universalists speculate in numerous ways about how this will be done. They would probably rather not speculate so much but most assuredly feel pressured to present their views because of the more traditional views of eternal torment and the redeemed taken to heaven. However, noting that Christians throughout the centuries have made their predictions only to show no real ability at predicting the future, I will not bother to predict how things can occur, other than to say that I believe that God is capable of demonstrating firsthand to people His love and then offering them the healing of a change, in the twinkling of an eye, to begin life anew. The traditionalist will no doubt ask about those who refuse to allow God to change them. I honestly don’t think that will occur because the weight of reason and evidence are so against refusing the love and healing of God. Suffice it to say, I think if someone has a firsthand person-to-deity talk with God, not through a still small voice or some preacher’s words or some ancient book, that God can present a case that no being could counter or fail to see the wisdom of. In fact, our innate selfishness would likely say, “This is a great deal; don’t pass it up!”

The traditionalist will likely protest that we only have this life, then the Judgment. We have to learn to trust and believe in God now before we die and before the Second Coming. The problem with that view is that we see through a glass darkly.2 Interestingly, that is not talking about glass as in the glass bottle or even the bottom of a glass. No, it refers to a looking glass more commonly called a mirror, a mirror without glass at all. The ancient mirror was simply polished metal bronze or silver. Metal, as anyone who owns silver knows, tarnishes and dulls with time. What is more, it points us back to ourselves. Now we have this warped view of ourselves and God and theology but one day we will see Him
face to face. Why depend on the warped view today of what will someday be known for sure? Does that really sound like the way a God of love would act toward His hurting creation?

So, why be a Christian or belong to a church if all people will be saved? Isn’t the reason to follow Christ so that we will be saved? God through Christ is the one who reveals that salvation is the gift of God. It is not something you earn by keeping a list of rules or sacrificing lives or property to gain favor with God. Christ has revealed God’s love, forgiveness and acceptance, that God desires to heal you and be reconciled with humanity. The purpose of the church is to point to this love, forgiveness and reconciliation and encourage those things in people’s lives. Thus, the members of a church that believes in Universalism move from knowledge-based salvation to practical healing of relationships with other people. Which I would think is an even higher calling than personal salvation by believing the right things.

Does that mean, then, that all religions are equal? that they all lead to the same place? Unfortunately, all religions are not equal; not all religions lead to healing and helping relationships with other people. Keep in mind that aside from the practical aspects of a religion, the good things it does or the evil things it does, its supernatural claims remain unverifiable. The Islamic terrorist who cuts off a journalist’s head in pursuit of his religious goals, whether for the glory of his god or the establishment of his caliphate, is judged by us on his actions rather than his beliefs. However sincerely that person may believe that he has the truth and is following the dictates of those beliefs, those beliefs are still unverifiable so the actions must be what we judge.

Sadly, many contemporary people feel that there’s no place for judging other people’s actions. But the reality is that everyone has to make those kinds of judgments; those who say that we should not judge are themselves judging. Hypocrisy does no one any good in the long run. You probably can’t judge someone’s sincerity of belief or determine whether a belief has caused a certain action. But the action remains, and everyone still is responsible for his or her actions. In any society, actions must be examined and judged as to whether they help build up or tear down.

Needless to say, from a Christian point of view such things are not arrived at by a literal reading of the Bible. In fact, almost no one actually interprets the Bible literally. Not even the writers and those who first received the writings of the Bible books. A good example is the doctrine of hell. Some denominations hold very high authoritative views of the Bible but don’t accept that there is an eternally burning hell. Others believe that hell is not fire but just separation from God. Hell serves as a good example because there is no evidence in the real world to support one view of it or another. Most of the many supernatural events and ideas contained in the Bible have no real-world evidence to back them up. So the Bible is probably the least problematic of the foregoing reasons for a universalist view.

Where does this leave the universalist? Universalists recognize that there are numerous different ways for people to draw meaning from their religion. A fundamentalist requires a strict set of rules to be followed. He finds comfort in his “knowledge.” His belief is a special kind of knowing. Liberal Christians find more comfort in being able to reason out what they should and should not do. The problem comes when one’s beliefs cause danger and threats to other people. This we see most clearly now in Islamic factions. But at one time or another, we have seen such beliefs on display in Roman Catholic Christians or Protestant Christians, such as their persecution of Mormons. (Mormons themselves persecuted others; e.g., the Mountain Meadows Massacre.)

One of the important Bible verses applicable here is “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (Isaiah 5:20). We judge evil and good by actions, and that is not always easy. America drops an atomic bomb that kills over 100,000 people but ends a war which very likely would have killed millions more. Some evil can result in good. Joseph was sold into slavery that turned out for the good of both Israel and Egypt. But society agrees about numerous other evils, such as pedophilia, taking innocent people hostage for ransom, etc. Stoning or beheading homosexuals is evil; it is not evil to believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman. In free and democratic governments laws can be changed when enough people want the laws changed. Disagreeing with a law is not evil either. A motorcycle operator may not agree with a helmet law, but that does not make him evil; it depends on the law. A sharia law Islamist may disagree with a law of murder so that he can perform an honor killing. That very well could be evil. There are going to be many factors to consider and no one is going to escape this life without judging such things and
making decisions. The case has to be made citing evidence and reason; a belief in something unknowable should carry the least weight in any decision process.

Something else is probably pretty important and is paid a lot of attention by people when they talk about their Christianity – a relationship with God. This idea is mentioned a lot but is very ill-defined. You are supposed to establish and maintain something entirely foreign to every human being, namely, a relationship with someone not here, with someone you can’t see or hear or touch. Every other relationship we have includes our being able to see and hear or write back and forth, to communicate in some type of direct matter. Thus, when the traditional Christian talks about a relationship with God, he is not using the term in any of its practical applications to people. This is really a serious problem in terms of language and in terms of understanding God. The best that Christian religions can say about this relationship and communication is that God wrote us a letter a couple thousand years ago that we call the Bible. Or perhaps when you ponder something you will get a “burning in your bosom,” as the Mormons would say. Or maybe it is the still small voice that speaks to you, but how do you tell that voice from your own voice in your thoughts? We are left in a very confused position. Those who claim to have more truth than any other religion must realize that they may not know as much as they think they do – about God, about themselves or others, and certainly about the future.

