A former inmate shares why prison ministry matters.

The Least of the Least

Does prison ministry do any good? Wyatt Allen should know. He spent 14 years behind bars. Find out what meant the most to him during that time.

Crash and Burn

Does your witnessing style make more enemies than friends? Paul had that problem after his conversion. Explore Paul's little-known "time out" that set him on

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The Least of the Least

Wyatt Allen

We’ve all heard of the need to minister to “the least of these,” but who is the least of the least? Notice what Jesus said:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.”

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:34-40, NKJV)

In His list of the leasts, Jesus lists those in prison last. By His own definition the prisoners are not just the least, but they are the “least of the least.” Though all may forget the plight of these precious souls, God does not. He identifies with them. He feels for them and seeks to comfort them. Jesus loves the least.

Paul writes, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8, KJV). And again, “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29, NKJV).

A few go to prison because they were falsely accused. Some are there for political reasons. Others are persecuted for their faith, as were Peter, Paul, and Silas. But the grand majority of those incarcerated in prisons around the world are those who have committed grievous crimes. The Scriptures make no distinction when we are admonished to “remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them” (Hebrews 13:3, KJV). Psalm 69:33 says, “For the Lord hears the poor, and does not despise His prisoners.” Neither should we.

I recall those in the Scriptures who at one time spent time in custody: Joseph, Samson, Jeremiah, Micaiah, Zedekiah, Manasseh, Daniel, John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, Silas, Paul, Epaphras, Andronicus, Junia, and even Jesus himself were arrested. I think of Samson and Manasseh especially, who during their time in captivity sought the Lord and repented. Samson is mentioned in the faith chapter (Hebrews 11:32), and Manasseh went back to reigning as king over Judah (2 Chronicles 33:11-16). I could repeat with them the precious words of Scripture, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (Psalm 119:71).

Prison Ministry Changes Lives

For over fourteen years, I was the least of the least. During that time, there were men and women who volunteered their time to minister to me and to others. They saw Jesus in prison grays, dressed in stripes, and in orange jumpsuits. They felt it their duty and privilege to speak words of hope and show by their actions that they cared.
While certainly not all are called to reach out to those in juvenile halls, jails, prisons, and treatment centers, those who do are making a difference for eternity. Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

These people wrote letters that would come at just the right time. I read and reread the letters that I received. A personal letter holds its value in gold when in prison; it shows that someone cares. The encouragement and counsel those letters contain have helped to see me through many hardships. Because there are so many prisoners who have scammed kind and sacrificing church members, I found that there are very few willing to write. “As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country” (Proverbs 25:25).

Visits were the most personal of all. During my time inside I received visits from pastors, elders, and elderly ladies. Friends who got to know me over the years would often come and see me as well. When I received honor status by staying conduct-violation free, I was allowed to have a food visit where the visitors could bring in a home-cooked meal. How precious were those visits! Of these people it will be said by Jesus, “I was in prison and you visited Me.”

Paul had a vision almost two thousand years ago in which a man of Macedonia asked him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Luke reports that “after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:9, 10). Paul obeyed the divine call, and notice the results: Lydia and her household were saved, and later the Philippian church was raised up.

Interestingly, it was here in Philippi, because of his obedience, that Paul ended up “doing time” himself. Paul and Silas held a worship service, praying and singing hymns at midnight! Not only did the prisoners listen to these “ambassadors in bonds,” but that very night even a jailer and his family gave their hearts to Jesus.

Do those in prison have any less need to hear the everlasting gospel preached to them than did the Macedonians? Could it be said about prison ministry: “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:2)? May we remember that “none are so vile, none have fallen so low, as to be beyond the working of this power. In all who will submit themselves to the Holy Spirit a new principle of life is to be implanted; the lost image of God is to be restored in humanity” (Christ’s Object Lessons, 96).

May the blessings of Almighty God be upon those who have sacrificed their time, their energies, their money, and sometimes even their reputation to minister to inmates. Whether it is through preaching, teaching, singing, playing instruments, or simply being there, their reward shall not be forgotten. God generously rewards those who sacrifice for those who cannot repay (Matthew 6:3; Luke 14:14; Proverbs 19:17). Interestingly, I have heard several “outmates” say that they are tremendously blessed by coming week after week to minister in prison.

