Male & female: balancing their roles in the church
The Bible our final authority

George Reid’s article (November 1991) is a useful survey of various theological positions on the authority of the Bible. I paid nearly as much attention to what he did not say as to what he did.

In the first paragraph Reid refers to John Locke’s “contention that in every person resides a self-directed autonomy not to be abridged except by permission of the possessor,” and attributes to this the challenges now issued by “extremists” against all kinds of authority.

Adventist thought rejects the concept of degrees of inspiration. Even a partial acceptance of some historical, grammatical, and critical views becomes acropper. “Unsuitable,” we are told, for a “prophet-oriented” view such as the Adventist one.

Reid’s article closes with an admonition to make accommodations for the errors inevitably involved in human effort and to suspend judgment on problems of biblical authority until we get to heaven and can then clear them up with information not available to us now.

Suppose that a reader peruses Dr. Reid’s article and accepts the high view of Scripture that he recommends; suppose further that this reader testifies that he or she did so, not because the argument appeals to reason, but because the Bible, Ellen White, and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and its officials, such as Dr. Reid, are authorities. Would Dr. Reid be happy with such a result? I think not.

On the other hand, if you please, suppose a reader accepts Reid’s views because the arguments put forth appeal to his/her “self-directed autonomy”? Suppose, further, that, as an act of permission by his/her autonomy, he/she rests in the sufficiency of the evidence put forth that these agencies and persons are, indeed, authorities. Would Dr. Reid prefer this outcome to the other? My guess is that he would.

So would everyone else.

Christians didn’t get their view of free agency—moral or doctrinal—from Locke; it is one of the foundational planks of our Protestant theological platform. It was and is to preserve this high view of human agency that the martyrs gave their lives.

No authority can take the place of our God-given autonomy. I accept the authority of Scripture, but it is I who do it, and no other kind of acceptance would be worthy of its authority.—Sydney Allen, Redlands, California.

Confused over the basis of salvation

After reading your attempt to remove the confusion from justification and conversion (July, November, 1991), I felt compelled to write. If you have ever experienced your extreme wretchedness, if you have ever felt the restlessness of a heart separated from God, if you have obtained riches and honor only for them to mock you because they did not give you the joy and happiness that you so craved, if you have experienced these things, and then realized the great gift Jesus gave on the cross, and felt the great joy that comes from being forgiven, peace would flood the soul in uncontrollable currents until the whole life is engulfed with joy, happiness, and love for God.

You cannot separate forgiveness of sins from conversion of the heart, for the heart is changed when it sees and feels the great gift Jesus gives. Conversion experience is much like the wind: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

If justification can happen without the change of heart so that I am still unhappy, restless, pursuing riches and honor, and feeling my extreme wretchedness, then I don’t want justification. I must have the entire package with the heart conversion or none of it at all.

It is because of this wonderful, priceless heart conversion that I decided to accept Jesus as the Ruler of my life, at the cost of being disowned by my family and of losing my friends and “career.” Jesus is my reason for living.—Laura Hamilton, Truckee, California.

As a layperson with no theological training (other than the “Bible” classes taken in academy and college), I have read with interest the articles “Confused Over the Basis of Salvation,” “Justification and Conversion Revisited,” and “Allaying Confusion Over Salvation.” Having read all three, I am thankful I am a layperson!

What difference does it make whether salvation’s events are “linear” or “simultaneous”? What matters is that Jesus does it all, when I choose to let Him do it all. I need not worry about whether there are two wheels to a bicycle, or whether there are six events (conviction, repentance, confession, forgiveness, conversion, sanctification) in the salvation process. Interestingly, “justification” does not appear in Moore’s six-event list, though I gather, from reading his article, that he also recognizes the importance of justification.

PS: I happen to be Mr. Moore’s “live-in lover” and wife, but I did not discuss my view, his views, or the articles until after I had formed my own simplistic ideas! I also asked him what would happen if theologians would stop splitting fine theological hairs, and find other ways to use their energy.—Lois Moore, Caldwell, Idaho.

The issue of “what is necessary for salvation” revolves around our understanding of “repentance.” Repentance and faith are the two necessities for conversion. Repentance is turning from self, and faith is turning to God.

(Continued on page 21)


"Oh, no! Not a woman!" That outburst was something less than an expression of affirmation from a college professor to an 18-year-old medical student. Elizabeth Ostring survived such male chauvinism to graduate and become a missionary doctor. From her rich ministry of 27 years she writes one of our articles. Her concept of "enabling ministry" for women greatly enriched my own understanding. Also contributing to the ongoing discussion of the role of women in the church is Iris Yob’s "Male and female: balancing their roles in the church."

One thing I appreciate about working at Ministry is the fearlessness of editor David Newman. He will tackle any topic, however controversial, if the integrity of the gospel is at stake. Hence this month’s major article, by Richard Fredericks: "The moral influence theory—its attraction and inadequacy."

Upon arriving in Washington, my family and I enjoyed a month of hospitality in the home of Floyd Bresee, world leader of the ministerial association of Seventh-day Adventists. The carpentry skill invested into the handrail on his stairway intrigued me. It was Floyd’s own handiwork. He brings the same precision craftsmanship into sermon preparation, as evidenced by the latest in his series on sermons resources. Rex Edwards, seminar director of the Association, adds his own expertise in "More than preaching."

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### Shop Talk

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More than preaching

Rex D. Edwards

Christian ministry is a gift. It is the gracious provision God has made in Jesus Christ for doing His work in the world. That work is essentially telling the story of salvation, the proclamation of something that has happened in and to human history, the showing forth of a new relationship to God in Jesus Christ.

So ministry is subordinate to its message and is rooted in Christian proclamation. What are the characteristics of that proclamation?

To begin with, Christian proclamation is not adding something to the story of God’s saving acts—as if we could stand off at a distance from them and decide dispassionately (not to say gratuitously) that there is something in them worth talking about. On the contrary, Christian proclamation is given in, and is integral to, those saving acts.

This is seen in the Pentecostal experience, which led to the founding of the apostolic church: “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). What did the apostles speak? God’s saving acts. Make of this proclamation an afterthought, and the event itself becomes abstract and unrelated, which is to say that it loses its saving character. Indeed, the proclamation is the evidence of, as it is the witness to, the power of what God works in us.

This inseparable relation of God’s act and man’s proclamation as a single event is illustrated most conclusively in the designation of Jesus Christ as the “Word” (cf. Luke 4:18, 19, where the relation of the divine Word and the human word is emphasized).

Second, Christian proclamation is not something that is given in a formless encounter and practiced in a formless setting—as if God addresses us in isolation from our human context and entrusts us with proclamation without its situation. On the contrary, Christian proclamation is given to individuals—to be sure, individuals in the church, through the church, for the renewal of the church. To say this is not to set human and arbitrary limits to God’s freedom of action, but to make a simple statement that every Christian must acknowledge: we have been brought to a saving relationship to God, not outside the church, not in spite of the church, but precisely in and through the church.

If this is so, then certain conclusions follow:

1. Because proclamation of God’s saving grace is given in, through, and for the church, it follows that the church is the preacher rather than any single individual within the church. The task of proclamation is given to the whole body of Christ’s faithful, who are called into the body of Christ by God’s saving action and the proclamation given in it.

2. The church, in response to God’s action and in fulfillment of its proclamatory task, bestows this gift of ministry to the individual who is called to minister and to preach. That minister, then, stands within the church and speaks to the church in behalf of the church. This is not to say that the preacher may not speak as preacher to those who stand outside the church, but that his first and absorbing responsibility is to address the church with the word of salvation.

3. Other members of Christ’s body, not set apart for the special ministry also exercise their task of proclamation. They have their own “apostolate” by virtue of their personal relationship in and to Christ and the church. This ministry of the laity includes both a priestly concern and a pastoral regard for each other—and for their minister!—within the church. But it does more. If Christian proclamation is given to and for the church, it is also given to and for the world. The chief means whereby proclamation to the world is achieved is not the special ministry but the lay apostolate. It is the ministry of the laity to “go into all the world”—the world of business, education, and the home—and “preach the gospel” throughout all the orders of society.

4. Christian proclamation is never done adequately only through preaching, that is, through verbal communication. What was revealed in a life—preeminently in the life of Christ and then in the life of the church—can be communicated only in life. Proclamation requires more than verbal expression; it requires a moral earnestness, a live model. The living out of God’s message of salvation in the life of the Christian community is the most effective means of its proclamation. Indeed, verbal communication from the pulpit or in the marketplace, however faithful to the Scripture, is often devastated by inconsistencies between the message and the life. Therefore, the community of believers within which, or on behalf of which, proclamation takes place, cannot afford to have a life governed by any norm other than that of reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

What this means is that the life of men and women within the church ought to be that life which is appropriate to those who are reconciled to God in Christ, and thus
reconciled to themselves and to each other. In a world marked (perhaps scarred) by division, loneliness, and alienation, the word of God's saving reconciliation can be spoken effectively only from within that community whose life bears witness to the power of forgiveness and reunion. Thus the life of the church is both the means and the test whereby the proclamation of the Christian message is effected and judged, and our faithfulness as witnesses is either attested or condemned.

Is your God able?

John M. Fowler

The king spake and said to Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions?" (Dan. 6:20).

Swift was the decree and savage were to be the consequences. The pride of the king, pushed by the sycophancy of his followers, made the king feel equal to God. Power, so tempted, quickly transformed itself into arrogance, and the decree was issued: Worship no god but Darius the king or else face the hungry lions. The order posed no problem to the ordinary, to the power-crazy, to the compromising, and to the opportunistic. But while the empire bowed its head and bent its knee to Darius, there was a man whose head could bow only to God, and whose knees could bend only to converse with his Creator. Daniel defied death and chose to stand for his faith, his belief, and his God. The result? Daniel in the lions' den. The empire awaited Daniel to disappear in the lions' inner regions. At that moment of intense crisis and anticipation, the king asked that crucial question: Is your God able?

The story ended happily. God was able to deliver Daniel. Faith stood vindicated; pride defeated; truth victorious. But the question and the answer stare down the centuries, and challenge our own experience to establish three facts: God is, God is able, and God is able to save.

God is. The fact of God is not dependent on the fact of man or woman. A Darius can say that there is no god but him. That proves nothing but the folly of the arrogant. A Voltaire can say of God, "We nod, but we do not speak," but that kind of sophisticated indifference leaves one neither here nor there. A Nietzsche can say God is dead, but in the depth of his soul he discovers a vacuum and wonders if there is a God after all. On the other hand, a disciple John can testify: "In the beginning . . . God" (John 1:1-3). Or an apostle Paul can shout to the world: In God "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Or an Augustine can climb out of the gutters of lostness to reach for the stars and affirm: "My soul was restless until it found its rest in God.

God is able. God not only is, but is able. The testimony of the Bible is about a God who acts. Out of chaos He brings about creation. Out of darkness He ushers in light. Out of bondage He causes freedom to rise. He says; it is done. He commands; it is so.

But the ability of God cannot imperiously command human acceptance. It awaits the reach of faith. But what kind of faith? Says Francis Schaeffer: "In Christianity, the value of faith depends upon the object towards which the faith is directed. So it looks outward to the God who is there, and the Christ who in history died upon the cross once for all, finished the work of atonement and on the third day rose again in space and in time."*}

Only faith that lives at the call of the Almighty, without compromise on principles or submission to personal convenience, can find that God is able. Only where integrity is not for sale, where the soul is not for exchange, where the spiritual is not bargained away in preference to the mundane, where the other is not crushed in order that the I may survive, where the cross is the basis of it all, can faith discover that God is able.

God is able to save. God is. God is able. God is able to save. From what did God save Daniel? It would be childish to think that God's saving act was limited to shutting the lions' mouths. Before and beyond that, there were other acts of God's salvation. Faith in a living God sees God's redemptive activity come to the aid of a faltering soul. Before Daniel could descend into the lions' den, he had tasted the power of redemptive faith. He had experienced God's saving acts—from pride, from delusion of power, from arrogance of wealth, from self-centeredness, from sin.

To save in the sense of making us to remain in continuous relationship with God is the ultimate purpose of God's redemptive act. He saves us from guilt. He saves us from the past. He saves us from being lost. He saves us from sin. He saves us for a new beginning. The cross, then, is the ultimate assurance that God is able to save and is worthy of all our trust and faith. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Rom. 8:32, RSV).

We need, therefore, to climb a hill called Calvary before we receive that courage to go down into the den of lions. Then and only then will we discover that "he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God" (Heb. 7:25, RSV).