Practically every paragraph above deserves its own article and I would encourage those interested to explore the topics further, even though on first glance something such as universalism seems to be both a dangerous concept and a greatly expanded conception of the love of God.


21 Corinthian 13:12, KJV
Debbonnaire Kovacs, Jan. 14, 2015  

Around fifteen years ago, following an epiphany moment at a conference for Sabbath School leaders, I made the decision to be more intentional about moving out of the Adventist “salt shaker” and out of what was then my comfort zone. I began visiting other churches, making more friends that were not Adventist or not Christian at all, and generally broadened my horizons, not to mention my comfort zone. I should add that I was never one of those who “only had Adventist friends.” (Is that really true of anyone?)

During the ongoing adventure that has filled and blessed my life, one of the things I’ve learned is that other Christians don’t think of justice and mercy as opposites. In Adventist circles, I often heard (and still hear) sentences like, “God is merciful, but he is also just!” I didn’t even realize that I had absorbed a concept of justice as equal to punishment. For many Adventists and other conservative-leaning Christians, justice means making things right by giving those who messed up “what they deserve.”

In the Christian and non-Christian spiritual circles where I move, this would be startling and disturbing. The constant call, especially among my more activist friends, is for more justice. Most often, it’s titled “peace with justice.” What they mean by that is that human beings need to heed the call of Christ to bring justice to the marginalized and ignored. Even my non-Christian friends value Jesus’ ways, and are often frustrated by what they see as Christians’ neglect of, or even opposition to his teachings and example on these matters. To these people, justice means making things right by caring for children and elderly, feeding the hungry, and most importantly, by reshaping the social, economic, and political systems in which we live to make possible a world in which all able-bodied people could work and actually have enough thereby, without needing more assistance from government and other agencies.

(A personal example: In my youth, I worked at a minimum-wage job, had my own apartment, paid my own bills, had all I needed, and saved for college. Three summers ago, I worked at a slightly-above-minimum-wage job that paid my mortgage, taxes, house insurance, and gas to get to and from work. I spent the rest of my waking hours trying to make enough for all other needs.)

Adventists, of course, have always been active in caring for all who need care, both in a formal “mission” sense and in local and far-flung ways. However, it seemed to me that we were not as open and visible about trying to actually change systems as I saw others trying to do. I was delighted, therefore, to learn a year or so ago that there was such a thing as the Adventist Peace Fellowship, and I immediately joined it. If we were behind (and perhaps we weren’t; it may have been only my own ignorance of what the church was doing on this front), we are catching up now. Here are some things that are happening within Adventist communities this month.

***This week, from January 12-19, is the first annual Adventist Peace Education Week, being held at Oakwood University (watch for more news of what happens there.) Here is a quote from www.al.com concerning the first meeting, Monday the 12th:

Want to feel less discouraged about the disarray and violence in the world? Then join a protest movement, say Kathy Kelly, co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, and Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink, a pro-peace group originally organized by mothers against war.

During the evening presentation on Monday, Jan. 12, 2015, marking Adventist Peace Education Week at Oakwood University, Kelly and Benjamin took questions from the audience of about 30 about what their protests and demonstrations do. Kelly has just been sentenced and will report on Jan. 23 to a federal prison for a three-month sentence for walking into Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri with a loaf of bread and letters from Afghan teenagers she was trying to deliver to the commander of the base from which drones are controlled that are killing
people in Afghanistan.

“You always feel like a fool out there,” said Benjamin, who recently participated in a “die-in” in Senator Elizabeth Warren’s office to bring attention to the civilian deaths in Gaza from Israel’s strong-handed response to Hamas. “But that’s how a movement starts. That’s how it gets built up. That’s how it gets talked about.” [To read the rest of this excellent article, as well as seeing links to the various things mentioned, go to http://www.al.com/living/index.ssf/2015/01/peace_oakwood_university.html

***The Center for Youth Evangelism, www.cye.org, is holding its annual inSpire weekend at the La Sierra University Church. This conference is free and open to all, but is especially for what the organization calls “Adventist creatives,” that is, artists, musicians, photographers, poets, songwriters, videographers, and writers. The conference theme this year is Peacemakers: Creativity through the Lens of Peace. Learn more at www.visitinspire.org/article/189/news/inspire-2015-la-sierra. Organizers say, “This is an event where we celebrate and explore the creative process, especially within the realm of spirituality, and affirm those who want to use their gifts to share God’s message of hope.”

***Adventist Peace Fellowship has also released its “first wall calendar featuring Adventist pioneers whose lives continue to challenge and provoke as champions of nonviolence, peacemaking, social justice, environmentalism, freedom of conscience, and human rights. The 12”x12” calendar includes major U.S. holidays and days of significance to socially conscious persons of all faiths or none. Days of particular importance to peacemakers in the Adventist tradition are highlighted in red.” Get yours at www.adventistpeace.org/resources/calendar.

***REACH-NYC is offering a series of local benefit concerts titled Concerts for Peace.” Executive pastor Tony Romeo describes their goal below:

It is difficult to understand all the dysfunction that has come upon our world, but one thing I know, the great unifier of music can bring people together and as we create conversation, we can all better understand each other; and perhaps the miracle of acceptance can extinguish much of the violence that is taking place around our nation and the world.

REACH-NYC would like to offer “Concerts For Peace – Series 2015.” The first concert of the 2015 Season will be held on Saturday evening, February 7, 2015 at 6:00 PM, in the 1881 Landmark Sanctuary of Historic Manhattan Seventh-day Adventist Church, 232 West 11th Street, NYC. The concert will be given by harpist Tomoko Sugawara, joined by August Denhard, performing on the Plectrum Lute and Rex Benincasa on percussion.

“Early Music along the Silk Road” will be an exciting night of great music that is not only historical in nature, but relaxing as well.

*** You! What are you doing to advance God’s cause of peace and justice in your world?
BOOK REVIEW — Genesis versus Darwinism: The Demise of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution

A atoday.org/non-fundamentalist-evangelical-christian-objection-darwinism-not-evolution.html

Jeff Boyd

Reviewed by Ervin Taylor
January 15, 2015

A Non-Fundamentalist Evangelical Christian Objection to Darwinism—But Not to Evolution

Background

This is not a typical work by a conservative Christian apologist addressing evolution. It certainly does not conform to the typical apologetic materials published by fundamentalist anti-evolution advocates. A causal reader looking at the title may not appreciate its uniqueness. To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the author’s point of view requires that a reader consider at least the summaries at the end of each of the 28 chapters of this 425 page book.