It is important to consider that upwards of 95 percent of all of those in prison will one day be out of prison. They will stand behind you at the checkout counter, sit in front of you at church, or walk next to you down the street. They may very well be your neighbor next door.

Would you rather they be a spirit-filled, Christ-following, Bible-believing Christian, or just the same person they were when they first went into the penitentiary? We can make a difference now and for eternity by sowing seeds of redemption and hope among those who desperately need it.

This article is adapted from Chapter 33 of Wyatt Allen’s book The Least of the Least: From Crime to Christ, which tells the gripping story of his transformation from a teenage Satanist and violent felon to a devoted follower of Christ. The Least of the Least is available in print and e-book formats from Remnant Publications.
Crash and Burn: Transformative Lessons from Paul’s Epic Fail

Omar Miranda

“You can believe that if you want—and be wrong and burn in hell!” I shouted to a coworker while passionately pounding on the table we were both sitting at. It was our lunch break, and I was speaking to him about the Saturday/Sunday “Sabbath” debate we’d been having. I had clearly won this disagreement by sharing only the biblical proof texts and historical facts; however, the look on his face made it instantly clear that not only had I gone too far, but I had lost his respect—and his friendship.

I quickly tried to apologize, but the damage had been done. He never talked to me again—and who could blame him?

As I sat there thinking about what went wrong, I realized that the two things I was right about were my motivation and my information. I was wrong about everything else—dead wrong.

I was 26, and since the age of about 15, I had been running further and further away from God. But He hadn't given up on me, and I had finally found a real and intense relationship with God. I wanted to share Him with everybody with whom I came in contact!

Unfortunately, being the knucklehead that I was, in the process of “sharing Jesus” and maturing as a Christian, it took me several years—and many more broken, bruised, and strained relationships—to learn what I’m going to share with you. I share it in the hope that you don’t crash and burn as I did, but instead bypass all that emotional and spiritual wheel-spinning and get moving down Sanctification Road with Jesus.

Presto Chango!

Coming to a saving faith in Jesus transforms us from the inside out. The Apostle Paul himself testifies to this fact through the analogy of a total metamorphosis from one creature to another (2 Cor. 5:17). But just because we have received salvation and are inhabited by God’s Holy Spirit power, that doesn’t automatically mean we can move forward and succeed in the Christian life.

Realistically speaking, our “B.C.” (before Christ) thoughts, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors haven’t changed. In fact, it’s safe to say that once we come to a full knowledge of who Jesus is and what He’s done for us, it is then that the real work begins. We must work in tandem with God’s Holy Spirit to change who we are (Phil. 2:12) and then allow God to keep changing us in order to be effective as Christians (1 Pet. 1:8) and to grow up into the full measure of the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:13).

The early mistakes that the Apostle Paul, formerly Saul, made are instructive for us and evidence some interesting facts about the nature of identity, change, motivation, passion, purpose, and Christian growth.

Think about it: from an emotional or psychological standpoint, the things that Paul had seen, done, and experienced before his conversion (Acts 7:57–8:3) surely must have taken a great toll on him. He alludes to that in several passages of Scripture that we’ll comb to discover his secrets to a powerful and effective Christian life of deepening relationship with God.

At this point it would be wise for you to take several minutes to acquaint yourself with the biblical accounts of Paul’s conversion (there are three of them). The accounts are found in Acts 9:1-31; 22:1-22; and 26:1-23.
From Saul to Paul

Clearly Paul was a well-educated, strong-willed, highly motivated, intensely passionate individual of above average intelligence. After God got his attention and he was converted, he spent three days in meditation and prayer before meeting Ananias and being baptized. Immediately after that he began preaching to others about who Jesus really was.

Unfortunately, things didn’t turn out so well. The account (Acts 9:20-22) may sound fine on the surface, but in reality it reflects Paul going off half-cocked after his conversion. To say that he crashed and burned is an understatement. Ellen White, in her classic book on the formation and development of the early Christian church, The Acts of the Apostles, reveals that the hatred toward him and his message grew so fierce that he had to flee for his own safety (p. 125). Most likely it’s because, besides being an “eloquent speaker” with extraordinary reasoning ability, he was also “a severe critic” who “by his withering sarcasm could place an opponent in no enviable light” (p. 124). Like me, Paul did the right thing—at the wrong time and definitely in the wrong way!