The moral influence theory—its attraction and inadequacy

Richard Fredericks

The moral influence theory highlights a vital truth: that God is love and He can be trusted. Regrettably, however, while affirming the patience and tenderness of God, it dismisses the legal-covenantal framework of Scripture. It denies that a loving God can respond actively to human rebellion with righteous judgments (wrath). To maintain their definition of a loving Father, moral influence scholars must sacrifice the holiness of God (His relentless antagonism to evil in all its forms) as inconsistent with His unconditional love.

Moral influence theology commendably confronts two distortions of Christ’s atonement. The first is that God is a vengeful deity whose irrational anger must be placated by humanity offering Him a blood sacrifice. The second distortion supposes that God is tragically trapped in the external demands of His own law, which forced Him to make His Son die before He could forgive sinners.

In defending God from those distortions, unfortunately, proponents of moral influence reject the reality that has been distorted. They overlook the biblical position that God’s grace (undeserved mercy toward sinners) must be true to His justice (holy wrath against sin). And so they regard His attitude toward sin as sorrowful indulgence in the face of ignorance, with no need for righteous retribution in the face of rebellion.

The cross only an illustration?

In the process, the moral influence theory reduces the death of Christ to a compelling illustration, necessary only because of its educational value for us and the onlooking universe. The cross had no atoning value to God, nor did it need to. Jesus’ death was an example for our sake: it demonstrated the natural consequences of sin as separation from the Source of life. The love of God is revealed in the costliness of this demonstration, and the power of the cross rests solely in its ability to influence positively our opinion of God.

Therefore, according to moral influence thinking, the cross was necessary only because its demonstration of God’s love influences us subjectively—not because it produces any objective change in our standing before Him. The gospel is supposed to be the good news that God was never angry or alienated from anyone in the first place. No one ever needed to fear Him. Our estrangement from God comes from our misconceptions about His wrath and justice. Divine acceptance and forgiveness are unconditional, and the essence of the sin problem is simply the fact that we didn’t know His mercy. Knowledge of God’s graciousness heals us (makes us safe to save).

Such is salvation, according to moral influence scholars. They appeal constantly to the story of the loving Father in Luke 15, where divine acceptance functions without any explicit mention of sacrifice for sin. This parable of the prodigal son, with selected proof texts emphasizing God’s love, becomes their interpretive paradigm—used not in harmony with, but as an argument against, the multitude of passages pointing to the divine necessity of Christ’s death (e.g., Rom. 5:9-11, 18-21; Eph. 1:7; 5:2; Col. 1:19-22; Heb. 9:26-28; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Rev. 1:6; 7:14).
Three flaws

At this point we can identify three positions of the moral influence theory that deny plain biblical teachings. First, moral influence scholars do not believe that sin elicits active retribution from a holy God. To them sin is essentially ignorance, causing us to live separate from God. Salvation, therefore, is accurate information about the character of God that heals us and restores us to a relationship with Him.

This leads to the second serious flaw in the moral influence theory: To the advocates of moral influence, Jesus’ death was an act of love to change humanity, but the cross in no way changed the way God views us. God did not need to be reconciled to us, but only us to Him.

The third flaw logically follows: moral influence proponents do not believe that on the cross God upheld the justice of His own moral nature while justifying sinners. Christ did not die for our sins (see Gal. 1:4; Heb. 9:15; 1 Peter 3:18), but rather to demonstrate the cause-effect relationship sin has on humanity. Moral influence theology thus leaves us with a purely subjective salvation based on information, a diminished view of God, and a unidimensional view of God that requires (as we shall see) a truncated view of Scripture and an idealized view of human potential. The gospel becomes a process of human maturation by accurate information, rather than Christ’s completed and costly redemption of an otherwise guilty and condemned humanity.

Historical roots

The moral influence theory has its roots in the teaching of Peter Abelard (1079-1144), a French philosopher-theologian and one of the keenest of medieval minds. For Abelard, the biblical term reconciliation spoke only of the setting aside of man’s misinformed hostility toward God. Jesus’ death had nothing to do with the proper demands of a righteous God for judgment on sin. Abelard stressed Jesus the example. Though he used such phrases as “redeemed by Christ” and “justified by His blood,” Abelard interpreted them exclusively in subjective human terms (i.e., our reaction to the cross “redeems” us). The dying Jesus moves us to respond to God’s love, making our own inward response of love to God the ground of our justification.

Nothing more is needed.

Though Abelard’s theory of atonement remained largely unknown to his contemporaries outside academic circles, it continued to have its champions. These included Peter Lombard (a disciple of Abelard), Faustus Socinus at the time of the Reformation, and John McLeod Campbell along with Horace Bushnell in the nineteenth century.

In our own time, Hastings Rashdall, C. H. Dodd, and A. T. Hanson have introduced the moral influence theory to the larger public. Today’s English Version (TEV) is the Bible of preference for proponents of the moral influence theory, especially when working with such key passages as Isaiah 53, Romans 3 and 5, or 2 Corinthians 5. This translation shows God’s active force, carefully alters or eliminates any references to God’s personal wrath or its propitiation through the death of Christ.

Though Leon Morris and Roger Nicole have exposed the linguistic and theological arguments of Dodd and Hanson as biblically and historically inaccurate, the writings of the latter two have inspired followers with similar ideas in many denominations. Many of these followers, including some Adventist scholars, promote their views as a “larger” picture and a “healing” versus a “forensic” model of redemption.

Distortions

It is worth repeating that moral influence theology offers a great deal of truth, beautiful and profound. Without a doubt, it has been a step forward for many Christians burdened by legalism. However, this reaction against legal categories has led to a distortion of the atonement itself. This distortion grows out of what the theory denies, not what it affirms.

Moral influence teaching denies that Jesus’ sacrifice was substitutionary, necessary by God’s holy wrath against evil. It places the legal atonement in opposition to a relational and educational model. In fact, both models are interrelated and necessary, just as a Christian marriage is both a legal (thus holy) and relational (thus loving) covenant. It is to this denial and false dichotomy that we now turn as we seek to offer a biblical response.

Seriousness of sin

According to one moral influence theologian, “the sin problem does not center in God’s opinion of man, but in man’s opinion of God. It was not God who turned away from man, but man who turned away from God.” This statement is partially true, but sets up a false dichotomy. True, our misconceptions (faulty opinions) about God are a serious part of the sin problem (“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” [Hosea 4:6]). Yes, God’s self-revelation, especially in Christ, seeks to heal this (John 14:7-9). But God’s revelations (especially on the cross of Christ as His ultimate revelation) also show His active holiness in executing just retribution against determined rebellion and pride. God punishes sin. (See Matt. 13:41, 42; 18:6-8, 32-35; 23:33; Mark 12:9; Luke 1:51-53; 12:4, 5; 13:28; 20:15-18; John 15:6.)

Scripture is filled with God’s personal statements declaring His retributive anger against sin: “They have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly. . . . Therefore, I indeed shall deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor shall I spare” (Eze. 8:17, 18, NASB; see also Gen. 6:13; Jer. 25:33; 33:5). Notice the warning of God’s wrath against human pride in Romans 2:5: “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed” (NIV).

Almost without exception, every biblical passage concerning sin combines elements of both retribution and redemption as God’s inevitable reactions to human evil: “Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him” (Rom. 5:9, NASB). “Jesus . . . delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10, NASB).

Moral influence theory affirms that from the origin of sin God in love took the initiative to save humanity—a beautiful truth. But it denies that reconciliation to God comes only through the
It is a problem of our nature. We want to be our own God, to put the desires of the creature above the will of the Creator.

righteousness of a suffering Redeemer (Gen. 3:9, 15, 21).

When Adam and Eve sinned, God banished them from His presence. They did not simply wander away because of a misconception about His unconditional acceptance (Gen. 3:22, 23). This divine reaction toward sinners—exclusion from the purity and holiness of His presence—remains unchanged. Only by means of the gospel do we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, through the blood of Jesus (Lev. 10:1-3; 16:1, 2; John 3:36; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Heb. 10:26-31; 12:29).

This is a far cry from a God whose sole problem with sinful humanity is our faulty opinion of Him.

The story of salvation in both the Old and the New Testaments builds on this tension between God’s holy wrath against human rebellion and His determined efforts to redeem the rebel. Yet one moral influence author asserts: “The focus of all true religion is on God’s endeavors to get men to change their opinions about God…He makes it clear that He holds no grudges.” The crude and unbiblical use of the term grudge seeks to gloss over the reality that in Scripture two divine necessities arise from two divine attributes: the execution of judgment because of God’s holy wrath against rebellion and the offer of salvation because of His mercy. On the cross God unleashed His hostility to evil while simultaneously expressing His self-sacrificing love for humanity.

The fear of the Lord

The Bible shows that God’s love includes justice as well as mercy. In Revelation 14 the first angel’s message is a call to “fear God” in the context of His wrath (verses 6-10). In Malachi the Lord speaks of the terrors of His coming judgment upon known pride and evil-doing, and then declares: “For you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise” (Mal. 4:2, NASB). The psalmist wrote, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10), and prophets repeatedly warned those who had “no fear of God before their eyes.” More than 200 times in the Old and New Testaments God calls us to fear Him while fearing nothing else.

Clearly, godly “fear” does not indicate a paralyzed terror of irrational outbursts from an irritated Deity. However, it does reflect a constant realization that apart from our sin-bearing Saviour there remains “only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb. 10:27, NIV). We need not fear God’s judgment because of our union with Christ, but apart from Calvary the “wrath of God” remains an awesome reality: “For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9, NIV). “Jesus…rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess. 1:10, NIV). The reality of God’s wrath is what gives such gospel terms as grace, forgiveness, and redemption their wonder and meaning.

Advocates of the moral influence theory reject the seriousness of God’s anger toward sin by diminishing the seriousness of sin itself. They package sin as an unfortunate misdemeanor based on a misnomer, easily healed and forgotten by a kind Father. But Scripture and history prove that sin is far more serious. It is rebellion against God and a violation of His person and God’s holy God forgive the repentant sinner and welcome the sinner back into His presence. The Lord is slow to anger and His anger is not a breezy assumption that God will forgive me, that’s His business but not a breezy assumption that God will forgive me, that’s His business but rather a profound dilemma: How can a holy God forgive the repentant sinner and still be true to His own character?

This fundamental tension between God’s unrelenting justice and His merciful saving grace stands at the heart of the Old Testament sanctuary and its sacrifices. The dilemma is truly and fully resolved only on the cross (Heb. 9:26-28; 10:10-18, NIV; see also Rom. 3:21-26; 8:1-7). God’s dilemma

One moral influence author suggested that the first step God takes in dealing with our sins is “stating that He holds nothing against us.” Compare this with the words of the apostle Paul: “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 5:5, 6, NASB). Our Lord relates to sin as a willful, fatal, destructive act of treason against His person and government. The prophets declared to His apostate people: “Your iniquities have made separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear” (Isa. 59:2, NASB). “The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished” (Nahum 1:3, NIV; see also Ex. 34:7). Indeed, the real biblical perspective concerning God and sin is not a breezy assumption that God will forgive me, that’s His business—but rather a profound dilemma: How can a holy God forgive the repentant sinner and still be true to His own character?

Evildoing is more than an immature and misinformed attitude. It is a mind-set bent on warring against the kingdom of God and His rule over all of life: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18, NASB; see also Rom. 8:7, 8).

The downfall of Lucifer and Judas proves that even in the light of God’s loving and gracious character our bent to sin remains. It is a problem of our nature. We want to be our own God, to put the desires of the creature above the will of the Creator (Gen. 3:5; Rom. 1:25).
God’s wrath that condemns sin is as personal as is His grace that justifies the sinner, and both are satisfied through the death of Christ.

God’s loving wrath

The Old Testament includes some 580 references to God’s personal wrath against sin; the New lists more than 100. Indeed, divine wrath is the Bible’s most mentioned theme and the backdrop that makes the proclamation of the gospel of God’s love and mercy such “good news.” But due to a diminished view of sin, the moral influence theory teaches that a God of love cannot personally experience wrath.

Moreover, such a position really removes the necessity of the cross. If God has always been “at one” with His rebellious children, the cross becomes a bit of divine overkill to illustrate what will happen in the natural flow of things if we don’t choose to believe this.

How does moral influence theology deal with the biblical references to divine wrath?

First, following Dodd and Hanson’s lead, many argue that the term wrath of God in Scripture does not indicate a personal attribute. Wrath is not a facet of God’s character at all. Dodd asserted that Paul used the term wrath “not to describe the attitude of God to man, but to describe an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe,” the inevitable process of sin working itself out in human history. Wrath is an “archaic phrase” that cannot be an attribute of God (for God is love), but identifies an attitude in man that causes him to self-destruct.

