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The article “Taps” was frustrating for me as a young adult Seventh-day Adventist Christian.

Case for creationism

I started as an academic physicist before ordination, teaching at several United Kingdom universities, and I have to say that the many evangelical Christians with whom I fellowship in the science and religion fields will be appalled by the shoddy and misleading scholarship in John Ashton’s “Case for Creationism” (September 2001).

To argue that evolution is prohibited by the Second Law of thermodynamics shows ignorance of both. A physical or biological system can move to a state of increased order as long as it receives energy from outside (technically, a dissipative system) and there are a number of examples of this in the physical world.

Ashton is quite right to point out that we do get some occasional odd dating results, but these are trivial compared with the rest of the evidence. The point with which Ashton started his article still holds in any university. You will not find (a) professional academic biologists/geneticists, etc., who do not treat evolutionary theory as basically sound, and (b) an academic cosmologist or geologist who holds a young-earth theory of creation.

—Mike Parsons, Montpellier, Gloucester, United Kingdom.

January 2002 issue

Grant Swank, Jr.’s article “Preaching With Certainty Here and Now” gives me a profound vision of how we can ultimately take the gospel. I like the charge, “God’s menu will give the might to withstand, but it must be devoured as those who are starving.” It makes me want to study the Bible with a deeper and more absorbing interest.

Could we think over how people are craving to be enlightened through this channel approach?

—Estrella Anacleto Jordan, Prilly, Switzerland.

The article “Taps” was frustrating for me as a young adult Seventh-day Adventist Christian. I grow weary with such articles on either extreme of the contested worship debate. The extreme subject used for “example” was described in such slanted phrases as “gospel rock” and “a daring mix of swing and ragtime.” It seems that this article is based, like so many others, on the emotional attachment older SDA Christians have to “the way things used to be,” automatically equating the traditional with the holy, and the new with the unholy.

I especially take issue with his statement “Nothing wrong with the songs, really . . . though I don’t hear about Adventist themes . . . .” Could it be that the reason that contemporary Christian music doesn’t have many Adventist artists is because of a mindset such as is evident in this article, that “new music styles are not bad music styles,” thus discouraging young, gifted, godly artists from ever becoming a part of the contemporary Christian music scene?

Instead of simply fueling the fire with emotional articles that do not try to discover the fundamental issues of this debate, Ministry should publish articles that would educate the readers in the history and effect of music. Such an article would deal with changes in music and worship patterns through the ages, edifying ministers on the many sides of the worship debate.

If church worship services echoed the traditional, formal style that Oliver Jacques enjoys, the congregation would match—older or retired persons. My question is: Do we wish our church to be only for the old and retired, or should it be one where we, through a variety of musical and worship forms, can attract people of all ages and religious upbringing to the foot of the cross and a relationship with Jesus Christ?

—Mark O’Fill, Orlando, Florida.

Editorial comment: Please resurrect the September 1996 issue of Ministry and notice a much more complete discussion of this question, one which more fully recognizes and embraces the concerns raised in the above letter. If you have difficulty finding this issue of Ministry, email or call us and we will send you a copy. (We hope that it will not be long before our readers will be able to go to the Internet to access all such issues.)

Thanks so much for the January 2002 issue. Oliver Jacques’s solid reasoning (as well as interesting writing) in “Taps” addresses concerns I’ve had for years, but without the because-it’s-not-traditional-it-must-be-wrong flavor. Both this article and Jack Van Ens’s “Why Christianity Lite is Less Filling” currently rest in my filing cabinet!

—Bill Krick, Clovis, California.
Brendy was our female Dachshund. Baffy, our neighbor’s male Pekingese. Between our properties was a chain-link fence which among other things kept Brendy away from the amorous advances of the likes of Baffy.

The two dogs clearly liked one another and spent large portions of their time running up and down the fence, each on opposite sides, trying to find a way through to one another. They would jump and bark and touch noses and paws through the barrier, but much to our relief and their frustration, the fence stood firm.

Within all of us there is a great longing to be close to someone, to have a sense of relationship, to be in uninterrupted touch with some other and really with all others. All of us spend significant portions of our time searching the barriers between us for a way through to more satisfying experiences of togetherness.

Barriers to unity and oneness are very common on every major and minor avenue of life, and the church is by no means as exceptional as we might wish. Many come to our churches hoping to find their need for closeness and relationship met, only to find that for them what they expected to be an experience of fellowship and friendship has become a source of frustration and painful friction.