Paul describes in his own words what happened after his epic fail: “I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days” (Gal. 1:17, 18, NIV).

It took the Apostle Paul a full three years to get his head screwed on straight after God got a hold of him on the road to Damascus! What was he doing in Arabia? Why was he there so long, and what lessons did he learn? The answers to those intriguing questions, in the form of five principles, will enable us to avoid many of Paul’s mistakes as we start our own Christian journey.

1. Consider Our Past

It’s important to take time to deeply consider the realities of our past core identity, beliefs, and values and make sure they square with the truth of our new reality: salvation! Just because we’ve received salvation doesn’t mean that our thinking, attitudes, values, and beliefs are saved and transformed as well.

Ellen White gives us this startling insight into what was going on in Paul’s mind immediately after his run-in with God:

> For three days Saul was “without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.” These days of soul agony were to him as years. Again and again he recalled, with anguish of spirit, the part he had taken in the martyrdom of Stephen. With horror he thought of his guilt in allowing himself to be controlled by the malice and prejudice of the priests and rulers, even when the face of Stephen had been lighted up with the radiance of heaven. In sadness and brokenness of spirit he recounted the many times he had closed his eyes and ears against the most striking evidences and had relentlessly urged on the persecution of the believers in Jesus of Nazareth.

> These days of close self-examination and of heart humiliation were spent in lonely seclusion. . . . Thus he seemed to be shut away from all human sympathy. His only hope of help was in a merciful God, and to Him he appealed in brokenness of heart.

> During the long hours when Saul was shut in with God alone, he recalled many of the passages of Scripture referring to the first advent of Christ. Carefully he traced down the prophecies, with a memory sharpened by the conviction that had taken possession of his mind. As he reflected on the meaning of these prophecies he was astonished at his former blindness of understanding and at the blindness of the Jews in general, which had led to the rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah. To his enlightened vision all now seemed plain. He knew that his former prejudice and unbelief had
clouded his spiritual perception and had prevented him from discerning in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah of prophecy. (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 118, 119)

This process continued during his years in Arabia: “He emptied his soul of the prejudices and traditions that had hitherto shaped his life, and received instruction from the Source of truth” (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 125, 126).

If we don’t take adequate time to carefully and closely consider the ugly truth of who we were before our conversion, then we can never be effective for God due to our emotional and spiritual blind spots.

2. Put Ourselves in Context

Just as Isaiah’s vision of God in all His glory and splendor rightly “reset” him and focused him for his ministry (Isa. 6:1-8), so a right perspective of who God truly is will do the same for us. Paul never forgot who God was, who he was, and the central role Jesus played in his life (Phil. 3). Paul never claimed to reach his goal of perfection. He acknowledged that he had learned a lot and was much more mature than when he began, but he admitted that he was not perfect.

Paul, writing to the Christians in Corinth, Greece, informed them that he had some sort of chronic physical condition he termed his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-10). This condition apparently limited his ministry and likely bordered on a lifelong disability. That was a big deal for him to share that sort of personal information, but after taking the time to thoughtfully and rightly consider himself and his assets and liabilities, he was able to tell them that “I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (v. 10, NIV).

Some Bible scholars believe that Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was debilitating eye trouble. This is based on his apparent large handwriting (Gal. 6:11). Furthermore, he was blinded for three days (Acts 9:9) due to seeing God’s presence in the form of a blinding light brighter than the noonday desert sun (Acts 26:13), and when his sight was restored, he had something like scales fall from his eyes (Acts 9:18). Additionally, Paul, in Galatians 4:13-15, refers to the fact that the Galatian Christians loved him so much they would have torn out their eyes and given them to him. Whatever this “thorn” was, Paul not only learned to accept it, but recognized that God could use even it for His glory.

Paul’s personal letter to his protégé Timothy expresses his sincerity and humility about who he was and, more importantly, who God is:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. (1 Tim. 1:12-16, NIV)

Contrast Paul’s humility and thankfulness for Jesus’ salvation with the pride he once placed in his family and cultural history: “If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless” (Phil. 3:4-6, NIV).
Are you starting to see the delicate balancing act that must happen with a clear understanding of who we truly are—in Christ? Once we begin to do it and do it consistently, we can get over ourselves and get closer to God. Just as a toy whose batteries aren't properly aligned with the leads can run only with partial power, so it is with our spiritual life: once we properly and correctly align ourselves with God through an admission of who we are and who He is, there’s no limit to how we can grow in Him!