Perhaps it also would be helpful to provide some background information about the author. Dr. Desmond Ford is well known to many belonging to an older generation of Seventh-day Adventists as an Australian Adventist theologian and evangelist. The title of his 2008 biography by Milton Hook expresses it appropriately: Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist (Riverside: Adventist Today Foundation).

Dr. Ford is probably best known to those who are familiar with the late 20th Century theological disputations within the Adventist denomination for the public statements he first made beginning in the 1980s that questioned the biblical basis on which the corporate Adventist Church seeks to support its only unique (and to many, its most problematical, controversial, convoluted and confusing) doctrine, the Investigative Judgment. To many Adventists, his detailed arguments based on biblical grounds were largely or entirely persuasive. As a reward for his efforts to advance modern Adventism’s better understanding of its traditional, historic theology, his ministerial credentials were revoked by Adventist church administrators and he became persona non grata as far as official institutional Adventism was concerned.

May I suggest that to understand the views of Dr. Ford with respect to issues considered in this book, readers at the outset might appreciate knowing that he comes at this topic from the perspective of a Christian evangelist with an intensely Christocentric Salvationist orientation. His use of language communicates his absolute dedication to a view that, to quote him “I believe in Heaven, nothing else makes senses of Earth . . . [T]here can be no lasting happiness without holiness . . . [H]oliness is so clearly identified in the person of Jesus Christ that all unanswered questions have little weight . . . I believe in the supernatural inspiration of Scripture and its offer of the gospel . . . as the foundation of all truth.” Finally, “the evidence for the divine inspiration of all Scripture is overwhelming” (viii, xi, 5).

Dr. Ford academic theological credentials are distinguished with a PhD from the University of Manchester in England. However, it helpful to appreciate that he would be the first person to tell you that the style of the approach he is taking
Summary

With these introductory comments placing the author in some context, let us review what, at least to this reviewer, seems to be the most important positions advanced in the pages of this volume summarized here under various topical headings:

Evolution: One of the most important aspects of this book is that the author accepts the reality of a procession of biological forms proceeding over billions and millions of years that constitutes the geological and paleontological history of planet Earth. That alone sets this book apart from apologetic literature issued from Christian fundamentalists including the fundamentalist-orientated conventional Adventist perspective. However, the author rejects the idea that there are “gradual transitions from one species to another” (114). He believes in the sudden appearance of different life forms over geologic time. This fact is particularly important for him in the appearance of humans in the paleontological and archaeological record. As the title of this book declares, what Dr. Ford is objecting to is “Darwinism” and its appeal to random events or “chance” in explaining major genetic changes and thus the appearance of new biological forms. To him, the principal problem of Darwinism is “Naturalism” (101). To the author, the solution to the “problems [presented by] geology, archaeology, and accepted science” is “Progressive Creationism.” His belief is “that not chance but God is behind all life in all its various stages. What scientists [describe] as the ‘abrupt’ appearance of new kinds is really the willing and creative power of God. This I believe is the clear teaching of Scripture” (181).

Genesis: The book of Genesis “is not anti-scientific nor pre-scientific, but non-scientific” (viii, 87). Ford insists that it “can be read aright in the spirit in which it was written, with its original purpose in view . . .”. Modern readers should ask what did the Genesis stories mean to its original audience (24). The text of the early chapters of Genesis “alludes repeatedly to well-known ancient polytheistic traditions and rescues what has value . . . Let us remember that Christ once told a story (Luke 16:19-31) based on erroneous beliefs of his day” (93). The author insists that Genesis “refutes the errors [of] . . . atheism, agnosticism, materialism, polytheism, pantheism, dualism, humanism, astrology, the eternity of matter, and the philosophy of eternal recurrence” (14). He suggests that “by faith we believe that God created the world. But faith is not credulity” (19). Ford argues that most evangelical scholars view Genesis Chapters 1-11 as a “different genre” in contrast to the Genesis of Chapters 12-50. Genesis 1-11 is “an antidote to false faith rather than as a lesson in biological origins . . . [it] covers an unknown vista of time” being a “global introduction to the history of one localized unknown tribe” (82-83). He suggests that, “there is a great gap between the pristine chapters two and three of Genesis which have no hint of other mortals, domesticity of animals, cities and high culture” (81).

Creation Week: As Ford sees it, the fundamental problem of those who interpret the Genesis text literally is that they do not realize that “God’s purpose in Scripture is not to make us scientists or historians but to save us, and therefore there are parabolic elements in the Genesis stories of chapter 1-11 . . . Genesis does concern a week, but it’s a parabolic not a literal week” (65).

Age of the Earth: To Ford, the “age of the earth” is the most “vulnerable point in traditional Christian belief” (xii). The author asserts that “[t]he Bible cannot rightly be used to establish even an approximate date for the age of the earth. It is nowhere interested in that topic . . . [t]he [scientific] evidence for the great age of the earth [at about 4.5 billion years] is overwhelming and fully valid for all who really want to know. . . . [Using the bible] precise dates for events before [the time of] Abraham are unknown” (66, 81). He quotes approvingly a comment of an Adventist physicist that “Fundamentalists may attack one dating method or another, pointing out sources of error and uncertainty. But this is like walking into a forest and denying its existence because many of the trees have imperfections” (68).

Age of Life Forms Including Humans: Ford believes that there was a real Adam and Eve who were “God’s climactic creations after the progressive arrival of all preceding life forms” (81, 152-157). With regard to the dating of Adam and Eve, he comments that while the “date of their arrival nobody knows . . . [m]any Christian scientists believe it must [have] been somewhere between 200,000 B.C. and 100,000 B.C.” (81).
Fall of Man: Ford believes in the reality of “The Fall” stating that it probably occurred very soon after the appearance of Adam and Eve (81).

Noah’s Flood: The author addresses directly the issue of whether the Flood recorded in Genesis was universal. While the author insists that while, in his opinion, there was “a great Flood, an ark, and a Noah,” he concludes that “[n]either geology nor archaeology testify to a universal flood millennia ago . . .” The Bible uses a “parable about a universal flood . . . Parables use everyday language with which we are familiar to teach abstract truth which is outside our experience,” (88). It is not wise to press every detail of a parable for historic or scientific truth." (59) In his view, the argument that the Genesis flood was world-wide is “based on a very literal reading of the text rather than a serious reading” (63). Finally, he notes that we don’t need to “worry about how Noah could fit in his vessel so many thousands of genera some of which had to traverse oceans and mountains” (88).