It is sobering to realize that often the very things we have come to believe are so important to the validity of our faith are the things that, given our outlook and attitudes, are the most divisive within the actual everyday life of the church.

What kinds of things caused divisions amongst the New Testament believers?

As much as anything, it was the outward things, the observable behaviors that could be noted and mentally or verbally "evaluated." Circumcision was a major one of these (Acts 15:1, 2, etc.). What should not be eaten, or which holy days ought to be kept were others (Rom. 14:1, 2).

Reading the New Testament shows us graphically that conflict over these kinds of things challenged the leadership of Paul and others as much as anything else they faced.

Each of these matters, along with the contention that goes with them, has its rather obvious parallels in today’s church. How did Paul and the early church view and face these matters and the conflicts that seemed to gather around them?

First, in the minds of the leaders these issues were intentionally kept subordinate to that which was genuinely essential. They were kept in perspective in relation to matters that were clearly central. When it comes to these things, Matthew 23:13-30; Acts 15:6-11, 28, 29; Romans 14:17, 18; and other passages are worthy of our careful study.

Second, when dealing with issues that were actually tributary to the main-stream, each member, whether of one opinion or another, was called upon to:

- Freely accept the differences there were in others over these issues (Rom. 14:1-3).
- Leave all judgment to God who was recognized as entirely able to guide one’s fellow Christian (verses 4, 10, 13).
- Allow each person his or her own convictions over these things (verses 5, 22).
- Accept that a fellow Christian does what he or she does out of sincere devotion to God (verses 6-9, 22).
- Concentrate on that which brings harmony and encouragement into the fellowship (verse 19).

But third, and very significantly, in order to discipline the freedom implied in these teachings and to encourage the harmony that was the overall intention, the fellowship was reminded:

- That everything done within the community was done “to the Lord” and not merely in the light of one’s own personal preference or pleasure (verses 7, 8).
- That as a Christian acts, he or she must do so with sensitivity and consideration toward others, remembering the weaker (not necessarily the more conservative) members of the community (verses 15, 16, 21-23; 1 Cor. 8:4-13).

There is no more pressing matter facing our churches today than that we find constructive ways of dealing with these kinds of differences among ourselves. Because of the struggles of the first-century church we possess an inspired, tried, true, and practical model for working towards and achieving harmony within and amongst ourselves.
What matters more: Container or content?

Randall L. Roberts

In ministry, what matters most is not the container, but the content. "Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, 'Light up the darkness!' and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful."

"If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at" (2 Cor. 4:5-7, The Message).

As a minister, I have an odd job. Don't misunderstand—I love it. But it is an odd job, and that is because of the two realities Paul states in the above passage.

Not about us

The first reality appears in these words: "Our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master" (2 Cor. 4:6, The Message).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his call to apostleship. Some have depreciated his call to ministry, questioning his apostolic credentials, so he addresses the issue. In so doing, he speaks to any called to ministry: "This call to ministry is not about us, it's about someone else." This is the reverse of what is commonly the case in professional life. Ministry, therefore, is an odd job, first of all, because it's an upside-down job.

It's upside down to the way we normally do things. We say, "If you don't take care of yourself, no one will." Our world is pockmarked by shameless self-promotion. In the world we work to advance our own agendas, not those of other people.

Throughout his football career, Deion Sanders was a flashy, brassy personality. A while back, Sanders, a Christian, stated that the position he plays on the football field ought to be renamed. Instead of calling it "cornerback," Deion says that he has so redefined the way this position is played that it should be called by his name. In other words, when a professional football scout asks a prospective player, "What position do you play?" the player shouldn't respond, "I play cornerback." No, says Sanders, the player should now simply answer, "I play Deion!"

Maybe this is just part of his act. Most would never be so brazen. Yet we all are tempted to self-promotion. Even our most noble accomplishments come from mixed motives. But Paul says, "We do not preach ourselves. We preach Christ." In fact, we're simply errand runners, delivering messages for the King.

D. M. Canright was a gifted but vacillating and volatile preacher in early Adventism. During the summer and fall of 1880, along with a number of students from Battle Creek College, Canright attended Professor Hamill's School of Oratory in Chicago. Canright and his friends sought to fine-tune their developing oratorical skills so they could communicate the gospel more successfully in the pulpit.

Each student was assigned a critic. Canright's teacher and critic was D.W. Reavis. During the time they spent together, they became quite well acquainted.

A gifted speaker, Canright was invited to preach in many Chicago churches. Reavis attended to analyze his application of oratorical principles. Canright was so accomplished that invitations flowed in, and eventually he accepted invitations only from the largest and most popular churches.