Such an argument is logical nonsense and double-talk. What process is “inevitable” or what universe is “moral” apart from the active sovereignty of God? Can the Absolute be passive to anything? As P. T. Forsyth has observed, “the one thing God could not do in the face of human rebellion was nothing. He must either inflict punishment or assume it.” In holy love He assumed it—upholding the law while saving the guilty.

The term wrath at times does appear alone, without the qualifier of God. So does the term grace. But no one suggests that the biblical theme of grace describes only an attitude within man that brings about inevitable consequences in a cause and effect universe. Both wrath and grace are personal, and both found their ultimate historical expression at Calvary (Heb. 2:9), where Christ as our substitute received God’s judgment and the sinner God’s pardon. In the context of such “holy love,” God’s wrath that condemns sin is as personal as is His grace that justifies the sinner, and both are satisfied through the death of Christ. Leon Morris comments: “The punishment consequent upon sin is just as much due to God as is the forgiveness which remits such punishment, for God is in all of life. ‘Shall evil befall a city and the Lord hath not done it?’ (Amos 3:6). . . . For it is the Lord who ‘bringeth sudden destruction upon the strong’ ” (Amos 5:9).

Others in the moral influence school discredit the biblical doctrine of wrath by simply comparing it to human anger, which is often arbitrary, vain, vindictive, irrational, and uncontrolled passion. Then they conclude: “Surely our loving Father is not like this.” Thankfully He isn’t, and such distortions should be rejected.

God knows wrath, although it is nothing like ours. Again, to quote Morris: “There is a consistency about the wrath of God. . . . It is aroused only and inevitably by sin.”15 Morris then goes on to cite approximately 30 passages in which God is “slow to anger” and aroused only because of evil.

In a similar vein, John Stott comments: “God’s anger is absolutely pure, and uncontaminated by those elements which render human anger sinful. Human anger is usually arbitrary and uninhibited, divine anger is always principled and controlled.”16 Divine anger, identified in Revelation 6:16 as the “wrath of the Lamb,” is seen also in Psalm 78:21, 22: “Therefore the Lord heard and was full of wrath, . . . because they did not believe in God. And did not trust in His salvation” (NASB). And God’s willingness to sacrifice Himself to propitiate that wrath is hinted at in Psalm 85:3: “Thou hast turned thyself from the fierceness of thine anger.”

What is unconditional?

In response, proponents of the moral influence theory argue that if love is unconditional, then forgiveness must be also. Unconditional love equals unconditional acceptance, they say, so there is no room for wrath.

This line of reasoning, however, does not bear up either in our own experience or in biblical teaching. In any healthy relationship acceptance has conditions, even when love does not. A wife may unconditionally love her husband, but cannot continue to accept him unconditionally if he abuses her or the children and practices flagrant promiscuity. Indeed, it is precisely her love that compels her to act against his misbehavior and seek justice.

Even so, God’s agape love for mankind carries no ifs or buts, for “God so loved the world.” But His forgiveness and acceptance do carry conditions. John 3:16–18 shows that the basis of all God’s actions is unqualified love for humanity, but this passage contains also a serious warning for all who refuse to accept God’s Son.
Throughout history God has executed active but partial retribution on hardened sinners to lead others to repentance (Num. 16:26-35; Acts 5:1-12). Whenever human rebellion has reached the point it threatens to silence God’s message and destroy His people, He has executed retribution to preserve a remnant (Gen. 6:5-7, 13; Num. 31:1-7; Rev. 2:21-23). And in history’s final hours when the wrath of God is finished (Rev. 15:2), God acts to destroy those who would destroy the message and messengers of the Lamb (Rev. 11:18; 14:9-11; 16:5, 6; 2 Thess. 1:7, 8; 2:8).

Circumventing Scripture

Moral influence advocates commonly use two techniques to circumvent any scripture they find troublesome.

The first is to obscure the issue by the use of emotionally loaded phrases, such as “My God isn’t a murderer.” This is a superficial yet effective device for avoiding the evidence of careful exegesis. One must simply agree with the element of truth: God doesn’t murder, for murder is the unjust killing of an innocent victim. But God does execute justice, even if it means the death penalty for those hardened in transgression. The Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the rebellion of Korah clearly illustrate this truth.

The second technique is far more troubling: the tendency to ignore large portions of the Old and New Testaments that do not fit their theory. One method of doing this is to say that all troubling passages are rooted in primitive and immature moral reasoning, which can now be rejected by a more enlightened and advanced Christian community. This approach admits the idea of wrath, but regards it as only a primitive anthropomorphic view of the Father, necessary to reach people at low levels of moral and spiritual development. God may have allowed such temporary language, but only until He assisted His people to grow beyond and cast aside such primitive concepts. To them, the biblical picture of wrath as a divine attribute is unworthy of Jesus and of any morally mature disciple.

By using such reasoning, adherents of the moral influence theology make human reason sit in judgment upon divine revelation. They heed only those passages that they perceive to reflect “a high level of moral development.” The intellect now shapes the Word into its image rather than the Word molding us into God’s image.

Another method used to eliminate offending passages is to deny the harmony of Scripture and pit one biblical perspective against another. For example, they often place Paul and Jesus in opposition. The goal is to negate Paul’s understanding of the atonement by declaring that the judicial/substitutionary element of Scripture is exclusively his, while the moral influence theory represents the teachings of Jesus as found in the four Gospels. This false dichotomy is unsound for several reasons: It is the risen Christ Himself who declares Paul to be “my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15, NIV). Paul’s gospel is Christ’s gospel (Gal. 1:8-12). Second, the four Gospels point to the cross as a substitutionary and justifying atonement (Mark 10:45; Matt. 26:48; Luke 22:37; 23:39-44; John 1:29). And finally, many of Paul’s epistles probably preceded all four Gospel accounts and, especially in Luke’s case, influenced them. There is unity, not divergence, in the message of the Scriptures regarding the atonement.

In the early church Marcion and other pious heretics believed they had the greater gnosis (knowledge) of God, which made them safe to save, and allowed them to evaluate and eliminate any portions of Scripture that conflicted with their larger picture. The moral influence theory seems to resurrect this ancient right to ignore Scripture.

In conclusion, Scripture affirms that God’s personal activity as Judge (arising out of His opposition to sin), and His gracious activity as Father (arising out of His love for sinners), are both integral parts of His self-revelation, especially in Christ. Any healing model of the atonement that denies the substance of Christ’s atonement neither heals nor offers a larger picture of the Father’s love.**

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1 It is dangerous to make any parable decisive in formulating a doctrine. Without exception, every parable of Jesus was an incomplete picture of a larger topic designed to illustrate one important dimension of that topic. In the case of the Father in Luke 15 the core lesson is the unearned graciousness and forgiveness of God toward unworthy sinners. But the parable does not attempt to answer how a holy and just God can be gracious. The fact that it doesn’t mention the need for an atonement is not decisive. It does not mention the need of Jesus as Saviour, either. Is He therefore unnecessary? Sadly, in the final analysis the logic of the moral influence theology leads one to answer that Jesus is helpful but not necessary for salvation.

2 A rejection of all legal categories pertaining to God, leaving sin as ignorance and salvation as a healing of the mind through accurate information about God. God’s purposes, was the core teaching of the Gnostic movement in the second to third centuries, and is the basis for most Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism.


7 It is interesting to note that even in this verse God says: “Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hosea 4:6, NASB).

8 One is left wondering, in the moral influence theology model, why God didn’t simply discuss the whole situation with Adam and Eve, clarify their mistake, and declare the whole thing forgotten, since unconditional forgiveness is His nature. But the promise of a Redeemer and a bloody sacrifice (Gen. 3:21) became immediately necessary.

9 Scott, p. 117; quotation from Nathaniel Dimock, Doctrine of the Death of Christ (London: Elliot Stock, 1890), p. 32.

10 Of sin, Stott writes: “It has been described in terms of ‘getting rid of the Lord God’ in order to put ourselves in his place in the haughty spirit of ‘God-maimhessness.’” Emil Brunner summed it up well: “Sin is defiance, arrogance, the desire to be equal with God … the assertion of human independence over against God” (Stott, p. 90).


12 Dodd, p. 23; see also Hanson, pp. 37, 69, 110.

13 John Stott’s discussion on God’s holiness and wrath are invaluable: “Closely related to God’s holiness is His wrath, which in fact His holy reaction to evil.” “What is common to the biblical concepts of the holiness and the wrath of God is the truth that they cannot coexist with sin. God’s holiness exposes sin; His wrath opposes it” (pp. 103, 106). In this context it is instructive to study the lives of the great saints of the Bible who came in contact with God’s holiness and how they, even as repentant sinners who have an accurate picture of God, reacted. See Moses (Ex. 3:6); Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-5); Job (Job 42:5, 6); Ezekiel (Eze. 1:28); Daniel (Dan. 10:9); Luke 5:18-26; and John 11:12-18. It is clear that only through the perfect righteousness of Christ we can ever dare to come—let alone come boldly—into God’s presence (Heb. 4:15, 16).

14 Morris, pp. 151, 152.

15 Ibid., p. 150.

16 Stott, pp. 121-126.

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Male and female: balancing their roles in the church

Iris M. Yob

Understanding the creative tension between the male and female ways of being and knowing may offer a balanced, holistic approach to the issue of gender in church life and liturgy.

We create symbols. We use symbols. Verbal or nonverbal, denotative or expressive, literal or figurative, symbols represent, categorize, and generalize our experience. When organized into systems, they give us cognitive access to the universe in which we live.

Ancient people had a basically religious-mythical understanding of the world. But in modern times "the movement is from unique truth and a world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making." First philosophy, and subsequently ethics, the arts, the humanities, the sciences, and the human sciences, emerged as separate ways of understanding. Each of these, along with religions, provides distinct perspectives on human experience and develops its own assumptions, myths, methods, truth tests, and categories for dividing up the world and naming its parts.

Against this background, I propose that within the various ways of world-making there is a constructive tension between the feminine and masculine ways of knowing. Since being is a way of knowing, this tension is understandable. Most likely, the different perspectives are in part biologically determined and in part the result of gender-role socialization. The latter expects women to exhibit the so-called feminine qualities of thinking and doing, and men the masculine. However, by nature and nurture, women have become the custodians of an alternative way of knowing.

I also propose that a world-making that holds the two ways of being and knowing in creative tension is better balanced, more wholistic, truer, and richer than any other. It does not discourage expertise and excellence, but draws its experts from both the feminine and masculine positions. It pursues truth at its cutting edges, but discovers in its balance of feminine and masculine viewpoints broader understandings and sounder constructions of the true, the good, and the beautiful, while protecting itself against damaging excesses and lopsided conclusions about reality.

Modern world-making as we know it has not taken full advantage of the potential benefit of this creative tension. For one thing, women have not been part of the discourse in theology, politics, economics, philosophy, the arts, and so on—and that their exclusion has been systematic. And for another, the feminine way of knowing has been devalued for both women and men.

A classic illustration of these propositions, one close to the interests of Seventh-day Adventists, is Kohlberg's study of moral development. Lawrence Kohlberg followed the moral reasoning skills of 84 boys for a period of more than 20 years. Kohlberg presented a hypothetical moral dilemma to each of his subjects. Heinz's wife was dying. She needed a drug that was rare and expensive. The druggist was charging 10 times the production cost, and Heinz could not raise the money to buy it. The subject was asked: "Should Heinz steal the drug to save his wife's life?" Kohlberg was not
interested in what answers his subjects offered, but in how they arrived at their answers. From this data, he developed a set of six discernible, "invariant," "universal," sequential stages in reasoning offered, but in how they arrived at their considered inconsequential. They wanted to know whether Heinz knew the woman, whether Heinz had talked things over with the druggist, whether the druggist knew the woman, and so on.

True to the tradition in which he works, Kohlberg concluded that not only do girls fail to come to grips with moral issues.7 From this data, he developed a dimension of the story as he perceived it. His judgment on their preoccupation with the relationships in the story was that in terms of helping, pleasing, and connection with others, women’s perceptions of goodness was adequate for life at home. However, if they entered the larger world, they would have to reach higher levels of moral reasoning, where rules and universal principles of justice must take precedence.