Death Before Sin: With regard to the issue of “constant suffering and death over millions of years,” he quotes the author of a 2010 work Good News for Adventists that “animals have no concept of death . . . while death is a moral problems to humans, it is not a moral problem to any animal and never has been.” Ford takes a position earlier suggested by C. S. Lewis that God “did not want it that way and is not responsible for being that way.” If God is not responsible, then who is? Ford’s position seems to be similar to that of the late Adventist theologian, Jack Provonsha, which is that “we have the right to look for a supernatural enemy of God who has twisted God’s good creation.” He also offers the interesting view quoting William Dembski that “we should understand the corrupting effects of the Fall retroactively (in other words, the consequences of the Fall can also act backward into the past.). Accordingly, the Fall could take place after the natural evils for which it is responsible”(75-76).

Commentary

In the view of this reviewer, the goal of the author in writing this book is to be commended. His motivation is based on his concern that many younger evangelical Christians, including many younger (and older) Adventists, are “giving up their faith” in large part over the manner in which their churches are advocating fundamentalist interpretations of Genesis. He comments that even the Christian gospel is “too often bound about and rendered powerless by traditional error taught [about a literal recent world-wide flood and the age of the earth and of plants, animals, and humans on this planet] in both church and home” (xiii).

The author correctly notes the problems that scientific research since the publication of Darwin’s original work has had in modifying understandings of several mechanisms that Darwin originally posited as being responsible for major changes in animal and plant forms over geological time. These differences are well-known and widely discussed in the standard biological literature. However, modern evolutionary biology considers the core of Darwin’s (and Wallace’s) understandings dealing with the process of natural selection are still very insightful. However, as pointed out in the book, there are well regarded evolutionary biologists who interpret the current scientific data as indicating that non-Darwinian evolutionary mechanisms may contribute more complete understandings of the complex evolutionary pathways that created new biological forms.

On this basis, the subtitle of this volume “The Demise of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution” is, if strictly interpreted would be considered correct. No biologist today believes in the validity of the entire range of ideas that Darwin proposed in Origins of Species. However, the core concept that Darwin and Wallace proposed, that of natural selection, is still, in a much more complex and sophisticated forms, regarded as an important scientific insight. This fact is obscured in this book.

Some may also regard the approach that Dr. Ford has taken to present his views — compiling a massive collection of quotations on a great variety of topics from the works of scientists, theologians and other scholars – as indicating that he lacks the ability to summarize the most important issues without resorting to long quotations. This is a relatively minor criticism as others may view it as a means of validating the arguments being advanced in the book.

On the other hand, from the perspective of this reviewer, the most serious lack of perspective exhibited in the book is a consequence of the author’s failure to appreciate the critical role of methodological naturalism in the conduct of
scientific-based investigations, in this case, scientific investigations concerning how and why living organisms change over time.

Dr. Ford is certainly aware of the distinction between methodological naturalism and metaphysical or ontological naturalism. We know that because of a footnote on page 101 where he states that “it is appropriate to distinguish between methodological naturalism and philosophical naturalism” (101). This reviewer would suggest that it is more than just “appropriate” to be aware of the difference. It is absolutely critical in a book dealing with this topic in the manner in which the author is addressing it.

To explain why this simple distinction is important if one wishes to have a productive discussion of this topic, it might help to be explicit about the contrasting definitions of these two concepts.

Metaphysical or ontological naturalism is a philosophical postulate or assumption about the nature of reality. It holds that all that exists, i.e., all that is “real,” in the entire universe is only, totally, and completely physical or materialistic in nature. If it does not have a physical form of some type, it does not exist. Note that this naturalism is a philosophical postulate or assumption. The arguments for and against accepting this postulate as stating something about the “real” world are philosophical or, if thought to be relevant, theological arguments.

Methodological naturalism is an operational principle of how to approach the scientific study of any aspect of the physical world. It states no postulate or makes no assumption about the nature of any presumed reality beyond physical or materialistic reality. As noted above, that task is left to philosophy and, if one wishes, theology. The “naturalism” of methodological naturalism is an “as if” naturalism. One undertakes the study of any aspect of the physical world as if the only reality is a physical or materialistic reality. Whether reality is or is not actually a materialistic one is irrelevant as being beyond the purview of any scientific-based consideration.

Methodological naturalism is one of the fundamental operational principles of the modern scientific enterprise. Because it is so basic, it is a “given” not typically formally considered or discussed among practicing scientists. That task is left to historians or philosophers of science, if they so wish.

There is a famous cartoon by Sidney Harris representing two scientists at a blackboard on which is written a set of equations and then the phrase “Then a Miracle Occurs” followed by more equations. One of the scientists is pointing at the “Then a Miracle Occurs” and the caption reads “I think you should be more explicit in step two.” The message is clear: science does not deal with miracles, i.e., any presumed non-natural or supernatural phenomena. The game it plays has certain rules and one of these rules is that all scientific explanations must be naturalistic explanations. That does not mean that non-naturalistic phenomena or explanations may not exist. It simply means that science is not designed to deal with any phenomena of any such presumed order. It can only deal with physical or materialistic phenomena. It has nothing to say about any postulated non-physical or non-materialistic expressions or entities.

As far as this reviewer can tell from reading this book, the author seems to not be sufficiently aware of, or sensitive to the fact, that the modern scientific enterprise is, by definition, totally naturalistically focused. When the author states that the problem with Darwinism is that it is naturalistic, he overlooks that this is what it is supposed to be, because the intellectual framework within which Darwinian evolution is considered operates, by definition, within a totally naturalistic and materialist framework because its arguments must be constructed within a scientific and thus totally naturalistic/materialistic contexts.