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side of Chicago. When he finished, people mobbed him, thanking, praising, and lauding him. It took some time for the crowd to disperse so that Canright and Reavis could leave.

Finally, at a late hour, they went to a park where Reavis could offer his criticisms and suggestions. But he had been so absorbed in Canright's presentation of Bible truth that he had no criticisms to offer, no suggestions to extend. They talked for a while, when suddenly Canright sprang to his feet.

"D.W," he said, "I believe I could become a great man were it not for our unpopular message."

Reavis replied, "D.M., the message made you all you are, and the day you leave it, you will retrace your steps back to where it found you."

Canright's wish? "If I could do my own thing, be the source of the missive and not just the errand runner, I could become great!" But Paul steps in and says, "We do not preach ourselves. We preach Christ." We're delivering messages for the King. In this job, we don't promote ourselves. In fact, the whole job is about Someone else.

Content, not packaging

Paul adds a second reality about the ministry of the gospel that warns us that it's an odd job. Not only is it an upside-down job; it takes place in an inside-out world. He says: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." This job is not about the package, but about what's in the package. It's not about the jar of clay, but about the treasure inside the jar. In the world of ministry, the value of what is done cannot be judged by what it looks like on the outside, because it is what's on the inside that counts.

My wife was traveling abroad. While passing through customs at her port of entry, the agent looked at her suitcase through X-ray equipment, and then said to her, "You have bullets in your suitcase." She denied it, of course, claiming that what he was seeing were her hair rollers. When the official opened the suitcase, what did they find but—bullets! Then, standing near a wall, she saw her suitcase, which looked identical to the one she had accidently carried to the customs agent.

Moral of the story? Don't judge by outward appearance but by inner content!

Double advice

The day I was ordained to the gospel ministry, I wrestled with the competing twin feelings: the grandeur of the task to which I had been called, and my own inadequacies and lack of qualification for it. I remember two significant conversations I had with pastoral colleagues while walking toward the ordination service in the auditorium.

These two men, both older than I, offered some advice. They were standing only about 20 feet apart, but I soon realized that a much wider gap separated their philosophies.

The first pastor said to me, "Let me give you a piece of advice, something I learned years ago that might also help you in your ministerial career." I was all ears, eager to hear wisdom from a more experienced colleague. He proceeded to carefully show me how to wear a paper clip behind my tie so it would not be noticeable, and yet would hold my tie in place. By doing that I could keep my tie in place and yet not call attention to myself by wearing an ornate tie clip.

A few paces further a second seasoned pastor stopped me and when I said that I felt unworthy of this calling, he responded, "You don't deserve it. In fact, the only reason you're here today is because He called you, not because you merit it. But since He called you, He will qualify you. You stand there in His righteousness."

Over the years, those two brief conversations have come to represent two directions to take in ministry. The first is the direction of making certain everything looks OK on the
outside. The “do-what-you-do-to-please-people” approach. Do it to avoid conflict. Do it to promote yourself and your programs. Spend time polishing the otherwise unadorned clay pot of the outward self.

The second choice is to take care of the inner life, the spiritual walk, the soul’s health. To spend time and effort and energy understanding, taking in, and applying the message of Christ. On my better days, I have been able to choose the second. On my more ignoble days, I have fallen prey to the first.

Deepening versus broadening

During my early days of ministry someone gave me a motto I adopted: “Deepen your ministry and let God broaden it.” When we succumb to the temptation of putting the broadening of our ministry first, we end up brushing and buffing and burnishing a clay pot. We become shallow public relations people, broadening our own agendas, and in the process become a mile wide and an inch deep. That’s why what Paul says is so vital. When it comes to ministry, what really matters is what’s inside.

The Corinthians were tempted to depreciate Paul’s ministry because of the often-discouraging circumstances that surrounded it. Apparently he was a small man, had bad vision, wasn’t a great speaker, and was constantly on the run. He had enemies galore and critics aplenty. He was hard-pressed, perplexed, and persecuted. If one’s focus was on the clay pot of his life, many reasons existed to question his success.

But that leads to a critical conclusion about ministry, this upside-down job in an inside-out world: In ministry, what matters most is not the container, but the content, not the packaging, but the filling, not the external elements, but the heart.

We face the same temptation, with a different slant. We may more often be tempted to feel good about our ministry because of the blessings that surround it. People criticized Paul’s ministry because of the discouraging nature of its container, as they might do with ours. But they might also affirm our ministry simply because of the successful trappings that surround it. Again, what matters most is not the container, but the content. We are still, after all, only errand runners for the King. We strive to deepen, and let God broaden.