Carol Gilligan, one of Kohlberg’s colleagues, was disturbed by the negative implications of his findings regarding the moral development of women. She abandoned these neat hypothetical moral dilemmas with their tidy assumptions, and interviewed in-depth and over an extended period of time a number of women about their own real-life crises regarding marriage, abortion, career predicaments, and so on. She discovered that in place of the “morality of Rights,” women tend to take the perspective of the “morality of responsibility,” which considers connection and relationship. In other words, women’s way of knowing differs from men’s way of knowing in recognizing the importance of attachment in the human life cycle.8 Neither perspective is intrinsically wrong, but taken together they give us a fuller understanding of what it means to be a moral person in community: morality is a matter both of justice and of responsibility.

Blending of insights
If moral understanding depends on the blending of women’s and men’s insights, religious understanding can scarcely be less. By way of illustration, let me tell you of my pilgrimage with the message of the Song of Songs. My college Bible classes and sermons, all presented by males, portrayed the man in the song as royal, chief, mighty, victorious, radiant, fair, and commanding—a figure of our loving God. The woman, on the other hand, was humble, defective, plain, lovesick, unfilled, immature, shy, yet cherished—symbolic of the faulty but hopeful church loved by God.9

Certainly we can appreciate and know God better as we see Him through the expressions of love of the man in the song and the presentations of the men who have interpreted it for us. That men would look to the male figure for insights into the nature of God is not only valuable but also not surprising. What is disturbing, of course, is that this single perspective contributes to a theology that perceives God as only male, only manhood as representative of God, and only womanhood as impaired and needy.

More recently I have been reading the Song of Songs from a woman’s perspective and have discovered a whole new set of insights. I notice that the woman is the dominant figure: she opens and closes the song and is the more involved partner throughout. She is identified as “a rose of Sharon” and “a lily of the valleys” (S. of Sol. 2:1, NIV); her lover describes her as “perfect and unique”; his friends declare her “fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession” (S. of Sol. 6:4-10)—descriptors poets have applied to divinity. More than that, in the most powerful and poigniant moment in the song, the woman tells this story: “I opened for my lover, but my lover had left; he was gone. . . . I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer. The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls! O daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you—if you find my lover, what will you tell him? Tell him I am faint with love” (S. of Sol. 5:6-8).

In this little tale of the man’s unfaithfulness and abandonment, is it possible to discern the wayward church? In the woman’s loss and suffering, is it possible to perceive the activity of a saving God?

As a man’s love in its passion, possessiveness, and power is a figure of some aspects of God’s love, so is a woman’s love in its winsomeness, searching, patience, and self-sacrifice a figure of other facets of God’s love. By allowing the experience of both to speak to us, we afford ourselves a more abundant understanding of God’s loving relationship to us.

Tension in perspectives
Lacking access to public discourse and deliberation,10 women have operated within their own frame of reference largely intuitively and prereflectively. However, a current trend in the women’s movement is to bring women’s intuitions to articulation. The result is an infant but growing literature on feminine world-making,11 such as Gilligan’s work on women’s moral perceptions and alternative research methods.

Research has identified other fundamental constructs that reveal the tensions between women’s and men’s accounts of the worlds they experience. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, for instance, coined the expression “inner and outer space.”12 When children assembled scenes out of blocks and figures, Erikson noticed that girls and boys tended to use space differently. Typically, the girls’ scenes were interior; that is, within an enclosure with elaborate doorways, reflecting an atmosphere of peace. The boys’ scenes were exterior, with protrusions such as towers bristling with guns, intimating danger, accidents, and destruction. Erikson observes that the gender differences in the organization of play space seem to parallel the morphology of genital differentiation itself, suggesting that some root symbols in women’s and men’s understanding of the world are derived from anatomical differences;13 This suggestion has brought mixed reviews, as we shall see.

Psychotherapist Anne Wilson Schaeff reports on the tension she has identified between product and process. What generally counts for men, she observes, are goals and outcomes; for women it is more likely the means and manner of getting there. She illustrates this difference in the ways women and men relate to time. In their preoccupation with work and achievement, men function best with “clocktime.” But for many situations women find themselves in, such as child rearing and relationship building, process time is a better measure than
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Erikson’s reply to this argument, however, is that women’s view of reality is needed as a complement to men’s not only in the home but in every sphere of human activity. Equal opportunity for women, he argues, “can only mean the right and the chance to give new meaning and a new kind of competence to [so far] ‘male’ occupations.”

Women and the Adventist Church

Despite the distinguished role of women in its founding and early growth years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church today, like many other churches, is largely a patriarchal institution, built according to male models and dominated by masculine thinking. By and large, “the brethren” make its administrative decisions. Male seminarians direct its theological development. Its ordained ministry is a male prerogative.

In effect, the Adventist Church wears a male face. After Ellen White’s inestimable contribution, the church’s history is perceived to have been wrought by the deeds and decisions of men. Church members are best acquainted with its male heroes and role models because its female influence remains largely lost to them and their present at clocktime.14 Process time is the unpredictable, uncontrolled time taken up in growth and development. Women often consider that time for getting to know one another, telling their stories, sharing their feelings, and generally establishing bonds among themselves is a productive use of time.

Another tension is between sight and sound.15 For men, to know is to be enlightened. Men tend to talk in terms of “gaining an insight,” “taking a perspective,” and “having a viewpoint.” In their explanations they would ask, “Do you see that?” This language represents a model of knowing that establishes truth through objective, dispassionate, detached methods. For women, on the other hand, to know is a process of “listening for a message.” Women complain of not “having a voice,” of “being silenced,” and they will ask, “Do you hear what I am saying?” Their language represents an engaged, dialogic, involved partnership in the learning process. Women tend to find truth in conversation, narrative, journaling, and personal stories; men in propositions, facts, and doctrines.

Variations in being and knowing

Each of these tensions is a variation of a single major theme of being and knowing. Feminine ways of being and knowing are bound up with human relationships. They emphasize nurture and caring. In contrast, masculine ways of being and knowing emphasize aggressiveness, forcefulness, powerfulness, and combativeness.

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And we might add, that just as “women’s vision,” as he calls it, is needed in a world made dangerous to human survival by policies of aggression, so men’s vision is needed in defense of the young and needy.

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In effect, the Adventist Church wears a male face. After Ellen White’s inestimable contribution, the church’s history is perceived to have been wrought by the deeds and decisions of men. Church members are best acquainted with its male heroes and role models because its strengths of faith and action are invisible. Adventist women are losing their past.

Women are losing out in the life and liturgy of the church as well. God is conceived in terms of male images—father, judge, and coming king—which make the divine-human relationship comprehensible to and affirming of men. But in view of the connection and empowering that female images of God could bring to women—mother, nurse, homemaker, and housekeeper—should not church liturgy reflect this? The congregation sings hymns, listens to sermons, and reads materials in language that refers to its members as men and its experiences as masculine, while women and their experiences are not sung, spoken, or written about. The church’s hierarchical structure brokers power among men, stifling consensual and inclusive decision-making. The calling, contribution, and very personhood of Adventist women today seems in jeopardy.

Because masculine perspectives have dominated the church’s version of truth and reality, women are alienated even within their own worshiping community. The root symbols, the methods, and the resulting judgments of our collective meanings, while not totally inaccessible to them, are nevertheless not drawn from their own distinctive experience of the world. Biblical scholarship and church organization are in danger of being foreign—or worse, hostile—to the women of the church, as many women are coming to realize.

However, as Adventist women discover their “own voice,” they also discover empowerment. With the past largely lost to them and their present at risk, these women evaluate their future with the church for the sake of their own spiritual integrity. Some choose to stay with their church community, with its Adventist distinctiveness, despite the pain and frustration, working for the day it may open its structures to them. Some find in the movement popularly known as “woman-church” a space for exploring and articulating women’s spirituality separated from male domination and patriarchal control. Others simply walk out of the relationship with the church altogether, like a battered wife from an abusive marriage, to discover a new life free from the constant denial of their own being and knowing. What is clear is that thinking women will not be satisfied with the present situation.

Religious world-making is characterized by metaphor and paradox—the simultaneous expression of is and is not. As Adventist Christians we know the challenge of holding in tension the implications of the Lion and the Lamb; Creator and Destroyer; the Three and the One; mercy and justice; grace and law; the present age and the age to come. We value the insights into sacred realities afforded by the essential complementarity and fundamental unity of each matching component. So too, in the meeting of what seems to be the disparate nature of feminine and masculine, we may better reflect on—and indeed, reflect—ultimate reality.

Bible texts in this article are taken from the New International Version.
Oh, no, not a woman!

Elizabeth Ostring

Our gender is a gift of love from God and need not be an obstacle to our fulfillment.

Elizabeth Ostring is a physician at Tsuen Wan Adventist Hospital, Hong Kong.

The professor of anatomy was a big, impressive man; very impressive. He had iron-gray hair and steel-blue eyes that cut you through to the soul faster than any surgeon’s scalpel. I was trembling slightly. It was not just the raw chill of the lowering south New Zealand day, nor the fact that I was there with my father to ask for Sabbath privileges from the man who had opposed such nonsense for years. Rather, it was the man himself.

He listened politely as my father requested that a young man and I be allowed to miss classes on Saturday. He assured us that this boon had already been granted, and that we should have no problem. He smiled magnanimously, slapped the young man’s shoulder, and said, “Welcome to medical school, fellow!” My father hastened to put the record right. “Professor, my daughter has also been accepted into the school,” he said proudly.

The professor stopped, and his smile vanished.

He lifted his hand distractedly to his immense brow and almost roared, “Oh, no! Not a woman! Not another woman!”

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Somehow we got ourselves outside the room without any further assistance from the professor.

That happened 27 years ago. The professor’s outburst certainly dampened the pride in my 18-year-old heart. But as time healed the embarrassment I came to thank the gentleman (in my heart, that is; I would never have found the courage to face him!) for teaching me a very valuable lesson: that before I became a doctor,
In creating humankind God shared not only His image with us, not just His reasoning power, not just His freedom, but also His plurality.

Gender—a gift of love

If gender is a gift of love from God, it is important that we understand how God intends this gift to be used and developed. We often mention that marriage and the Sabbath are the only “institutions” that came to us from Eden, and this is true. Sometimes it seems, however, that when recognizing the divine origin of marriage as a perfect fulfillment of God’s plans for us, we fail to realize that marriage is based on the previous gift of gender, and that it is possible to fulfill God’s purpose without being married. Jesus never married, yet He was a perfect man, which suggests to me that it is possible to develop one’s masculinity or femininity in the ways God intended without necessarily being married. What I would like to explore is whether there is a real theology of gender difference.

Many Christian women, and I among them, can testify that by accepting wholeheartedly their husband’s leadership in their marriage they have increased their own happiness, and that of their families. This acceptance is not easy, and most wives succumb all too often to the temptation to take the reins themselves, with resulting distress. Should one conclude from this that women are simply less capable than men, or that men are incurably chauvinistic? Or is there some deep spiritual truth involved that can be applied to all women, married or not?

The fact that God created Eve from a rib of Adam suggests that she was in equal value, but does not prove she was his equal in function. We know she was specifically created to be a “helper fit for” Adam (Gen. 2:18), but in what way was she to help him? Unfortunately, we have no clue as to the exact Edenic role. Once sin entered, Eve was primarily concerned with the bearing and care of children, while Adam had the more aggressive work of wrestling with his environment to provide for his family.

That being so, is child care the only work suitable for the feminine role, or is it perhaps the clearest expression of that role, a supreme example? What does Paul mean when in 1 Timothy 2:15 he declares that a woman “will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty”? Is he suggesting that women must bear children to be saved? To imply this makes nonsense of the apostle’s strong and frequent assertions that salvation is only through faith in Jesus Christ. Instead, he is suggesting that child care is a superior expression of femininity to two other ways mentioned in the contextual passage of 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

The first of these other ways is outward adornment. Obviously the fashion industry was as active in Paul’s day as in ours, and he admonishes that “women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire” (verse 9). We find similar advice in 1 Peter 3:3. Presenting oneself attractively is a common feminine impulse. Many great women of the Bible were beautiful. Even as an elderly lady, Sarah was attractive enough to cause trouble for her husband. Esther won a beauty contest, and Rebekah and Rachel were both fair to look upon. Enhancement of physical beauty, therefore, is appropriate for a Christian woman, but it is not the main purpose of her gender.

The second feminine expression Paul is concerned with is found in verses 11, 12: “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent.” These words cause an increase in heart rate and a rise in blood pressure in even the mildest of women. There are some sincere Christian groups that take this passage very literally. But what is the complete biblical picture? Consider the prophetess Anna. In Luke 2:38 we read, “And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” The previous verse indicates that she did not depart from the Temple. Obviously, then, she did her speaking there, and it quite clearly seems to be of a teaching nature.