Now it is certainly correct to state that some scientists who are highly regarded by their peers in their areas of expertise in semi-popular or popular venues or in books intended to be read by non-scientists make statements that indicate that they have adopted as a personal preference metaphysical or ontological naturalism and expound on the advantages of adopting such a personal philosophy. Such an individual would naturally gravitate to holding to a classical atheistic metaphysics. We can perhaps thus correctly infer that these individuals have adopted “Darwinism” in its non-scientific incarnation. That is, of course, their absolute right. However, a personal decision on their part should in no way confuse other considerations of what Darwinism might indicate within an explicitly scientific context.
In the view of this reviewer, if the author of this book could have included an explanation of the fundamental distinction between methodological and metaphysical naturalism and the implications of that distinction as being at the center of the scientific enterprise, this could have been an outstanding book. This reviewer has the most profound respect for the intellectual and religious integrity of the author as an outstanding representative of the religious commitments that he espouses and for the willingness to publicly declare his convictions on points of theological dispute within his faith community.

The present book is an important statement by a non-fundamentalist conservative evangelical Christian that goes a long way to provide a much needed corrective on a topic that causes so much confusion in the minds of young evangelical Christians including Adventist Christians. However, in the opinion of this reviewer, the book in its present form lacks an important perspective in explaining what kind of statement the scientific approach to the study of the physical world can and cannot make. Darwinian evolution, either in its original formulation or as it has been subsequently modified, in its explicitly scientific incarnation, is not an enemy of the values that the author espouses. This is because the scientific status of Darwinian evolution or neo-Darwinian evolution or however Darwinian evolutionary concepts may be reconstructed and reconceptualized in the future, has no relevance to these values.

Perhaps the author in a second edition of his book would consider some of the points raised in this review.
Interview with Ryan Bell, Former Adventist Pastor

A atoday.org/interview-ryan-bell-former-adventist-pastor.html

Jeff Boyd

Viewpoints Interview Series #17
Ryan Bell Interview by Jeff Boyd
Submitted January 8, 2015

Welcome to Viewpoints: Adventist Perspectives on Peace, Justice and Righteousness. For 19 years Ryan Bell was a pastor, most recently the senior pastor of the Hollywood Seventh-day Adventist Church. In March 2013 he resigned his position due to theological and practical differences. In January 2014, Bell began a yearlong journey exploring the limits of theism as well as the atheist landscape in the United States, an experiment known as Year Without God. He received a Master of Divinity degree from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and a Doctor of Ministry in Missional Leadership from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

AToday: Why did you decide to do the year-long experiment in this way—blog, events, etc.?

Bell: It came up very off-handedly over lunch. There was no real strategy. I was feeling a little frustrated with my unemployment and my theological questions that were coming to the surface a bit more. I had just picked up a book at a neighborhood bookstore called Religion without God, when I was meeting a friend for lunch. We started talking about why I chose that book. I've been drawn to Alain De Botton, who had written Religion for Atheists. I knew there was this new literature, and I was really interested in it because I wasn't sure if I believed in God anymore. I told my friend at lunch, "Maybe I'll become an atheist for a year and just see how that feels."

I thought I might write a book in the end, but my friend encouraged me to write the blog. He said, "I think people would be really interested in reading about your journey because I think a lot of people are in a similar place, and I think it would be interesting to follow along."

And because I have an outlet on the Huffington Post, it seemed appropriate to post it there as well. So I put it up, and they published it, and it just went crazy, which was a huge surprise to me.

AToday: So you didn’t expect so much coverage?

Bell: Yeah, yeah. I just read again today a comment on the Spectrum blog. Someone said they were sympathetic to my doubts, they just didn’t see why I had to be so self-promoting and make a big publicity thing out of it. Which of course I didn’t do that. That sort of happened. I say this to people: I challenge you to make a media splash. Try it and see how it goes. I’ve tried before with church stuff, and at PATH we’re constantly trying to get our name out more. It’s difficult. You never know what’s going to strike a chord with people.

I had intended to visit some skeptics’ and atheists’ gatherings and meet some people. When you meet people they want you to meet other people, and the next thing you know you’re invited to this thing and that thing. It really evolved organically like that. There wasn’t any foresight into trying to create a viral campaign.

AToday: As you look back, what do you see as positives and negatives to having it such a public journey?

Bell: The negative for me is that I had less time for myself. I've had less time for my own thinking, reading, writing.
Especially at the beginning of the year and then at the end of the year.

The benefit of doing it publicly is that there are so many people who can identify with my experience and have been in a similar kind of place. They may come to a different conclusion than I have, but I think people feel validated when they hear about somebody else who did something similar or is in a similar place.

It’s very pastoral actually. There is a nonstop stream of people who say, “If you have any time, I’d love to chat.” Right now I don’t have that kind of time, but I do intend for that to be part of what I do with my life going forward. I do want to talk with people who are in between. I want to try to create a space in whatever way—and I’m not sure exactly in what way yet—for people to feel safe and not to have fear around asking these big existential questions.

It does have a pastoral quality to it, which is weird because I’m in this transition myself. I really don’t feel that qualifies me, especially during this past year, to be a guide for anybody else. But people are looking for role models. It’s pretty interesting how people put me in that role the same way they did when I was a pastor. I didn’t love it then; I don’t love it now. But there’s something fulfilling about just being with people in their journey.

**AToday:** There are many Jews who are atheists in one sense but who are still Jewish in another. Is this a parallel to where you are with Adventism?

**Bell:** That’s interesting because one of my very first lunch appointments in January of last year was with a rabbi friend of mine whose first comment was, “You’re on a very Jewish journey. Half of my congregation are atheists, so you’d fit right in.” I knew there were plenty of atheist Jews, but I didn’t know that atheist Jews went to shul.

Atheism is not that threatening to Jews, liberal Jews especially, because the narratives give shape to them culturally, and it’s not about the ontology of God as much as it is about ethics and the moral framework that the Jewish story—whether it’s exactly true according to the Torah or not—gives their family, their culture, their community.

Am I that connected to Adventism? My favorite part of not being religious is actually not being Adventist. Sometimes I miss Christianity; I almost never miss Adventism. But my friends are there, so that’s the rub. I have a lot of friends who are Adventists.

The longer I’ve been away from it—almost two years now—the more I feel that there are some things that are inherent within Adventism that are really destructive. And I know people who are trying to make Adventism a safe place for women and for gay and lesbian and transgender people. There are people who are trying to make Adventism safer, but it’s not in and of itself a safe thing for people, especially for people on the margins of life and society.

I wish the “atheist Jew” analogy were more apt. I do. But if the analogy were “Is Ryan an atheist Christian like there are atheist Jews?” then I would feel a lot more connected to that idea because I think the narrative about Jesus has real ethical value and narrative value.