Just before preaching my first sermon in my current assignment, I was feeling quite anxious. I was worried about what to say and how to say it. I shared my anxiety with two friends. Their words brought me back to the core of ministry and the reality of Paul’s passage: “Randy,” they said, “don’t forget that we are just errand boys for the King. Therefore, we have only to please Him.”

It may be an odd job, but what a majestic calling! 

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May 2002
Pain

Clifford Goldstein

I

Clifford Goldstein is the editor of the Adult Bible Study Guide at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

n the end,” wrote Nietzsche, “one experiences only one’s self.” Nietzsche is right. When we grieve with the grieving, weep with the weeping, and suffer with the suffering—we experience only our own grief, our own cries, and our own anguish—never anyone else’s. We bleed our own blood, spew our own spit, and secrete our own sweat—never another’s, no matter how fused our flesh. Other people’s pain comes to us filtered, always and only, through our own. Our own, then, is all we ever actually know.

When the Twin Towers crashed, and thousands of mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers perished in a crushing cascade of steel, fire, and blood—each one felt only his or her own fear, only his or her pain, only his or her own suffering; no one else’s. Whether a mother holding a feverish infant to her breast, or a father clutching a crumpled wife, neither can splice into the nerves of the other to feel a spasm of their woe, a prick of their pain, or a sputter of their sorrow.

No matter how loud, outrageous, or consuming, pain remains more private than thought; thought can always be shared, pain never really can. Unlike the liver, the heart, or blood—suffering is nontransferable, non-transfusable, and non-transplantable. What’s yours is yours alone.

When famine descended upon Ethiopia, and tons of flesh withered and faded back into the earth, they did so, each quivering one at a time. However we die, however we suffer, whether alone or in bundles, corporate agony, collective pain, doesn’t actually exist; we are islands of anguish unto ourselves.

This privatization of pain, this personalization of anguish, it’s good—because it means that no one has ever suffered more than an individual can. Grief remains finite, hedged in by what’s as minuscule as the human. We know no more suffering than our personal metabolism allows, no more pain than our delirious cells can carry. No matter how many miles of nerves are wired through us, what are they but a few frayed and twisted threads in contrast to the light-years of reality that surround us? Our finitude is our defense, our physical borders our best protection. How fortunate that pain and suffering remain hedged in and limited by the inherent confines of individuality. It’s hard enough, this bearing of our own pain. Can we even imagine carrying others’ as well?

There’s an exception, however, to this otherwise pandemic personalization of pain; only one time when this universal paradigm of individuated anguish shifted, and that was the Cross. Only as we understand what happened there, to God Himself in contrast to anything and everything that happens to us, can we begin to understand what’s perhaps the most difficult question that ministers face from their parishioners: Why does God allow human suffering?

Only on the cross can we find, if not certain answers, at least some hope amid the pain.

A clear view

To begin, if one could shovel away the debris, climb over the rubble, and wade past the moral and physical wreckage left in the wake of two thousand years of Christian history in order to see the cross, what would appear? If one could peel off the cross the centuries of ecclesiastical riffraff, what would remain? If one could unravel all presuppositions and prejudices amassed from lifetimes of lies, myths, and religious illusions, all in order to have a clear, unadulterated and undistorted view of the cross—what would they see?

They would see the Creator of the universe—the Being who spoke the strong force, the weak force, electro-magnetism, and gravity into existence; the Being who sprinkled infinity with the Eagle Nebula and Orion; the
Being who threaded 100 billion billion superstring loops into every proton—they would see the Christ shrunk into human flesh and nailed to two pieces of wood, His life crushed out by all the pain, suffering, and anguish of a world that He with His creative syllables had crafted into existence.

Again, though we experience only our own fear, only our own loathing, no one else—at the Cross, Jesus experienced everyone else’s. The individual miseries of humanity were, one by one, added up and the gruesome sum fell on the Creator. At the Cross, everything noxious and evil that ever rippled through our nerves rippled through His—at once.

However much blood, sweat, and tears have spilled, dripped, and flowed under anemic moons; despite the cancerous color of the soul and the loathsome fates of so many little ones—none of them, none of us, suffered more than a single human can. Our pain never surpassed our finitude. No one ever ached more than he or she, individually, could withstand; the moment the threshold was crossed, death cracked it off.