3. **Confess Our Sins**

When we take the time to consider who we truly are and the lies we’ve believed and when we rightly perceive our context, God’s love, mercy, grace, and goodness will compel us to confession and repentance! We will want to get rid of all known sin, better understand why and how we sin, grasp the promises of God for victory, and make a plan for genuine repentance and further growth and deeper communion with Jesus.

Once again, Ellen White writes about Paul’s confession in eye-opening terms:

As Saul yielded himself fully to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, he saw the mistakes of his life and recognized the far-reaching claims of the law of God. He who had been a proud Pharisee, confident that he was justified by his good works, now bowed before God with the humility and simplicity of a little child, confessing his own unworthiness and pleading the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour. Saul longed to come into full harmony and communion with the Father and the Son; and in the intensity of his desire for pardon and acceptance he offered up fervent supplications to the throne of grace.

The prayers of the penitent Pharisee were not in vain. (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 119, 120)

Here, in the solitude of the desert [of Arabia], Paul had ample opportunity for quiet study and meditation. He calmly reviewed his past experience and made sure work of repentance. He sought God with all his heart, resting not until he knew for a certainty that his repentance was accepted and his sin pardoned. He longed for the assurance that Jesus would be with him in his coming ministry. (The Acts of the Apostles, p. 125)

Imagine what incredible insights Paul gained from his “down-time” during his three years of reflection, meditation, confession, and repentance! He—like us—had to spend time unlearning his old ways that led to death and allowing God’s Holy Spirit to educate him on the ways of life.

It’s because of that time he took that we have the very practical books of Romans (especially chapters 5-8), Galatians, and Ephesians, which describe so well and relevantly the internal emotional and spiritual workings of the ultimate battle that each of us daily faces with our flesh vs. God’s Spirit; as well as Philippians, which describes so beautifully the secrets of infectious joy and unspeakable contentment in any and every situation. Additionally, think of how much we as Christians have benefitted from Paul’s descriptions of the benefits of “keeping in step with the Spirit” (see Gal. 5:25, ESV) and the consequences of a lack of said relationship.

4. **Connect with God’s Church**

After Paul recognized that God wanted to use him, God connected him with a local physical church…the same church he had been trying to stamp out of existence! Can you imagine Paul’s success without initially connecting with Ananias or, after his three years in the desert, with Barnabas, Peter, or James? Even with all his spot-on self-insight and strong relationship with God, he would have continued to flounder.

You cannot ascertain God’s will or grow into maturity in Him without the church’s support, community, and
encouragement. It’s foolish of us to think of ourselves as “The Lone Ranger” and act as if we don’t need others and can make it on our own—just us and God. The person who brought us such impactful illustrations on what it means to be rightly connected to God and others (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 2-3) likely learned these lessons during his time in the desert with God and during his early ministry to God’s church, with others.

It’s no surprise that the little old White lady has some straightforward things to say about this as well:

He [God] arrested him in his course and convicted him of sin; but when Saul asked, “What wilt Thou have me to do?” the Saviour placed the inquiring Jew in connection with His church, there to obtain a knowledge of God’s will concerning him. . . . The marvelous light that illumined the darkness of Saul was the work of the Lord; but there was also a work that was to be done for him by the disciples. Christ had performed the work of revelation and conviction; and now the penitent was in a condition to learn from those whom God had ordained to teach His truth.

Thus Jesus gave sanction to the authority of His organized church and placed Saul in connection with His appointed agencies on earth. Christ had now a church as His representative on earth, and to it belonged the work of directing the repentant sinner in the way of life.

Many have an idea that they are responsible to Christ alone for their light and experience, independent of His recognized followers on earth. Jesus . . . respects the means that He has ordained for the enlightenment and salvation of men; He directs sinners to the church, which He has made a channel of light to the world. (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 120-122)

5. Move Forward with Conviction

Immediately upon his Damascus Road experience, Paul was convicted—not only of who Jesus truly was, but also of God’s great plan for his own life. However, I find it interesting that even with his initial dismal failure, Paul’s vision and mission to share Jesus still burned brightly after three years in the desert!