I think it’s important to say that my friendships with people in the Adventist community are certainly not contingent on what I think about the existence of God.

**AToday:** Are there any pieces of Adventist identity that you hold on to?

**Bell:** I’m not doing a very good job of practicing it at the moment, but I definitely think that the rhythm of Sabbath is something that is healthy and beautiful. It doesn’t need to be on any particular day, and it doesn’t have to be from God, but I think the practice of ceasing from work and being more attentive to the important people in your life and perhaps taking a day and giving away your time to others is a very healthy practice that I picked up as an Adventist.

I think my politics, which is ironic because I think my politics was one of the problems that I got into in Adventism. But I feel like my politics around peace and justice are actually things I learned from Christianity and in part from my attempt to make Adventism more relevant.
Today: You studied pastoral ministry at Weimar. How do you see the journey or trajectory from there to where you are today? Is it marked more by continuity or discontinuity?

Bell: I’m going to wrestle with that more in some writing I’ll be doing this year. I don’t know if this is something that was part of my childhood upbringing or whether it was something that I learned along the way. But I think a fundamental impulse of conservatism is that there is this outside standard—whether it’s the Constitution in the United States or the Bible in Christianity. It’s the absolute standard and everyone has to accommodate their lives to that standard. Whereas I think I’ve always just been more classically liberal, where I thought people’s individual experiences and stories mattered a great deal. I needed to at least take into account as a serious part of my decision making process the experience of people. A concrete example, the Bible appears to say that homosexuality is a sin. But I knew lots of people who were gay who were wonderful people who loved God and wanted to be part of a congregation, so I had to really wrestle with those things.

Even though I was raised conservatively, I think there was always a seed of liberalism in me. And by liberalism I just mean that people’s personal experiences have to be taken into account. It’s not just words on a page—sort of the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. I think I’ve always been more inclined to the spirit of the law than the letter. I think that seed of liberalism for me was always there somehow, so even though I was at Weimar I valued compassion or empathy. I don’t want to imply that conservatives aren’t sympathetic, but I think that hurting people matter, and our theology has to take into account the fact that people are hurting in unequal ways. So I see it as a natural progression from Weimar to where I am today.

AToday: Beyond religion, what do you think is the best contribution Adventism can make in the world today?

Bell: I think by being true to what I take to be the original Adventist impulse, which is to not be content with truth handed down from authorities before them and instead pursuing present truth. To me no matter what conclusion you arrive at about present truth, it’s that pursuit of present truth that is the impulse of Adventism. James and Ellen White and others didn’t want to accept their Methodist or Christian Connection as final. They saw something different or something more compelling or something their intellectual forebears left out or couldn’t see. I think that’s something the Adventist pioneers—and not just Adventists—said, “No, we’ve got to go for the truth no matter what. Even if it means we have to leave our churches. Even if it means we have to suffer some relationship breakups if our families and friends don’t see things as we do.”

I lost my jobs over the pursuit of the truth, but Adventist pioneers lost their jobs over it too. I disagree with their conclusions, but I think that spirit of searching for the truth and this idea that there’s present truth—always something new to be learned or discovered—that to me is an Adventist spirit.

AToday: I think it’s safe to assume that other pastors are dealing with questions, either about particular points of Adventist theology or with God more generally. What would you like to say to them?

Bell: I’ve been thinking about how much fear is involved in the process of having these big questions, especially for pastors. Not only have we been taught that this is the truth, but we’ve also been called to ministry. And that calling to ministry feels like an absolute too. We see that absolutism when a person leaves the ministry, and colleagues say, “Oh he left the ministry,” like they really betrayed God because God called them to ministry and God can’t be wrong.

So I think there’s a lot of fear, not only around having doubts about theology, but around saying, “Do I want to be a pastor for the rest of my life. Is that required? Am I being a total fraud if I decide not to?” And also around beliefs about the afterlife. Maybe I’ll burn in hell. We don’t have a burning hell the way Baptists do, but we still have a hell in which you don’t exist anymore. So that can be pretty bad if you’re expecting to live forever with family members in heaven or on the new earth.

So my message to pastors would be: have courage. The truth can stand on its own two feet. If your belief system is true, then you really don’t have anything to worry about. You should explore it and dig into it. And if it’s not true, wouldn’t you want to know that? It’s the same kind of thing that an Adventist Bible worker would say to a Catholic.
family in their living room. “Don’t be afraid. If Catholicism is correct, then you’re fine. But if it’s wrong and I’m right, wouldn’t you want to know that?” So I would say, “If evolution is true, and creation of the earth didn’t happen in six literal days or in six thousand or ten thousand years but over a much longer period of time… If that’s true, wouldn’t you want to know that? And if it’s not true and you’re right, then great.”

There’s so much fear that’s instilled in people, not just pastors, everyone around these off-limit topics.

And I would say too—and you haven’t asked this question—if you were to ask me what is the greatest freedom I’ve experienced this year, I’d say it’s the freedom to have all subjects open for inquiry. The Adventist Review article and other comments people have written have really emphasized this. “Well, it’s because he was reading those uninspired authors.” I think other people would just call that knowledge. Not all books are true and right, but I think if there’s a god, he gave us brains to use to sort through things. One of my atheist friends says, “If there’s a god, and God created me, and the brain or mind he created me with made me inquisitive, but then he didn’t provide sufficient evidence to satisfy my intellectual curiosity, then that god is just toying with me.” So that’s a problem for a lot of people. So I think that freedom to ask, Is the earth millions and millions of years old? Is the universe 14 billion years old? That’s a great question. We should ask that question. We should talk about it. We should explore it without having predetermined answers. And the same is true for God, Jesus, the Bible, or any other topic.

This goes for atheists too. I would say any skeptic or any secular person, if they’re being faithful to their values, and I come along and I say, “Look, I’ve got this really important evidence that there’s a god,” then that person should listen and pay attention to that.

Christians aren’t the only closed-minded people out there. Not all Christians are closed-minded, and not all closed-minded people are Christians.

AToday: You said in an interview that you would love for there to be a god. What did you mean by this?

Bell: It depends on which god we’re talking about. There are a lot of gods that it would not be a good thing if they were true—the Southern Baptist God or the Westboro Baptist Church God. I want nothing to do with that god. In fact I hope that god doesn’t exist.