In contrast, at the Cross, the evils of the world, and all their doleful results, honed in on Him at once. From the pain of the children mutilated and then murdered by Mengele, to even the Herr Doktor’s personal terrors of guilt, from the first swollen belly to the last emphysemic lung, from abused to abuser, all the planet’s finite evils fell on Christ and, amassed at once, they were enough to kill Him.

Putting aside postmodern mumbling about perspectivalism, relativism, pluralism, about Foucault’s Interpretative Analysis, or Derrida’s Deconstruction of the text, or Wittgenstein’s language games . . . either England is an island near Europe or it isn’t; either Jonathan Swift wrote A Tale of a Tub or he didn’t; either George Washington was the Prime Minister of France from 1926–37 or he wasn’t; and, either at the Cross the Creator of the universe, having taken upon Himself our humanity, died from the evil of that humanity—or He didn’t. There’s no middle ground here, no compromise. Either Jesus was God Himself, or He was just a good man (and an infinite qualitative difference exists between the two), or maybe even a bad man, or maybe never a man at all. But if He were merely a good man, or a great one, or even the greatest—yet not God too, then the Cross is a noxious lie.

“Man simply invented God,” it has been said, “in order not to kill himself.” If so, then man invented not only God, but One who suffered infinitely more than the creature, any creature, He created. Belief in a false god is bad enough; belief in a crucified one is even worse, for while the belief helps tame the cruel, empty spaces of the universe—the lie makes them more hellish than ever.

The infinite divide

However incredible the Cross, there’s nothing contradictory about it. The Power who uttered into existence infinity, eternity, and matter and wrapped them together and draped the result across nothing, certainly would have the capacity to garb Himself in human flesh and then die in that flesh. The One who created all of what’s created could become part of what’s created. The issue is not physics (How did He do it?) but morality (Why did He do it?)

If ascending from zero to one takes an infinite step, what’s the moral calculus of descending from the infinite to the finite? That God Himself would become a human, that the infinite would assume finitude (while still remaining infinite), that’s incredible enough. But that God would, in the form of finitude, suffer only as the infinite could suffer? Logic and reason knuckle under the notion; before a sketch, or even a rough draft, the imagination surrenders. Only the metaphysics of faith can approach it.

But more importantly, if Jesus

From the pain of the children mutilated
And then murdered by Mengele . . . to the
Last emphysemic lung . . . all the planet’s
Finite evils fell on Christ.

“tasted death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9, TLB), if He died “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2), if upon Him was placed the iniquity “of us all” (Isa. 53:6)—then all of us are implicated in the Cross because all of our evil was there.

Either the Cross is true or it is lie. If a lie, then it’s just a black hole into which so much hope, promise, and prayer have been poured, with little or nothing in return. But, if it’s true, then it means that our lies, our greed, our envy, our lust, our pride, our cheating, our selfishness, our injustice, and all the nasty and dirty little things we have thought and done; all the things that by themselves might not seem so bad but if added up, shoved in our face, and exposed for what they really were would cause us to claw at our own flesh—all of them were there, at the Cross, borne by Christ, killing Christ so that when all the evil moments of our life are tallied and weighed, they don’t have to ultimately, and forever, kill us.

There’s no justice in this life. But if God exists, and if He is just, then justice will be done—which means sooner or later we’ll have to answer for everything; for the dirty secrets that occasionally appear in our dreams, for the pangs that itch in

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If all the evil we have ever committed or will ever commit fell on Jesus to spare us from the punishment that justice demands, then the Cross has an absolute moral claim on us. Whether we believe it or not, whether we accept it or not, the claim remains—and all other ties, in contrast, bind us in nothing but pink ribbons and bows. No one, nothing else, has such a stake in us because no one, nothing else, has done (or could do) so much for us.

If at the Cross Christ paid the penalty for every wrong thing we have ever done, if He bore the brunt of our evil, if in His flesh He felt at once the painful consequences of our foul deeds, and if He did it in order to spare us from having to face divine judgment for all these things we have done and yet we reject the provision, what’s left?

That’s heavy. Whatever else we do or have done to others, we do or have done to those of the same noisome brew as ourselves. We are finite creatures who do things, sometimes petty, sometimes puerile, sometimes terrible, but always only finite and temporal things, nothing more. The gap between who we are, what we do, and to whom we do them stays finite, and finite minus finite equals only finitude.