It’s easy—and natural—for our brand-new excitement and love for Christ to compel us to want to tell others, but Paul’s continual, laserlike focus constantly amazes me. Once Paul took time to receive the education that God wanted him to get and let go of the education that his fellow Jews had raised him in, then and only then was he able and ready to grow continually and effectively in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

Take a look at what Paul himself wrote this about his initial convictions:

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. . . . But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. (Gal. 1:11-16, NIV)

After spending time with God learning about himself and God’s ways, Paul, in the paramount passage that describes his life (Phil. 3:7-14) powerfully states three different times that there is nothing more important than knowing Jesus! The same convictions he had initially were now tempered and focused into a supreme passion to daily know more of and love Jesus.

Had Paul’s focus on mission changed? Of course not! His focus was now rightly informed by the overarching focus
of his life: to know Jesus more and more every day and become more and more like Him. Out of that would spring the rest of his life’s work—not because he was blindly following God’s orders, but because his love for Jesus naturally overflowed into everything he was doing, to everybody he was with, and everywhere he went!

May it be so with us as well. Paul loved Jesus much because he was forgiven much (Luke 7:47), and that love flowed out of him as naturally as you and I breathe.

Ellen White writes of the distinct correlation between the depth and strength of our relationship with Jesus and the clarity and power of our convictions: “As he pondered these things in his heart, Paul understood more and more clearly the meaning of his call. . . . And so, viewing the wisdom of the world in the light of the cross, Paul ‘determined not to know anything, . . . save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’ 1 Corinthians 2:2” (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 127, 128).

**Transformation Takes Time**

The Christian life is fraught with obstacles, difficulties, immense joy, and devastating suffering (2 Tim. 3:12). However, we can always be sure that God will never leave us and will be with us until the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). We can be confident that He is in us to convict us of sin (John 16:8), to empower us to draw closer to Him, and to help us succeed in becoming more like Him (Phil. 2:12, 13).

If we, like the Apostle Paul, are not careful, after coming to an awareness of our need for Jesus and His salvation, we can, in our haste, inadvertantly place obstacles in our own path of drawing closer to Him—not to mention in the paths of others! But if we take the time to deeply consider the truth of our own sinful perceptions, beliefs, values, and actions, we will then be able to clearly and rightly see ourselves in the correct context. This will help us to confess and repent of our sins, which will allow us to more fully connect with His chosen tool, the church, to help us build a relationship with Him. As we draw closer to Jesus, we will become more and more convicted of our sinfulness and deeper need of a relationship with Jesus. We will then be able to minister effectively to others.

If we make these principles our pattern of life and continue in this way, daily drawing closer and closer to Jesus, we, like the Apostle Paul, can sidestep consistent crashing and burning. Instead, we can with certainty proclaim, “He [Jesus] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may [be fully mature and] present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28, NIV).
Women’s Ordination: Events, Video, and Concerns

Valmy Karemera

As the Seventh-day Adventist Church prepares for the 60th General Conference Session this summer in San Antonio, July 2-11, the biggest issue on most people’s minds is the subject of women’s ordination.

Currently, various interest groups are voicing their opinions. Last fall, we reported about the “Women’s Ordination Symposium” by the Secrets Unsealed ministry (advocating what was labeled Position 1 at the recent Theology of Ordination Study Committee meetings). This weekend, Jan. 23-24, the Loma Linda University Church hosted “Women’s Ordination: The Road to San Antonio” (advocating Position 2).

At the same time, the third option (labeled Position 3) just released its Spanish-language version of a five-minute video on ordination. The video uses whiteboard animation sequences to explain the central elements of what advocates call “the moderate position.” Ordination Position 3 proposes a bridge between the other positions. It believes that Position 1 is correct when it sees the Bible as teaching that men have a special responsibility for spiritual leadership in both the home and the church. But it also views Position 2 as correct in reading the Bible to allow for variance from these patterns of male leadership to further the work and mission of the church in particular times and places. The result is a position that proponents hope may allow the church to move forward in unity, even while allowing diversity of practice on the question of ordination. The videos were created by Nathan Dubs, an M.Div. student at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, and are based on a paper by Seminary professor Nicholas Miller. Both the English and Spanish versions of the video can be found at http://www.moderateway.com/#!video/mainPage.

Moving Toward Division or Unity?