What did Paul mean, then, by saying that women should be silent? The apostle explains himself further by discussing Adam and Eve. Eve’s sin did not condemn her to silence, but at that time it was emphasized that she must recognize the authority of Adam. Thus the real thrust of Paul’s message seems not that women become mute, but that they recognize the God-ordained authority of men. What authority does a man have over a woman? The same type of authority Jesus has over the church: a beautiful, caring, self-sacrificing, and leading authority (see Eph. 5:22-28).

Child bearing and caring

But some women may wonder why Paul mentions child bearing and caring as supreme expressions of the feminine role. The Incarnation may provide us some light. When the fullness of time was come and God sent forth His Son, He could have organized His arrival on this earth by all sorts of spectacular methods. One method (which He had already used, and which would have emphasized the subordinate, inferior role of women once and for all) would have been to choose a
man, anaesthetize him and remove a rib, and then prepare around it a perfect body for the Son of God. But no, God chose to perform the miracle in the body of a young woman, demonstrating that He still honored her special feminine work. At the same time God honored the masculine role by providing Mary with a husband, one she did not need in the biological sense, but who was nevertheless entrusted with her care, and who was given authority to make decisions for her; for example, in the need for the flight to Egypt. It was to Joseph, not Mary, God sent an angel with the message to flee.

So what was Mary’s work? God entrusted to her the development of His Son now in human form. In a special sense she made it possible for Jesus to do His work; she enabled God to declare Himself to the world.

Again, consider other great women in the Bible and see in their lives this special work of enabling, this ministry that allows them to develop their God-given potential. Look at Miriam. By her care on the banks of the Red Sea a hymn of triumph that enabled the Israelites to understand more fully all that God had done for them. However, dissatisfied with her role, she aspired to leadership, but God swiftly declared this to be wrong.

Deborah was both a prophetess and a judge. She lived in very bad times when Israel was under Canaanite oppression. God enabled her to judge Israel and make His people understand right from wrong. When war broke out, she called upon Barak to take the lead. However, at his request, she continued her encouraging role by going with him to the battlefield. She could have exercised leadership alone; instead, she worked with a man.

Rahab’s courage and quick thinking permitted the spies of Israel to return safely and also ensured the preservation of her family. Ruth’s love and devotion enabled Naomi and the women of Bethlehem to preserve the line of Judah in which Jesus was born. Jehosheba’s courage rescued the boy King Joash, while Esther’s saved a whole nation.

Proverbs 31 gives a profound description of the ideal woman—energetic, dynamic, caring, and responsible both within the community and her family. She enables her family to be well cared for, her husband to be a leader among the elders, her servants to work well, and her children to love her. And “she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” (verse 26). Was not Ellen White that kind of woman—enabling the development of a special people preparing for Christ’s second coming? Her role perhaps was never administrative, but it was decisive and prominent.

The enabling ministry
This ministry of enabling does not mean that it is of lesser value or of lower dignity. I refer again to the working of the Godhead. The Holy Spirit is a comforter and a counselor. He glorifies Jesus. He convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. He enables us to live victorious and productive lives. Does this enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit in any way lessen the equality and dignity of the person of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity?

When women accept their enabling ministry, they bring new dignity and courage to their work. They know they are fulfilling God’s plan for them in enabling their husbands and children to fulfill their full potential. How much better the world would be if they would spend time listening to their children, and talking with them to guide and encourage?

However, marriage and family are not essential prerequisites for full feminine development. Indeed, if we could see the full import of women’s enabling role, much argument and rancor would disappear in the discussion of precisely what they should or should not do. Enlightened and empowered by the Holy Spirit, a teacher will see herself as developing her pupils’ potential. A director of nursing will not consider herself a manager of the nursing staff, but rather an enabler of ward nurses to function efficiently in patient care.

What about ordination? A woman need not lobby to be ordained as a minister because she sees herself capable of expounding the Scriptures as any man. Nor is ordination per se essential for feminine fulfillment. However, there may be special circumstances when tremblingly and reluctantly, like Moses, Isaiah, or Jeremiah, a woman may recognize the need for formal ordination. Such situations could be in places such as China, where few men can enter the gospel ministry. Or perhaps a woman called to prison ministry may find herself required by government authorities to have full ministerial credentials. Ordination for her would simply show that others recognize her enabling ministry in jails.

Two women have greatly inspired me. Both of them unmarried, and both of them from India: Ida Scudder of Christian Medical College, Vellore; and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Dr. Scudder became a medical practitioner to serve the women of south India; cultural barriers disallowed a male doctor from ministering to them. Not only did she help her immediate patients, but her vision of a medical school enabled thousands of young men and women to enter the healing ministry. She was a truly feminine person.

Mother Teresa, originally a teaching nun from Yugoslavia, heard the call of God to work with the destitute of Calcutta. Listen to her vision of fulfillment: “If you really belong to the work that has been entrusted to you, then you must do it with your whole heart. And you can bring salvation only by being honest and by really working with God. It is not how much we are doing but how much love, how much honesty, how much faith, is put into doing it. It makes no difference what we are doing. What you are doing, I cannot do, and what I am doing, you cannot do. But all of us are doing what God has given us to do. Only sometimes we forget and we spend more time looking at somebody else and wishing we were doing something else. We waste our time thinking of tomorrow, and today we let the day pass and yesterday is gone.”

*All Bible passages in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

The art of announcing a hymn

Edward E. White

Properly introducing a hymn helps determine whether the congregation mimes the words or mines the meaning.

Announcing a hymn does not require a university degree or a knowledge of music and poetry. However, it does call for a thoughtful transition from whatever precedes the singing, to prepare the audience for receiving the message interwined with the music.

Too often we sing our hymns mindlessly out of habit or tradition, ignorant of the author's original purpose. When that happens, are we really doing much more than barking at print? How important that whoever announces the hymn does so in reference to its meaning.

Picture yourself in church, sitting quietly after the sermon. The elder rises and says: "Our closing hymn is Number 541." How inspired are you by that announcement? Granted, it is necessary to inform the congregation where to find the hymn, but wouldn't it be better to say something like this: "Our closing hymn, Number 541, summarizes the message we've just heard. Notice the threefold prayer in the three stanzas 'Lord, speak to me,' 'Lord, lead me,' 'Lord, strengthen me.' Hymn Number 541."

Preview the hymn

Is it too much to ask the elder to read through the hymn before announcing it? To my sorrow, I have heard more than once: "Let us sing the consecration hymn, Number 330, 'Take My Life and Let It Be.' " Now, what kind of consecration is that, when we ask the Lord to take our life and then let it alone? That is precisely what "let it be" means. A simple solution is to add the next word in the hymn, which does not appear in the title: "Take my life, and let it be consecrated."

When you do that, the audience sits up and takes note. For the first time some will have an idea of what they are asking the Lord to do with their lives when they sing that hymn.

Here is another example of how improperly announcing a hymn can convey a completely unintended message: "Let us sing hymn Number 317, 'I love to steal.' " It might be better to read the rest of the first sentence: "I love to steal awhile away from every cumbering care."

Find the heart of the hymn

The definition of a hymn requires that it be based upon Scripture; otherwise, it is simply a sacred song. It was my privilege to supply the scriptural references to every hymn in The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal. This daunting task left me with admiration for those writers who transformed and collated various texts into a harmonious whole. Some hymns even gave the nucleus of a sermon.

One notable example is Charles Wesley's composition in celebration of his own conversion. An elder might typically announce it by saying, "Now let us sing Number 198, 'And Can It Be.' " The audience dutifully mouths the words, ignorant of their rich spiritual background. Wesley was aligning his own experience with the New Testament incident in which Peter found himself miraculously delivered from prison into freedom:

"Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed Thee."

How many times have you sung those words without connecting them to Peter's angelic deliverance from prison or to Wesley's personal testimony? A thoughtful preview of the hymn would identify
its link with the book of Acts. Further research would uncover the connection to Wesley's conversion. All this would enable the announcer to bring new life to the congregational singing of that grand old hymn.

Deeper meaning

Knowing Charles Wesley’s appreciation for Scripture, we might expect other texts to be incorporated in that same hymn. Indeed they are! Find them for yourself, or look them up in the scriptural index. At least five references come from Paul’s writings.

Take another example of the deep scriptural origins of a hymn. Henry Williams Baker edited the beloved classic of the Anglican Church, Hymns Ancient and Modern. One he wrote himself was “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.” A cursory reading immediately reminds us of Psalm 23. It is more than a paraphrase of the shepherd’s psalm, though. Thoughtful examination of the third stanza points us to the parable of Luke 15. Baker combines the psalmist’s version of the shepherd who leads with Christ’s description of the good shepherd who seeks the straying sheep. Pointing this out to a congregation will certainly enhance the singing of Baker’s hymn.

Structure and sequence

Structure is another aspect of a hymn that requires reading with understanding. Consider Number 488 in The SDA Hymnal, “At First I Prayed for Light.” The first two words immediately imply a sequence in the structure, and lo, the following stanza begins with the words “And next.” The pattern is obviously a prayer for light, then strength, then faith, then that love that summarizes all succeeding prayers. In this hymn, as with many others, the structure lies on the surface, yet many in the congregation would not notice it. Unless the announcer helped them understand, they would miss a large measure of the blessing.

Andrew Reed, a Congregational minister, wrote some hymns displaying obvious structure. One of them about the Holy Spirit (No. 267 in The SDA Hymnal; No. 213 in The Church Hymnal) employs the similes of light, fire, the dove, dew, and wind. Another (No. 268, The SDA Hymnal) uses light, power, and joy as metaphors for the Spirit. Recognizing the structural pattern involved enables the singer to appreciate the various functions of the Holy Spirit.

Antiphonal singing

In announcing the hymn, you can do more than identify meaning, scriptural origin, and structure. Some hymns lend themselves to antiphonal singing, that is, going back and forth in responsive, alternating parts. For example, each verse of “Peace, Perfect Peace” has an implied question and an answer. Have the women sing, “Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?”; and then the men respond, “The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.” Again on the next verse the women sing, “Peace, perfect peace, by throving duties pressed?”; then the men, “To do the will of Jesus: this is rest.”

Do you see the possibilities for bringing out the meaning of certain hymns by singing them antiphonally?

Contrasts

Another aspect to watch for in hymns is the contrasts emphasized. Consider “Make Me a Captive, Lord.” In quick succession we see the following:

captive/free:
render up sword/conqueror;
sink/stand;
imprisoned/strong;
freely moved/chained;
enslave/reign;
my own will/Thine;
monarch/crown resigned;
stand unbent/lean on bosom.

These contrasts follow each other so rapidly that singing them does not offer the opportunity to appreciate them. Each deserves time for thought to discern the depths intended by the hymn’s blind author, George Matheson.

Another remarkable series of contrasts occurs in Charles Wesley’s hymn “Thou hidden Source of calm repose”: rest/in toil; ease/in gain; war/peace; loss/gain; smile/frown; shame/glory.

Don’t preach another sermon

Some who seek to avoid a superficial announcement of a hymn find themselves preaching their own sermon. There is no need to fall into that other extreme. Announce the hymn briefly and announce it well.

The Bible directs us to “sing praises with understanding” (Ps. 47:7). Thoughtfully introducing a hymn helps make this possible.
Fig leaves and lollipops

Siroj Sorajjakool

If God is our friend, need we not be open and honest with Him?

In Thailand a man can wear a Rolex watch, a Cartier belt, Gucci shoes, and an Arrow shirt even though he is far from wealthy. “Crocodile shirt, 45 baht” painted on cardboard pieces is a common sight along the streets of Bangkok. As far as merchants are concerned, there isn’t anything unscrupulous about the whole business; after all, these shirts are made from genuine Thai crocodiles.

We are in a great era of imitation—jeans, licenses, passports, watches, shirts, computer programs, and spare parts, to mention a few. In the Adventist circle too we have imitations. We use the label vege. Vege-chicken, vege-bacon, vege-turkey, vege-fish, vege-dance (marching), vege-movies, and so the list runs on. All this is all right, except when we internalize this external imitation into our personal lives. And when we do, we become imitation Christians, vege-Christs.

Vege-Christianity has its roots with Adam and Eve. After eating the forbidden fruit, they realized their nakedness and tried to conceal it with fig leaves. And ever since they yielded to temptation, the human race has not stopped hiding. Even Christians often try to escape from reality or deny it.

For example, we are taught that the joy of Bible reading comes spontaneously to a true Christian. Feeling bored in our devotional life is an indicator that something is wrong with our Christian experience. And so in our desire to qualify as true Christians, we make ourselves believe that Bible reading really is our obsession after all.