I think what I meant was that I think many people who believe in God hold it as kind of a general statement. They haven’t really examined it closely. They haven’t felt a need to. It’s just a worldview concept, a concept that outside of me, outside of all of us, outside of the universe, there’s an intelligence. And if you’re loosely Christian, the idea is that this intelligence is benevolent and created us and loves us and wants to create a better future for all creatures. That’s a really nice idea. I would love for that to be true. That’s a beautiful story.

I think people have this grandfatherly picture of God. God is a judge—he’s not to be screwed with—but also he loves us and he wants us to prosper and be healthy and enjoy eternity with him. That idea I think is very attractive. I think if you drill down into it, it has problems, but on the surface, I think that’s how people have this positive idea about God. My whole life was spent trying to reconcile that kind of a god concept with my experience of life and the world.

AToday: How did you choose between an agnostic or an atheist position?

Bell: The way it’s explained in the skeptic community, agnosticism is a label that refers to epistemology. It’s a question about what you think you know or don’t know. So an agnostic is someone whose posture toward whatever topic is being discussed is “I don’t know.” But atheism pertains to the question of God’s existence. So the two terms are actually about two different things. Agnosticism is about how confident you are about your knowledge. Atheism or theism is the question about God’s existence. I describe myself as an agnostic atheist, which means that I don’t think there’s a god, but I don’t know for sure. And I don’t think anybody can know for sure. At least not yet.

Most atheists are open to the possibility of discovering there’s a god. Some prefer not to even think of themselves as atheists because that’s not the defining characteristic of their lives. They’re humanists or activists of various types;
they just happen to not believe in God. It's not a big deal to them. So I would say for someone who is purely agnostic, someone who genuinely doesn’t know—it’s almost like a 50-50 proposition that there’s a god or not a god. Most atheists that I know do not claim that they know that there’s not a god. They simply say, based on the evidence that I have, I don’t think there is. It’s not a positive claim—there isn’t a god—but it’s more of a negative claim that I lack evidence or I lack a belief in a god.

Most people would say that unless they can know something is true they’re going to assume it isn’t. The default position or the null hypothesis is that there isn’t a god, and if you’re going to claim that there is, then you need to demonstrate that. So most atheists are just in a neutral position. I don’t believe in unicorns, not because anyone has proven to me that there aren’t any unicorns. Most people don’t need evidence to prove there aren’t unicorns; my assumption is that there aren’t unless someone can produce one. I think a lot of atheists have that approach to God. It seems unreasonable to believe there is a god unless there’s evidence that there is. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

**AToday:** You said in an interview that there are more important questions than if god is real. What types of questions, are more important to you and why are they more important?

**Bell:** I think one of the things that led me to where I am now is a concern that the kind of belief in God that most of us have puts our focus and our emphasis off into another world—some other time, some other place. What I think are the most important questions are the questions that pertain to how we live now. This is where I actually find Jesus to be quite a compelling character because he—sort of against his cultural stream—focused on the immediate needs of his community, the people that he encountered.

To me the question of whether there’s a god or not sort of pales in comparison to questions like How should we live with one another? What are we going to do about the climate crisis? What are we going to do about income inequality and racism? If I had to pick a way to spend my life, I would rather spend my life working on those issues than endlessly going around the question of whether there’s a god or not. I would rather focus on those humanistic questions—relationships between people, our communities and nature.

**AToday:** What would you like Christians to understand about atheists?

**Bell:** I wish Christians would not immediately jump to the conclusion that atheists are immoral or bad people with no moral compass or are nihilists with no meaning and value in their lives, that all atheists are depressed with no way to make good ethical judgments. I think that's a real fallacy. I think there are plenty of depressed Christians, and they’re are plenty of happy atheists. And vice versa.

**AToday:** What would you like atheists to know about Christians?

**Bell:** I wish atheists knew that not all Christians are biblical literalists. They’re not all homophobic and anti-women. It’s the fundamentalists that get a lot more media coverage in the U.S. than more liberal Christians.

I think we’ll all have better conversations if we can understand each other better, so a theist and an atheist can come to the conversation admitting the best in each other and talking about the actual differences that we have instead of these straw-man differences that we wish the other person would have so we could easily dismiss them.

I think atheists have to deal with the fact that there are a lot of really good Christians who do good in the world and who are happy, healthy productive members of society. That doesn’t mean there’s a god; it just means that some Christians have managed to believe in God and figure out how to live good lives in the world. And I think Christians have to realize that atheists are people who have very similar interests and values. That kind of parity in our understanding of each other would be a really good start.

**AToday:** You’ve said there are healthy and destructive ways to be a person of faith. How would you describe this healthy way.
Bell: I think anytime a person uses their moral, ethical, philosophical beliefs to channel the best human impulses to do good in the world and fight for the common good, those are things that are good expressions of Christianity that contribute to human thriving.

I think destructive ways of being a Christian are all the ways Christians can use ideology to discriminate against people who the Bible says are less or that they just think are less.

AToday: You’ve shared that a belief in the afterlife can be disempowering for action in this life. For those who believe in the “Great Controversy” theme with Jesus’ literal return, what would you want them to understand in order to be empowered rather than disempowered?

Bell: What I tried to tell my congregation is that one way of looking at eschatology is to say that we should be people who do now what we anticipate will be true one day. If we believe that there will be no more rich and poor, slave and free in some kind of future paradise, then as people who believe that, they should work to make that as true as possible now. That’s what I tried to encourage my folks about—we’re called to be people of action to produce the kinds of results we hope to one day see.

AToday: Carl Wilkens, the American Adventist who stayed in Rwanda during the genocide, told me that he believes God is active in the world through people (link to interview). I’m curious how you would react if your Christian friends said they believe God is still working through you in the world through your work with PATH or in other ways. Would that be offensive?

Bell: I think there’s a way for it to be offensive, where it comes off condescending like, “You’re still a theist even if you don’t realize it.” That’s a condescending way to say that person thinks they know more about what’s going on in my mind than I do. It’s a little offensive, but I don’t get offended easily. It’s more just wrong.

But I think that the way you’re intending it is fine with me. If you believe that there is a divine being—if we can use that word—that is superintending human affairs to some kind of good conclusion, then yeah there’s this kind of notion that anyone who is doing good in the world is doing it in participation with that process. Not all Christians would say that of course. That’s fine with me.