The closer we move toward San Antonio, the more divided the church seems. It appears this renewed focus by various interest groups is what recently prompted the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) to write:

*The BRI is quite concerned about some fallouts of the current debate. It seems that after the Theology of Ordination Committee (TOSC) finished its work, the dispute reached a new level that, in our opinion, is detrimental to the Church and to church members—that is, those directly affected and those listening to the debate. We have the impression that the discussion is no longer on a biblical-theological and factual level but that individuals and groups are being heavily criticized and condemned by others. In theology we refer to these as ad hominem arguments. Here are some potential effects of such an approach:*

1. *Ad hominem arguments not only hurt people but may also create hostility between the attacker and the attacked, destroy trust, and hinder future cooperation and teamwork. In the end we may have a split within the Church—if not visible, then invisible. This may hinder the unity and mission of the Church for years to come.*

2. *Quite likely, onlookers will also be affected. Non-Adventist observers of the debate may be appalled by what they see happening in Adventist circles and what they read on the Internet. Thus the debate may have negative effects on the Church’s outreach and on its reputation in the general public.*

3. *The same may be true of our church members and young people. The ordination debate has*
nothing to do with the Bible’s most fundamental teachings. It does not belong to the core of Adventist beliefs. Hence, it is all the more disturbing to church members when they see people involved in the debate avoid, offend, and judge one another because they are on different sides of the ordination debate—and they see little to nothing of the divine love that Jesus wants His disciples to exhibit. This may raise serious doubts about the Church in the minds of church members.

(4) Another major problem is the erosion of biblical authority and hermeneutics. It is perplexing, especially for young people, to see people who hold a high view of Scripture come to different results. As a result, they may conclude that the Bible is irrelevant to some or all issues that we face today, and that the Church has failed to articulate a methodology that brings us all to the same conclusions. This is very serious because such a conclusion would destroy the foundation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Amidst these differences, how shall the church reach the unity of John 17—a prerequisite to effective evangelism? A time of crisis like this calls for serious prayer and the wisdom from above.
(Re)Defining American Religious Liberty

Valmy Karemera

Once again, religious liberty is in the crossfire. The firing of Atlanta fire chief Kelvin Cochran over his personal views on homosexuality has reignited the debate about religious vs. sexual liberty.

But who defines freedom and its limitations? Has religious liberty become a relic of the past? Has it become a “myth,” an “impossibility,” or a “tragedy”? We may disagree, but one thing is obvious—religious freedom is being redefined before our very eyes.

Commenting on the dismissal of Cochran, the New York Times editorial board wrote:

"Mr. Cochran said he was fired “for no reason other than my Christian faith.” But he and his sudden coterie of supporters have it backward. This case is not about free speech or religious freedom."

Interestingly, Julie Roys, writing an op-ed in the Christian Post, finds parallels between Kelvin Cochran and the recent Charlie Hebdo terror attack in France. She notes,

"Even those who said they found Charlie Hebdo’s cartoons offensive or racist, defended the magazine’s right to publish freely. “If speech rights only protected polite comments that everyone could agree with,” writes James Poniewozik in Time, “we wouldn’t need them.” Similarly, Matt Yglesias at Vox wrote: “The legal right to free speech requires that people’s right to speak freely be respected legally. That means no legal sanction for publishing racist cartoons . . . and it means that the law must protect you from acts of retaliatory violence.”"

"Ironically though, none of these righteously indignant journalists wrote anything to support another victim of strong-arm speech suppression last week. Granted, this victim was spared his life. Yet, Atlanta Fire Chief Kelvin Cochran was stripped of his livelihood and a career that had been his passion for more than three decades. Why? He dared to write in a devotional book that homosexuality is a “perversion” and that homosexual acts are “vile, vulgar and inappropriate.”"

In today’s culture wars on issues such as homosexuality, the line distinguishing conscience and coercion is fast becoming blurred. As The Compass Magazine previously reported, religious freedom is undergoing cultural redefinition (and neutering?). The prophecies of Revelation 13 speak about these events. “But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28, NASB).
Newsweek Cover Story Blasts Reliability of Bible

Valmy Karemera

*Newsweek* magazine starts 2015 attacking the veracity of the Bible. The magazine’s cover story for January 2015—“The Bible: So Misunderstood It’s a Sin”—attempts to show the illegitimacy of the Bible as a trustworthy and divinely inspired book.