Why do we attempt to conceal the occasional feeling of boredom? Why the fig leaf?

A college student, requested to pray at the close of sundown vespers, uttered “Thank You, God, that the Sabbath is over.” The remark was a slip of the tongue, but in a way it reveals our nakedness, our true feelings.

“I don’t feel like praying!” is yet another shocking reality that frequently confronts the Christian. We seldom vocalize such a feeling. For one thing, we understand that self-realization is often derived from self-expression. Also, it is unchristian not to feel like praying. We try to live up to the norms, expectations and standards of the church. And that in itself is perfectly commendable. But problems begin when we cover up certain no-no feelings within us, acting as though everything is OK when actually such is not the case.

Why must we pretend that we are something we are not? Do we imagine that God cannot handle frankness and honesty? No wonder we force ourselves to say “Lord, I love talking to You. I enjoy reading Your works. I love attending Your programs.” And on and on we murmur sweet nothings, for fear that He may feel offended if we said otherwise. Perhaps we think God feels threatened when we are angry at Him and so we say nice things. We present Him with a lollipop.

The truth is God is tough. He is secure, unthreatened by our complaints.
The primary gift of love is the offering of one’s most honest self through one’s most honest self-disclosure.

He doesn’t ask for artificial affirmation. He prefers frankness and honesty to lolipops. I recall the days I first started dating the lady who is now my wife. On one occasion we got into a big argument. It was my first quarrel with a woman, and I tried every tactic I knew to pacify her. Nothing worked. At last I recalled that in the movies whenever the hero and his lady got into a fight, a simple kiss could turn anger into passion.

“Aha!” I thought, and I did kiss her. I quickly learned, however, that life is not a Hollywood production. My sweetheart picked up the argument exactly where we left off before my contrived affection. I learned one simple truth: a relationship is not built on lolipops but absolute honesty.

Above everything else in life, we esteem our relationship with God. Yet how often we overlook or underemphasize one of the most essential ingredients in a relationship—honesty. Absolute honesty makes a relationship grow. Even when we are confused about what God does or what He doesn’t do. He prefers genuineness to pretension, nakedness to fig leaves. There can’t be love without honesty, suggests John Powell: “What if someone once said, “A friend is a person with whom you dare to be yourself.” Do we dare to be ourselves in the presence of God? If we cannot be frank and honest our closest Friend, what is friendship then?

“Honest to God” must be the beginning of our relationship with Him. He who said “Come now, let us reason together” (Isa. 1:18, RSV), wants us to come before Him in our spiritual nakedness. A fig leaf is insufficient.

1 In speaking about hiding, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: “Man has suddenly fallen from God and is still in flight. . . . This flight, Adam’s hiding from God, we call conscience . . . this flight allows man to feel secure in his hiding place.” Creation and Fall: Temptation (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1959), p. 81.


3 For a “not so perfectly fine” example, see the chapter entitled “Cruel Non-sense” in Kosuke Koyama, 50 Meditations (New York: Orbis, 1979), pp. 47-51.

4 This concept is made explicit by A. L. McGinnis when he begins his chapter “Being a Nice Guy Gets You Nowhere” with the Biblical injunction found in Ephesians 4:26: “Be angry but do not sin” (RSV). See A. L. McGinnis, The Friendship Factor (Minneapolis: Augustsburg Pub. House, 1979), p. 128. The importance of honesty in building a relationship has been expressed by various authors. See, for example, John Powell, Will the Real Me Please Stand Up?; Dan Benson, The Total Man (Wheaton, Ill.: Living Books, 1988), pp. 151-164; Norman Wright, Communication: Key to Your Marriage (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1974).

5 John Powell, Unconditional Love (Allen, Tex.: Argus Communications, 1978) p. 82.

6 Quoted in McGinnis, The Friendship Factor, p. 36.

7 Speaking about the call to spiritual nakedness, Bonhoeffer says: “God speaks to him Adam. He stops him in his flight. ‘Come out of your hiding place, from your self-reproach, your covering, your secrecy, your self-torment. . . .’ This call goes directly against the conscience, for the conscience says: ‘Adam, you are naked, hide yourself from the Creator, you dare not stand before Him.’ God says: ‘Adam, stand before Me’” (p. 81).
Speaking through an interpreter

Esa Rouhe

An interpreter need not be an interrupter. Here are six principles that will help both the speaker and the translator.

Modern communication has turned the world into a global village. Many of us pastors and evangelists often find ourselves facing audiences across linguistic, national, and cultural barriers, requiring communication through interpreters.

Communication in any situation is a difficult process, but speaking through an interpreter is even more challenging. How shall we improve the situation for all three parties—the speaker, the interpreter, the audience—as well as for the message itself? From my experience both as a speaker and as an interpreter, I suggest six principles to follow when using interpreters.

1. Consult with the interpreter in advance. Often the speaker and the interpreter may have had no previous acquaintance. Before going on the rostrum, they should get to know each other a little. Even a brief discussion gives the interpreter advance notice on the speaker's use of words—pronunciation, accent, vocabulary. Speakers should inform their translators of any special terms they may be using—such as technical words, statistics, or any unusual linguistic formations. Translators will thus be prepared to do their job with confidence.

2. Surprise the audience, not the interpreter. An interesting speech often contains surprises, but they should be reserved for the audience. If the interpreter is not absolutely sure what you mean by a story or a fact or a joke, he or she would find it difficult to convey your expression and meaning to the audience. To be sure the interpreter does not miss your intention, share the difficult portion in advance. If you have a written sermon or an outline, give a copy to the interpreter. Discuss with the interpreter any remarks or expressions that the audience may find difficult or offensive.

3. Don’t rush the interpreter. Interpreters need their share of time. In some languages translation is easy; in others, certain words and expressions call for explanatory presentation. Fortunately, interpreters often cut down repetition and may not need the long pauses that speakers sometimes take. Generally, translation requires about three fourths of the time of the speaker.

Since both preachers and interpreters function under some pressure and excitement, speakers tend to start the next sentence before the translator finishes with the previous one. When this happens, the audience doesn’t get the full message, and the interpreter gets frustrated. So don’t rush. Let the translator have the needed time.

4. Speak naturally and clearly. Interpretation does not necessarily require that speakers alter their normal mode of speaking. Too slow a delivery may sound theatrical, and too fast a one may make it difficult for the translator. Just speak with good rhythm at a normal rate. If you use abnormally short sentences with only a few words at a time, the presentation may sound irritating to the hearers and the translation more difficult—particularly with transitions and cohesiveness. Differences in language structure also affect the flow of translation; sometimes it may be easier to translate whole sentences than short clauses. The ideal rhythm in translated speech is two to three sentences at a time.
Forget the native eloquence of your language. You may deliver a speech in majestic Shakespearean English, but that means nothing to your non-English audience. The translator must convey your message in the common language of the audience, perhaps skipping all your verbal acrobatics. Hence, avoid poetry, or even high prose when the eloquence and flow of the original eludes easy translation. The same goes for play on words, idioms, and other grammatical variances that sound good in one language, but are impossible to relate in another. The simpler the language, the easier to translate.

5. Use illustrations with good taste. Illustrations brighten a speech and keep the audience alert, but speakers who are being translated should choose them carefully. Is your story culture specific or universal? Is it essential for making the point? Is the audience sufficiently aware of the background required to understand the illustration? Will it help win the hearts of the audience?

When visiting a foreign country, Billy Graham often uses illustrations from that nation’s history or culture—something dear to the people—and he immediately wins his audience. Will your illustrations charm or offend sections of the audience? Especially be careful with war stories—some in the audience may have been on the wrong side of the war.

6. Above all, represent the heavenly kingdom. Ellen White once warned the ministers against making political statements. Pastors visiting other countries should take this counsel seriously and refrain from making statements supporting or opposing any political ideology. Such pronouncements, even if true, could cause offence and bring embarrassment to the church. The best course is to be a patriot of the heavenly kingdom.

While it’s true that we cannot escape our national or cultural roots, we are primarily ambassadors of God, ministers of the gospel. Therefore, the message that we deliver, particularly in a foreign land in a foreign language, must not communicate any national bias or prejudice.

The universal language of love is the proper vehicle for conveying the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

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Twelve years ago Pam gave her heart to Jesus. As she rejoiced in her new salvation, power over sin surged into her life. She imagined that within a few weeks she could be perfect—just like Jesus—through faith in His indwelling strength.

Somehow that didn't happen, and guilt mingled with doubt began gnawing at her conscience: “Since I'm not anywhere near perfect yet, I wonder if I'm worthy of heaven... Suppose I'm not even saved anymore!”

Pam confided her confusion to a friend, who came up with some quick advice: “You're trying to do it all by yourself, silly! Just let go, and let Jesus live His perfect life in you.”

But, Pam remained perplexed. “How do I do that?”

“You missed the point—He does it!”

“But He won't do it without me. I must have some part to do.”

“Well, you know, just surrender your will to Jesus every morning and nurture that relationship with Him. Then when temptation comes, Christ will naturally live out His victory within you—as long as you don't resist.”

That sounded sensible, but she had already been surrendering her life to Jesus in sincere prayer every day. Now she increased her devotional time, studying the character of Christ with the intensity of a college senior preparing for a final exam.

Still she found no spiritual satisfaction. In fact, her sense of guilt even worsened. You see, the more she learned about Jesus, the more aware she became of her own unlikeness to the Lord. That left her with deeper hopelessness than ever. Often she rose from her knees in greater despair than when she began praying.

Pam also got discouraged when she compared herself with women in her prayer group who seemed to enjoy a closer relationship with Jesus than she did. They reveled in being filled with the Holy Spirit and reported all kinds of starspangled answers to prayer. Poor Pam couldn't recall any of her prayers answered. Nothing major, anyway.

Intimidated by those super-saints, she consoled herself by contrasting her sober lifestyle with church members who apparently lacked commitment. Those who didn't join prayer groups, didn't have daily devotions, or didn't send their kids to Christian schools.

Although Pam hated herself for indulging such a “holier-than-thou” attitude, she couldn't make herself stop. Self-righteousness provided the only refuge from a torturing conscience.

Her friends considered her one of the most helpful and humble Christians they knew. She wasn't all that happy, they could tell, but her pious convictions impressed them. Even so, guilt, like a nagging toothache, hounded her constantly. Pam hated to admit it, yet it was true just the same: she had actually been happier before becoming a Christian!

Before long she secretly resented religion for ruining her life (which made her feel all the more guilty). Why go on trying to please God? What was the use?

All sinners

Finally she decided to discuss her frustrations with her pastor. There in the church office, she opened the conversation: “I've always admired you, Pastor. You seem to know the whole Bible backward and forward. I wish I knew the Lord as you do.”

“And I admire many of your qualities too, Pam,” he responded. “But both of us have a serious problem. The apostle Paul exposes it in Romans 3. Notice verses 22 and 23: 'There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'
"You see, all of us fall short of perfection. So there is no difference, no distinction—none are better or worse than others in the church. We all deserve damnation."

She looked startled as he continued. "Really, none of us are any more worthy than the most desperate criminal cringing on death row. We don't even deserve the polluted air we breathe. When you hold up my life, or your life—or anyone's life—comparing it to Christ's character, we all come up short. Evidently there's no ground for comparisons. We're all equally unworthy."

Pam observed with a rueful smile, "In other words, I'm not OK—but at least you're not OK either! That doesn't leave us with much hope, does it?"

"Well, we can be thankful the story doesn't end there. Listen to this good news: 'But God, who is rich in mercy, and of tender compassion, by grace has saved us through the redemption that came through Christ. He lived a perfect life for us, and died a sacrificial death for us' (Rom. 3:24)." "Comparisons are foolish," the pastor continued, shaking his head. "They always create barriers of inferiority, hypocrisy, intolerance—barriers that Jesus tore down at the cross. There is no difference now between believers. We are either saved or lost—not second-class Christians. And no super-saints who stand more acceptable before God than the poorest struggling believer."

**Redeemed together**

"Do you see what has happened now? We are alive together in the Lord Jesus Christ. Before we were doomed together. But now in Jesus we are redeemed together. So we're equal again."

Pam perked up as the pastor added. "Let me tell you about Lisa, a new believer in a church I used to serve. She compared herself with older Christians and got discouraged. They seemed to have a better prayer vocabulary than she did. Or they didn't appear bothered with the doubts and struggles she faced. Soon Lisa developed a spiritual inferiority complex."

"She would have been shocked to realize many of the older Christians envied her—the same ones she put on a pedestal. Her fresh faith and eager enthusiasm for the Lord made them nervous. They felt threatened by her. Seeking to build themselves up, they put her down, finding in her young spiritual life things to criticize. Feeling condemned, Lisa finally got so depressed she almost left the church."