I think there are some forms of Christian theism that would see God as roughly equivalent to the concept of love. And so they wouldn’t see God being a being per se, a creature among other creatures, the most powerful being among all beings, but would see God as more of a force, sort of like gravity is a force that we can’t see or identify but we see the results of it. In that sense if you think love is equivalent to god—god is love, love is god—then anybody who is acting loving is acting in harmony with that, whatever you want to call it. That’s fine. We can all choose to call things different words.

The risk there is that people in the dominant society can tend to co-opt the minority position for their own. So there’s a way you can sort of say, “Let’s not focus on race. We’re all just human.” And if you’re a white person saying that, it’s very easy to sort of slip into, “Human, like me, of course. We’ll just call it human and we’re all just the same.” And a person of color might say, “Well, let’s unpack that a little more.” I think it’s also true that there is a line that you could cross in co-opting another’s viewpoint by saying, “They’re all worshiping the same thing even if they don’t know it.” But I also understand why someone would believe that if that’s truly their belief. Christians just have to understand how that can come across as sort of a totalizing kind of story.

AToday: During this year you started dating a Christian woman. What wisdom do you have for couples with different beliefs?

Bell: I think what works for us is that we’ve identified common values that in many ways transcend the question of whether we think there’s a god or not. I think if two people are romantically attracted to each other and they don’t have common values, that’s tough because one person wants to just spend money and one person wants to save money; one person wants to help the poor and one person wants to just keep it all for themselves.
Rebecca and I have more in common than not. The results of our belief systems are more in common even though on the question of whether there’s a god we differ. I’m a fan of her kind of Christianity. I was that kind of Christian myself, so I think it’s a good way of holding your faith. If you’re going to believe in something that is relatively unbelievable, then you should at least channel it for good in the world instead of harm. Rebecca is that kind of a Christian, and I’m totally supportive of that. And she supports my exploration, my doubts, my inability to make the puzzle pieces fit together. I think that’s the key—to find those common values that you can hold almost as religious values in a way. For me it’s from the perspective of humanism and for her from the perspective of Christianity. She’s working with survivors of human trafficking, and I’m working with the homeless. Unless you asked us what we thought about the existence of God, you wouldn’t necessarily know.

**AToday:** What can you tell me about the film *Year Without God*?

**Bell:** The film is being made by two guys—Ryan Moore and Tim Banks. They’ve been following me around as much as possible this year, as much as I would let them. I’m not a producer or a film maker. I’m the subject. I basically told them that they could do it.

It’s been fun. It’s going to be good. I think people will like it. I think people who think it’s going to be a hit piece against Christianity shouldn’t worry. It’s not going to be “Now Ryan gets revenge on Adventism.” It’s not going to be like that. It’s really a matter of documenting what it’s like to be in this in-between place where you’re struggling with doubts and questions. It’s one story of how someone navigated that. It should be out in the fall of this year.

**AToday:** Will there be a book?

**Bell:** I’m working on a book though it’s a slower process than I wish it was. There are no hard and fast commitments. We’ll see a book eventually, but I don’t know anything more than that right now.

**AToday:** What is the Life After God project?

**Bell:** It’s still in its conceptual stage, but my interest there is in being a companion in whatever way with people who are in a similar place and creating kind of a cultural space and a social space for people who are in a crisis of faith and trying to sort through what they believe and how it impacts their lives.

I don’t have an agenda to tear people’s faith away, but I do think that when people start having these deep questions and doubts about what they’ve been told, they don’t have a place to go or people with whom to have that conversation, so I’d like to hold that space for people in whatever way. And “in whatever way” is what I’m still trying to figure out.

I think it will include gatherings, online forums, even up to the point of doing some personal coaching. Usually coaching has to do with career coaching or life skills coaching, but this would be more like worldview coaching—what do you believe about the world and how do you go about asking those questions.
Without Spot or Blemish

Debbonnaire Kovacs

An essay by S M Chen, January 14, 2015

“That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or… blemish.” (Eph. 5:27)

My eldest sister, a good woman (I can think of no one who better exemplifies the virtuous woman described by the Preacher in the last chapter of Proverbs), had a birthday recently. An extended family celebration was planned in her honor. Although she had requested no gifts, I thought a commemorative photo book would be acceptable. Her daughters concurred. In response to my inquiry, they (somewhat to my surprise) asked if I would edit it. I assented.

In the preparation process, I perused hundreds of photographs, including those already in my possession and some submitted by family members.

Chronology affords order. I decided to start at the beginning (and even before that, with photos of our parents before they married). Some from many decades past were vintage and sepia toned.

I have a perfectionist streak, and tried to optimize each photograph I planned to use. I imported all photos into iPhoto on my computer, where I planned to edit. I discovered that many early photos could be modified but slightly. iPhoto, in the editing mode, has a feature called “retouch,” which can be used to remove blemishes. It is variably successful, depending upon the derivative original. Some vintage photos contained obvious blemishes that I would have liked to remove, but I found that I was often unable to do so. In fact, in certain instances, “retouch” actually made a given blemish worse.

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It got me to pondering about matters of ultimate concern. At the Second Advent, the redeemed will be transformed from corruptibility, presumably without spot or blemish (albeit still recognizable). By contrast, the non-redeemed will not become incorruptible and, after witnessing Christ’s triumphant return, will perish, to be later resurrected to face the final judgment.

Not that photographs have any intrinsic virtue, but I wondered if the photos refractory to “retouch” were akin to the metaphorical goats, those on the left hand of God when judgment is pronounced with finality. They resisted the forces of good that sought to influence them while they were alive.

On the other hand, those photos responsive to “retouch,” whose blemishes could be removed, might represent the metaphorical sheep, those on the right hand of God at time of final judgment.

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The photo book project turned out reasonably well, although I deliberately chose to include some photos that I knew were flawed, because I felt that the sentiments likely to be invoked justified their inclusion.

So it is with us. Sheep and goats coexist. As do wheat and tares. The sun shines on the unjust as well as the just. The sifting, we are given to understand, will occur before the Second Advent, but the final separation awaits events in the more distant future.

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While some may deem the above to be a stretch of metaphor, I recall that some of Christ’s parables involved
inanimate objects (e.g. the lost coin, the pearl of great price, the wedding garment). I believe the universe is intertwined and its components interrelated.

It is up to us to connect the dots.