While acknowledging the historicity of the Sabbath (Saturday) and its subsequent change to Sunday, *Newsweek* author Kurt Eichenwald claims no one has ever read the Bible. He writes,

> No television preacher has ever read the Bible. Neither has any evangelical politician. Neither has the pope. Neither have I. And neither have you. At best, we’ve all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times.

About 400 years passed between the writing of the first Christian manuscripts and their compilation into the New Testament. (That’s the same amount of time between the arrival of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower and today.) The first books of the Old Testament were written 1,000 years before that. In other words, some 1,500 years passed between the day the first biblical author put stick to clay and when the books that would become the New Testament were chosen. There were no printing presses beforehand or until 1,000 years later. There were no vacuum-sealed technologies to preserve paper for centuries. Dried clay broke, papyrus and parchment crumbled away, primitive inks faded.

Back then, writings from one era could be passed to the next only by copying them by hand. While there were professional scribes whose lives were dedicated to this grueling work, they did not start copying the letters and testaments about Jesus’s time until centuries after they were written. Prior to that, amateurs handled the job.

These manuscripts were originally written in Koiné, or “common” Greek, and not all of the amateur copyists spoke the language or were even fully literate. Some copied the script without understanding the words. And Koiné was written in what is known as scriptio continua—meaning no spaces between words and no punctuation. So, a sentence like we should go eat mom could be interpreted as “We should go eat, Mom,” or “We should go eat Mom.” Sentences can have different meaning depending on where the spaces are placed. For example, god is nowhere could be “God is now here” or “God is nowhere.”

It is true that today’s Bible is a translation of the original manuscripts. However, as clever as Eichenwald’s argument may appear, he fails to grasp the nature and process of biblical translation and copying. Moreover, the author greatly undermines the degree of accuracy various manuscripts render to the authenticity of the Bible. Concerning the trustworthiness of the New Testament manuscripts, the famed scholar F.F. Bruce asserts,

> The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as
beyond all doubt. It is a curious fact that historians have often been much readier to trust the New Testament records than have many theologians. Somehow or other, there are people who regard a ‘sacred book’ as ipso facto under suspicion, and demand much more corroborative evidence for such a work than they would for an ordinary secular or pagan writing. From the viewpoint of the historian, the same standards must be applied to both. But we do not quarrel with those who want more evidence for the New Testament than for other writings; firstly, because the universal claims which the New Testament makes upon mankind are so absolute, and the character and works of its chief Figure so unparalleled, that we want to be as sure of its truth as we possibly can; and secondly, because in point of fact there is much more evidence for the New Testament than for other ancient writings of comparable date.

There are in existence about 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in whole or in part. The best and most important of these go back to somewhere about AD 350, the two most important being the Codex Vaticanus, the chief treasure of the Vatican Library in Rome, and the wellknown Codex Sinaiticus, which the British Government purchased from the Soviet Government for £100,000 on Christmas Day, 1933, and which is now the chief treasure of the British Museum. Two other important early MSS in this country are the Codex Alexandrinus, also in the British Museum, written in the fifth century, and the Codex Bezae, in Cambridge University Library, written in the fifth or sixth century, and containing the Gospels and Acts in both Greek and Latin.

Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar’s Gallic War (composed between 58 and 50 BC) there are several extant MSS, but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 900 years later than Caesar’s day. Of the 142 books of the Roman History of Livy (59 BC-AD 17) only thirty-five survive; these are known to us from not more than twenty MSS of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books iii-vi, is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of the Histories of Tacitus (c. AD 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his Annals, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of his two great historical works depends entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh. The extant MSS of his minor works (Dialogue de Oratoribus, Agricola, Germania) all descend from a codex of the tenth century. The History of Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC) is known to us from eight MSS, the earliest belonging to c. AD 900, and a few papyrus scraps, belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (c. 488-428 BC). Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals. (F.F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?, p. 10)

Just like the New Testament, the Old Testament can be trusted. In 1947, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls cemented the authenticity of the Old Testament. Before this discovery, the complete Hebrew manuscripts available were from A.D. 900 on. The incredible “significance of this discovery has to do with the detailed closeness of the Isaiah scroll (125 B.C.) to the Masoretic Text of Isaiah (A.D. 916),” according to Josh McDowell (The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict, 78). Despite a 1,000-year-plus difference between the two manuscripts, the remarkable accuracy of the scribes and the closeness between them is simply astonishing.