"I know how that feels," Pam interjected. "I've been on the verge of giving up too."

"That's tragic! How few of us really know the gospel. The gospel that makes us all equal—equally lost without Jesus, equally saved in Christ. Whatever our level of Christian growth, all of us share the same perfect record of Jesus Christ. We must all approach God through His mercy, not on the basis of our character development. Our hope, you see, is never in our spiritual attainments, but in Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross. And our assurance of salvation is not our feeble love for God, but His great love for us in Christ."

"All share perfection" Pam looked excited. "This is such a wonderful concept that it's hard to get hold of. Let me try to put it in my own words. When I accept Jesus as my Saviour, God considers me as perfect as He is—even though I'm very much imperfect. Is that it? And since you have accepted Jesus, you're counted just that perfect too. We all share Christ's perfection—there's no difference now! That means that I don't have to feel intimidated again by anyone!"

"Well," she concluded, "I guess I don't have to prove myself to other Christians. Not even to God! He loves and accepts me completely in Jesus."

"Amen!" the pastor concurred.

"Day by day, Pam, just cast yourself upon God's mercy and obey His will. When you fall, confess your sin and ask for His help next time around. As you keep committing your life to Him, He will keep counting you perfect in Jesus. Keep resting in His love, and He will keep counting you perfect in Jesus."

"You see, all of us fall short of perfection. So there is no difference, no distinction—none are better or worse than others in the church. We all deserve damnation."
“It’s the general trend of our lives, not some occasional good deed or misdeed, that shows whether we are genuine Christians.”

which we are saved. We must accept God’s declaration of something we are not—God justifies [forgives] the ungodly,” according to Romans 4:5. When we repent and believe, the Lord counts us perfect through the blood of Christ—even though we are totally unworthy.

God does not leave us helplessly trapped in failure, however. Alcoholics become sober through God’s grace. Adulterers become trustworthy spouses. We forgive others as God has forgiven us.

Faith also transformed the lives of Abraham and Sarah. She gave birth to Isaac, the miracle child of promise. And just as faith worked miracles for Abraham and Sarah, faith in Christ will bring about the miracle of transformed lives today.

No, salvation by grace doesn’t give us permission to fool around with sin. God offers all the power we need to keep from yielding to temptation.

But let’s be careful here. Victory over sin never becomes the basis of our salvation. The miracle of a changed life never becomes our ticket to heaven.

Remember Abraham’s miracle child Isaac. As the young fellow matured and bore children of his own, did Abraham become more worthy to have the title “father of many nations”? No, from beginning to end it was God’s mercy alone—not that miracle in Abraham’s life—that qualified him for acceptance with Him. Likewise with us. Sincere faith will bring victories over sin, but such miracles never become the basis of whether God can accept us. Only through the blood of Christ are we ever worthy of heaven.

Well, that was quite a sermon for Pam. Learning the truth about Abraham really helped her understand the good news of salvation. Questions lingered, of course, so the following week she visited the church office again.

Holy Spirit Living
“Your help is greatly needed, Pastor, but I’m still perplexed. What about the Holy Spirit? How can the Holy Spirit live in my heart unless I first achieve holiness myself?”

The pastor explained, “The Spirit lives within us because God has already made us His children through Jesus—not because we are worthy,” her minister explained. “Remember Abraham. The Holy Spirit gave him power to become a father, but that was only after God had already accepted him as the father of many nations.”

“But what if I momentarily resist the Holy Spirit and yield to temptation? Like if I get mad at the kids. Am I lost at that moment?”

“No, thank God. Abraham failed too from time to time—he even lied about being married to Sarah. Yet the Bible says he did not waver from his faithfulness. He wobbled, but he didn’t waver! It’s the general trend of our lives, not some occasional good deed or misdeed, that shows whether we are genuine Christians.”

“You know, Pam, along the gospel freeway lie two opposite ditches, equally treacherous. Off to the left you have the ditch of presumption—people thinking they are saved while refusing to surrender themselves to Christ. To them, forsaking their sinful ways is something optional—nice but not necessary. They overlook that faith in Christ involves a covenant with Him, an agreement similar to the marriage commitment.

“Since you are conscientious, Pam, your big battle isn’t with presumption. Your tendency is to fall into the opposite ditch, legalism—basing your salvation on your spiritual accomplishments rather than of rejoicing in what Jesus has already done as your Saviour. You’ve got to guard against that and keep trusting in the blood of Jesus.”

“But Pastor, I want so much to overcome every sin!”

“The devil knows that, and all these years he’s been taking advantage of your sincerity. It seems incredible, but it’s true just the same—many earnest Christians actually compete against Christ. Seeking to equal His perfect character, they fail to find refuge in Him as their substitute. Yes, they go to Him for strength, but they don’t trust His blood to cover their short-comings. Because of such legalism they never find rest.”

“You’re right. I’ve been miserable all these years.”

“Pam, you might have been confusing what the Bible calls the fruit of the gospel—a changed life—with the gospel itself. The gospel, you see, is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The fruit of the gospel is a transformed life because of the indwelling Christ. Do you see the difference?”

“I certainly do. I guess I’ve been making my pattern of Christian growth the basis of my salvation—rather than finding my security in the blood of Jesus.”

“You’ve got it. Christian living offers all kinds of possibilities, but my faith must remain rooted in God’s forgiveness. I could memorize 10 books of the Bible during the next year, perhaps the entire New Testament. But if I fall short of that goal, am I lost? It might be possible for me to win my whole neighborhood to Christ this coming year. But suppose I fail—am I lost? It’s possible for me to be such a good father that I run circles around Bill Cosby. But am I lost if I simply love them and show them Jesus?”

Once saved always saved?
“Spiritual security is wonderful, Pastor. But how far does it go? Once I’m saved, is it impossible for me to become lost?”

“Well, think of a married couple. Nobody in the world can rob them of their relationship, but they can forfeit it themselves by their own free choice. The national divorce rate tragically attests that there’s no such thing as once-married, always-married. We Christians likewise must preserve our relationship with Christ throughout life. God keeps us in His grace, but only as we continue yielding ourselves to Him. If we return to our old lifestyle, we squander our salvation.”

“Well,” she responded, “since it is possible to become lost again, at what point would we forfeit our salvation?”

“Suppose a husband and wife have a little argument. They might say things that don’t reflect the love they really do cherish for each other. Later they feel ashamed and deeply sorry. So they confess to each other and make up. Now tell me. After they have cleared the air with their confession, must they go down to the county courthouse and get married again?”

(Continued on page 30)
Sermon resources—III: your library and file

Floyd Bresee

I t happened in a ministers’ meeting of the Evangelical Church in Germany. A young pastor waxed eloquent in recommending his new approach to preaching. He no longer needed to spend long hours in sermon preparation. He simply walked into his pulpit and depended solely on the Holy Spirit to tell him what to say.

An elderly pastor rose in disagreement. “The Holy Ghost never spoke to me in the pulpit. Yes, I remember, he did speak to me once. When I was going down the pulpit steps after a poor sort of sermon, the Holy Ghost spoke to me. He said only three words, and what He said was ‘Heinrich, you’re lazy!’”

“I don’t mean to belittle in any way the necessity of relying on the Holy Spirit in the pulpit. But God seldom rewards indolence. As Emerson said: ‘You can have truth or repose. You cannot have both.’

Where do we go to find this truth about Christ that we preach from our pulpit week by week? Previously we’ve mentioned two sermon resources: your Bible and yourself—your personal experience with Christ. Let’s look now at two additional resources: your library and your file.

Your library

_Preachers must be readers_. According to Megatrends 2000, by John Naisbitt and Patricia Alburdene, one in five American adults buys at least one book a week. I was surprised to learn that “people 18 to 34 years old buy 2.6 books a week. And they read them.”

Dare we who preach to these people in our congregations read less? Preachers must be readers. When you haven’t anything to preach, check, and you’ll likely find you haven’t been reading.

But what should we read in the sermon preparation process?

_Bible commentaries_. First, of course, we read the Bible. But second only to that should be Bible commentaries. They should not come until after we have gotten everything we can directly from the Bible. But they should probably come before we go anywhere else. They give us more biblical insights per minute of study time, and they help protect us from expository misinterpretations.

_Books on the subject_. You seldom have time to read a whole book when preparing a sermon. Read ahead of time, underlining and writing on the flyleaf ideas you may want to use. Get into your file a reminder of where the material is.

_Books of sermons_. These should be used sparingly. They may produce ideas around which you may form your sermon, or even a framework on which to hang your sermon. But a sermon is as personal as a toothbrush. You ought to use your own.

Your file

A filing system is one of the greatest time-saving devices known for sermon preparation. From 50 to 75 percent of your sermon should come from your file.

Ministers who quit studying as soon as they have enough material to “fill the hour” will always be mediocre preachers. Before you begin putting the sermon together, you should ideally have gathered two or three times as much material as you can use.

What do you do at this juncture is the hardest mental work in sermon preparation and does most to separate good sermons from poor. Sermon material tends to fall into four categories: 1. _This sermon_. Material that is a little second-rate. Throw it out. If you didn’t use it this time you shouldn’t use it next time. 3. _Long sermon_. This material cries out to be used, but it will make your sermon too long. It’s hard to put it aside, but easiest if you have a way to file it for later use. 4. _Wrong sermon_. This is good material, but it doesn’t quite fit this sermon. You’re preaching on A, and you come across some excellent ideas on Z. Don’t preach an A to Z sermon. File it for the day you’ll be preaching on Z.

Forget you can remember and remember you’re bound to forget. I thought this idea was clever enough when my homiletics teacher said it that it got into my notes. Through the years it has proved so practical it finally got into my head. Carry note paper everywhere you go. Write every usable idea down immediately. Otherwise, it will likely leave you like the attractive stranger who smiled at you one night, then walked away, and you never saw him or her again.

_Topic file_. It can be as simple as a cardboard box or as complicated as a computer, but a topical file must include a fairly complete index. Don’t fill it with illustrations only. It should represent all your former study on any subject. But when you want to file something and can’t find a place to file it, you give up on filing.

Sermon file. This file is set up for three categories of sermons: Possible sermons—sermon ideas you may want to pursue later. Planned sermons—sermons you are specifically planning to preach soon and for which you need a place to be gathering material. Preached sermons (Don’t lose the sermon or the research material used in its preparation. Some day you may want to preach it again.)

Next time, a final sermon resource: your congregation.
A shrill whistle pierced through the bedroom window, awakening me at 5:00 a.m. Already I could hear the local church elders beginning to gather on the road in front of the house. I dressed quickly and joined them for a few minutes of warm-up exercises, followed by a brisk walk in the cool predawn darkness.

Thus began one of the most interesting, satisfying, and exhausting Sabbaths I had experienced in the Philippines. It was the culmination of a three-week elders’ training session conducted in conjunction with a nightly evangelistic campaign. The scene of activity was a village outside Santa Lucia, several hundred kilometers north of Manila. I stayed in the home of Floyd and Vicky Ramos, a dynamic young couple holding responsible government positions. After becoming Adventists two years previously, they found themselves the only church members in their locality. Feeling a burden for evangelism, they constructed a bamboo frame meeting hall across the road from their house. Then they appealed for assistance from mission headquarters.

Help came in the person of Florante Andres, director of the Church Growth Institute for the Northern Philippines Union. He invited local elders from the region to attend the training program and help out with the evangelistic meetings. Thirty-one elders attended the training session, and hundreds of people from the community took their stand for Christ and His truth as Rogelio Bernal presented the nightly message.

Since 1987, nearly 50 of these programs have trained an average of 35 to 40 elders a session. The plan originated in the Philippines with Edwin Beck, then director of the Church Growth Institute for the Far Eastern Division. Filipino pastors often serve 10, 20, or even more churches and can visit each of them only once a month—at best. For the week by week operation of a church, total responsibility typically falls on the shoulders of local elders. Despite having strong spiritual leadership potential, many are inadequately trained for preaching, visitation, and conducting the diverse business of the congregation.

The training sessions have met their need. The curriculum for the three-week course covers a number of important areas. After a morning devotional exercises one of the fundamental SDA beliefs, four basic classes follow:

1. Personal Evangelism
2. Sermon Preparation
3. Church Administration and Leadership
4. Principles of Church Growth.

In addition to attending these classes, elders become involved in the evangelistic crusade going on. They help with platform duties, visitation, Bible studies, ushering, transportation, even special music.