It was the Biblical archaeologist and the foremost authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls, W.F. Albright, who once said, “We may rest assured that the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible, though not infallible, has been preserved with an accuracy perhaps unparalleled in any other Near Eastern literature” (Gleason L. Archer, Jr., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974, 65).

If it were a legal case, a cross-examination of the witness on the stand (these manuscripts) would provide fingerprint
evidence to put the case beyond any reasonable doubt. The evidence marshaled by these manuscripts throughout the corridors of time gives any sincerely searching person confidence in the Bible as the inspired word of God. Unfortunately, Eichenwald will not rest until he lays the ax at the foundation of the Bible—the story of creation. He writes,

> Few of the Christian faithful seem to know the Bible contains multiple creation stories. The first appears on Page 1, Genesis 1, so that is the version most people tend to embrace. However, it isn’t hard to find the second version: it’s Genesis 2, which usually starts on the same page. Genesis 1 begins with the words “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”; Genesis 2 starts with “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.”

> Careful readers have long known that the two stories contradict each other. Genesis 1 begins with expanses of water that God separates, creating the earth between them. Genesis 2 describes a world without enough water, which is then introduced. Vegetation exists before the sun and the stars in Genesis 1; it’s the other way around in Genesis 2. In Genesis 1, man is created after plants and animals; in Genesis 2, plants and animals come after man. In Genesis 1, Adam and Eve are created together; in Genesis 2, Eve is created out of Adam’s rib.

Given *Newsweek*’s broad readership, statements like these are simply a disservice. Any serious student of the Bible knows that there is no contradiction between Genesis 1, 2, and 3. Briefly, the alleged contradiction stems from the “Documentary Hypothesis,” which claims the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but rather by different authors later in the history of Israel. The theory gives four main sources: “J” (for Jehovah), “E” (for Elohim), “D” (for Deuteronomist), and “P” (for the Priestly writer). These allegations are nothing new.

In the mid-20th century, a renowned Jewish and biblical scholar, Umberto Cassuto, gave a devastating critique of this theory in his six-lecture course entitled *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1941). Cassuto discussed these five aspects of the hypothesis:

1. The use of different names for God
2. Variations of style and language
3. Contradictions in the text
4. Duplications and repetitions
5. Signs of composite structure in the text.

Space and time do not permit me to go through each of his observations; however, readers can find them here.

Professor Randall W. Younker of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary sums up the critique against the theory:

> A close reading of the text suggests that chapter 2 does not offer a Creation account that contradicts chapter 1. Rather, the point of Genesis 2:4-9 is to explain the origin of four things that were not a part of the original creation described in chapter one: (1) thorns; (2) agriculture; (3) cultivation/irrigation; (4) rain. Chapter 2 informs the reader that each of these things was introduced as a direct result of the entrance of sin. Thorns, plants requiring cultivation, and a human race that must till the ground for its food are introduced in Genesis 3:17, 18 as curses or judgments immediately after the fall. Although rain is not mentioned until the Flood, it, too, comes as a curse—a judgment against humanity’s sin. Thus, rather, than a contradiction of chapter 1, these early verses in chapter 2
actually serve as a bridge between the perfect creation of Chapter 1 and the introduction of sin into the world in Chapter 3. (Randall W. Younker, “Are There Contradictory Accounts of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2? Genesis 2:4-6” in Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers, 122, 123)

All in all, there are several things to note about this *Newsweek* article. First, Eichenwald’s sources are mainly liberal scholars; Friedrich Schleiermacher is noted as the father of modern theological liberalism.

Albert Mohler sums it up well:

[The author] really does not address the subject of the Bible like a reporter at all. His article is a hit-piece that lacks any journalistic balance or credibility. His only sources cited within the article are from severe critics of evangelical Christianity, and he does not even represent some of them accurately.

Second, a text without context is a pretext. Many of the author’s textual criticisms ignore the context. Third and most important, the author willingly ignores the traditional Christian understanding and interpretation of the Bible. Ironically, not only does Eichenwald’s article show his own Biblical illiteracy, but his misleading of many is a great sin.