Many elders sacrifice financially to avail themselves of the training. Some even jeopardize well-paying jobs. Each receives a modest stipend to cover food and transportation costs. Careful spending allows something to send home to the family for groceries. Elders usually find housing with local church members.

Many elders in metropolitan areas cannot abandon their professional practice for three weeks at a time. For them the church offers a weekend training program in Manila lasting three months.

The Lord’s leading has been evident in the establishing of the Filipino training program for local elders, who contribute in large measure to the vitality of the Filipino church. Edwin Gulfan, Church Growth Institute director of the South Philippine Union, one of the largest and fastest-growing unions in our world church, is enthusiastic about the elder training program. “We are constantly planting new churches,” he says, “which means that our pastoral force is spread out more and more. The demand for strong lay pastors and elders is urgent, and this new program is meeting the need to equip them.”

One local elder asked me, “Why has the church waited so long to provide this training for us? If all the elders had taken this course years ago, we would be in the kingdom by now.”
Good News in Growing Churches
Robert L. Burt, editor. Pilgrim Press, New York, 1990, 343 pages, $17.95, paper. Reviewed by Monte Sahlin, adult ministries coordinator, Church Ministries Department, North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Silver Spring, Maryland.

So much literature on church growth has been written recently that few pastors attempt to keep abreast of new books. Because this volume would not have otherwise come to the attention of most Ministry readers, it deserves mention here as an exceptional work.

Most church-growth material promotes the work of the nondenominational superchurches or fast-growing conservative denominations. This book, however, comes from a different perspective. Written by pastors in the United Church of Christ—a declining liberal denomination—its stories tell of exciting growth.

Good News showcases 17 congregations with memberships from 35 to 4,000, ranging from newly planted churches to ones more than 350 years old. Case studies include Hispanic, African-American, and White groups. Some are located in small towns or suburbs; others in the inner city. The pastors who presided over churches during exciting growth periods have written their stories. This case study approach provides valuable details as experienced from behind the scenes. As a result, the book gives some of the most instructive material on pastoral leadership I have seen published.

I find several interesting characteristics about this collection of documents. First, the dedication of these so-called liberal pastors to winning converts for Christ impresses me! “Perhaps only churches [involved in] the conversion of non-Christians to the gospel . . . have the right to celebrate growth,” observes one writer. Many pastors set aside blocks of time to visit the unchurched in their neighborhoods and give Bible studies.

All of the pastors emphasize spirituality and primitive godliness. One pastor commits himself to living out liberation theology among the poor of the inner city. “As a church we pray together every Wednesday night. On Friday nights a small group . . . gathers in different homes to spend two hours in prayer. . . . Local and global concerns are lifted up to God.” His congregation spends “at least four to six Saturdays of the year in all-day retreats, praying, fasting, and studying together.”

These congregations have strong programs of evangelism and social services. Each invests much time and money in serving the needs of nonmembers in the community while vigorously trying to win souls. But they are not boastful about their efforts. None of the authors claim this work as significant in growth success. Service seems to be an expected natural part of their ministry.

Except for the smallest, each congregation holds multiple worship services. Several writers mention the discomfort of their congregations at not having the whole family together at one worship. But the pastors see multiple services as a necessary step for growth.

Growth requires money and personnel, and the pastors thoroughly discuss finance and volunteer resources. The ability to motivate members to give time and money remains a necessary skill for pastors dedicated to evangelism. Though they share many creative approaches, no pastor claims an easy way to make it happen.

Listening to these United Church of Christ ministers provides a valuable learning experience, especially for the pastor of a middle class church in which strong tradition has stalled growth. We need to encourage more pastors in every denomination to use the case study approach in writing about church growth.

The Sandwich Years

If you are between 30 and 65 and find yourself sandwiched between your children and your parents, I have a book for you! I found The Sandwich Years to be outstanding, easy, and enjoyable to read, though it brought a few tears.

Christian psychologist Dennis Gibson and his wife, Ruth, a marriage and family counselor, strive to reconcile generations. They write: “As each generation understands and respects the preceding one, we will all harvest the fruit of that commandment with a promise: ‘Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with you.’”

The first five chapters talk about parenting adult children: detaching, affirming, enjoying each other, traditions, disciplining young adults, preparing them for marriage, and giving advice. They present practical and lively illustrations.

The next seven chapters deal with parenting our parents. I found this part of the book exceptional. Its many illustrations show how the elderly think, feel, act, and respond. We find out what they need most and how to understand and help them. The authors offer practical and balanced suggestions aimed at meeting the needs of all the generations.

The Gibsons discuss unexpected and lingering death, counseling both the parent and those in the sandwich years. They give guidance in selecting home care assistance, nursing homes, and support groups. They tell how to use community resources in caring for the elderly and/or disabled.

The last four chapters consider spousal concerns during the sandwich years. It tells how we shift gears during life’s changes, and the need for communication and retirement planning.

I recommend this book as an important addition to every minister’s library—both for personal use and professional counseling.

In Praise of Plodders!
Warren W. Wiersbe, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991, 144 pages, paper, $7.95. Reviewed by Danny R. Chandler, pastoral assistant at the Columbus, Mississippi Seventh-day Adventist Church, and member of the executive committee of the South Central Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

In Praise of Plodders is about real-life ministry. I have watched with sullen interest the erosion of respect shown to those in the ministry. In an attempt to “humanize” the clergy, we have depreciated the importance of the office. It would be well if Plodders could be made available to all church leaders, especially those who work directly with pastors. And for those of the same occupation who may not feel the fraternal bond, it will inspire greater interest in their contemporaries.

Recently noted
The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf; William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York,

As women struggle for equality, one of the most difficult hurdles they must clear is the myth of female beauty. Seventh-day Adventist women have long had access to the principles of simplicity and modesty, and should welcome this book. Unfortunately, our standards have too frequently been taken out of cultural context. They have become inconsistent social taboos and even superstitions that some view as equal with moral issues. It is little wonder that young women question church values. Now comes a secular book that may say what we want to get across in today's language.

Wolf, a brilliant writer, Yale graduate, and Rhodes scholar at Oxford, tracks the tyranny of the beauty myth through history and reveals its sophisticated function today at home and work, in literature and media, and in relationships. With shocking examples, Wolf confronts the beauty industry and its influence. She analyzes the forces that coerce women to sacrifice their bodies to starvation and surgery for the sake of the beauty gods.

Wolf comes on strong and sometimes extreme, but maybe that's what it takes in a world that judges human worth—especially women—by appearance.

Pam's tortured conscience
From page 26

“Certainly not,” she answered, laughing at the absurdity of the suggestion.
“Now, if they refused to admit their guilt and stubbornly denied their sinfulness, that marriage would ultimately be lost. Any problem, even something small, can eventually split apart a relationship unless it is confessed and confronted. So in the Christian life. We must confess specific sin—to nip it in the bud before it becomes a cherished sin, something more important to us than Jesus. Otherwise, we would indeed lose our salvation. Thank God, though, we don’t have to live in the dungeon of spiritual insecurity. Having entrusted ourselves to Jesus we can know we are saved.”

Feelings and faith
“But what happens when I don’t feel saved?”

“Feelings often fool us, Pam. People with terminal cancer often feel fine, unaware of their fatal condition. On the other hand, we might feel awful when really nothing is wrong.

“Spiritually, too, feelings often fail to tell the truth. We might have great confidence about heaven even while lost outside of Christ. And we might struggle with guilt when everything is fine with our relationship with our Lord.”

“I think I’m understanding that now, Pastor. But there’s something else that really bothers me. Often I feel impatient or resentful, and I ask the Lord to take those desires to sin away. But I still have those cravings—even when I spend a lot of time with Jesus.”

“Pam, you could spend the whole day praying, and still the fact remains that you have a sinful nature that produces those cravings.”

“But doesn’t the Bible say we’ll get a new heart?”

“That means a new attitude, a new willingness to resist temptation and follow Jesus. Cravings of the flesh remain to tempt us. Listen to this from the book of James: ‘Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed’ (James 1:14). So we all have desires for sin that conflict with our commitment. The important thing is that we don’t yield to those urges.”

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"But I wish God would take all those sinful cravings away!"

"That won't happen until Jesus comes, when He will change our vile bodies into ones like His glorious body. Till then, the Spirit and the flesh battle it out, and it's up to us to make the right choices."

"Can't I just let go and let Jesus fight my battles?"

"The Bible says we must fight the good fight of faith and 'run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus' (Hebrews 12:1, 2). God's Word has a lot to say about effort, Pam. It takes effort to get up in the morning to spend time with Jesus. It takes effort when temptation comes to turn to God for help. God gives strength, but we must trust Him for it. That's not always easy."

"Well, Pastor, all this is so wonderful! I sure hope I remember everything so I don't lose my peace with God."

"Pam looked relieved as she departed the pastor's office. She left behind all her years of insecurity and uncertainty, of being tortured by her conscience. Now her life is a pageant of rejoicing in Jesus."

"How about you? Why not give yourself a spiritual checkup? Have you repented of your sins and accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord? If so, then, thank God, your sins are forgiven. When God looks down from heaven He smiles at you and says, "This is Joe, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

"Oh no, Lord," you may protest, "You can't be happy with me—I'm still struggling with problems. After I conquer them, I can consider myself worthy to be Your child."

"God responds, "I've got the power to help you overcome your problems. But even now you are 'accepted in the Beloved,' 'you are complete in Him' (Eph.1:6; Col. 2:10). Not because you are worthy but because you have accepted the life of My Son.""

"God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things have I written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:11-13)."
Eulogizing someone unfamiliar

Fellow clergy anywhere might find the following form helpful in conducting the funeral of someone unfamiliar.

MEMORIAL INFORMATION OUTLINE

Name and age of deceased:
Place and time of funeral:
Place of birth:
Place of residence:
Name of surviving spouse:
Where and when married:
Occupation:
Hobbies:
Religious preference:
Organizations belonged to:
Favorite charities:
For what should the deceased be remembered?

List of survivors:

—Rabbi Mervin Tomsky, Beth Tzedec Congregation, Calgary, Alberta.

Keep a file on your members

They didn’t teach it at the seminary, and I’m amazed that more pastors haven’t discovered the following secret by accident, as I did some years ago:

Assign a file folder for each family of the congregation. Date and place into it every reference you run across to any member of the family—child on honor roll, newspaper clipping, letters of appreciation received, etc.—along with your own observations after visits and other contacts.

People really perk up when you begin your hospital visit by saying, “Last Thursday when I visited you, we talked about how much you love Psalm 121.” At a recent funeral service I stated, “Last November when I visited Betty in Florida Hospital after her bypass surgery, she told me…”

I’m retiring next month, and I think my successor will appreciate the files he inherits.

—Oscar A. Gerken, First Lutheran Church and School, Eustis, Florida.

Visitation potlucks

For larger congregations where it’s difficult for the new pastor to visit individually in everyone’s home within a reasonable amount of time, consider having cottage group potlucks. You can designate a letter of the alphabet once a month and invite all families whose names begin with that letter.

Don’t write them a thank-you note

I don’t believe in sending my members thank-you notes for the good things they do. Yes, I verbally express my appreciation, but I send the following letter (or a variation of it) to their spouses or other family members:

“Dear Ellen,

Of course, you know what a fine husband you have in John. Do you know what he did for the church? [Describe it.]

“You can see why I consider John my dear friend. Humble as he is, he probably didn’t even tell you about his kindness to me. Would you please tell him how much I appreciate it? “Love to you both, [signed name].”

Sometimes I even send these letters of thanks for my benefactors to their work supervisors. Few things I do have worked as well in winning hearts.

—Arthur Freet, First Presbyterian Church, Golconda, IL.

Also, this summer we’ve had a lot of success with family Bible study brunches on Sunday mornings. This replaces the more formal Sunday School curriculum, keeps the family unit together, and results in some good fellowships.

—Rich Carver, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church and School, Madison, Wisconsin.

Sugar-free token

Sometimes it’s the little touch that sparks a relationship. The next time you send a birthday card, include a stick of sugar-free chewing gum. For anniversaries, send two—one labeled “his” and one “hers.” This has been quite a conversation piece and has brought me closer to my people.

—Carl D. Smith, Huntington, West Virginia.

$25 for your ideas

We’ll pay you $25 for your ideas as to how pastors can make their ministry less taxing and/or more effective, provided that these suggestions do not involve a product or service that you are selling. (We’ll consider the latter for publication also, but we won’t pay for the privilege of using them!) Send your ideas to Ministry, Attn. Shop Talk Editor, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904. U.S. citizens, please include your Social Security number. We pay for Shop Talk items upon publication.