The Cross, however, presents to humanity something infinite, something eternal. Instead of hovering “out there,” as concepts merely sensed or intuited, the Infinite and Eternal stepped directly into the equations of our lives, wrote Themselves into the formulas of our immediate existence, and made

Themselves accessible as never before. To have the eternal and infinite God clothe Himself in human flesh in order to save us from the inevitable doom of our own rotting wraps—and then only to have those temporal and rotting wraps purposely reject what He did for us—what’s left?

There’s an infinite gap between the finite and the infinite; those who have rejected what Jesus has done for them have, in a sense, breached that gap; it is the ultimate transgression because it is an infinite one. Of all the evil of the world at the Cross—the

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A N D  B E Y O N D

E V E R Y T H I N G  E L S E . . .

mysteries, the rapes, the incest, the barbarity—the only one not there, the only one not provided for is the only one that’s infinite, the one in which the finite rejects the Infinite.

The dilemma

Of course, belief in this Infinite death isn’t in itself productive of loving and lovable Christians. On the contrary, corporate Christianity often produces corporate wretches. It’s one thing to have vile folks walk into a church—that might be expected. But to have them leave worse because their villainy is now absolved by a conscience confirmed in the certainty of terminal truth—that cannot be expected.

How does one explain those who have murdered, raped, and pillaged in the name of Jesus? Or what about those God-fearing, church-going white Protestants who loved the Lord but wouldn’t share their restrooms with a Black person? Or the folks who shoved Jews into gas chambers Monday through Saturday but rested from their work on Sunday? From the Crusades to the Inquisition, from the Ku Klux Klan to the most orthodox fascists, why has Christianity provided the vehicle, the incentive, and the rationale for so much of what rots the planet? And why has much of what’s been noxious been nurtured in the cold, lurid womb of the church, which served for centuries as the intellectual, cultural, and moral dungeon of the West?

Though good questions, none are good excuses. Jesus Himself warned about those who would, under the guise of Christian faith, work iniquity (Matt. 7:21-23). Millions of professed Christians have, for almost two thousand years, provided convenient excuses to reject the Cross; what they haven’t provided are adequate ones, because nothing has changed the Cross, where God died for and from the world’s evil—an infinite act that transcends all finite ones, even the ones done in the name of the act itself.

In the end, nothing nullifies the Cross. It remains, above and beyond everything else, and its claims are so universal, so sweeping, and so grand that they blow away all excuses, even good ones about human suffering.

No matter what we have suffered, we have suffered only as individuals. No more. In contrast, God took on the form of humanity and died a death not only worse than the worst of the best of humanity but suffered a death worse than all of humanity (even the worst of it)—combined. And though that amazing death does not answer all the questions about evil and pain, it does put them in a perspective that could help us past our own anguish and that of others if for no other reason than that, because of the Cross, the moral hues, the tones, and the tenor of the cosmos have radically changed, and the music of the spheres becomes howling praise. ☩
Deciding between dialogue and debate

Ian Hartley

There are two broad divisions in communication style—dialogue and debate. Radio and television stations often focus on one of the two. Congregations and cultures also seem to gravitate toward debate or dialogue. The predominant communication style in an organization will, to a large extent, determine the quality of relationships experienced.

**What is dialogue and debate?**

To dialogue is to listen to the other, to draw the other out, to try and understand another’s point of view. Dialogue presumes an interest in what the other has to say. It is thus a sensitive experience in which the listener has the opportunity of walking through an often unknown forest of ideas.

Of course the word “dialogue” implies the speaker and listener exchange roles from time to time. It is a mutual journey, a cooperative venture, a partnership, a marriage of two minds or souls. In true dialogue, it is as if the universe is no longer a vast, cold, empty space but a warm, friendly, inviting place to be. Dialogue is premised on cooperation and mutual respect.

Debate, on the other hand, is concerned with getting my facts, my point of view, my way of seeing transferred into your head. It is not just the presentation of these ideas or views that occurs in debate because this presentation may occur in dialogue too.

What is unique to debate is the force with which the presentation is made. It is assumed in debate that the most forceful presentation wins the day. This means the presenter with the best logic, eloquence, or power of persuasion has the truth.

**Dialogue**

Dialogue is about relationship, about understanding other people. Dialogue is at the heart of friendship. It is the language of intimacy, the language of lovers. Dialogue affirms and empowers, it seeks to build understanding of the other.

All lasting relationships depend on dialogue for maintenance and extension. Successful families and societies are grounded in dialogue. Dialogue adds value to all involved. It creates a win/win situation. In the postscientific or postmodern society, people work with facts all day long at work and seek meaning outside of facts in relationships, in dialogue.

Business people know that dialogue improves customer relationships. They also know that these relationships are much more important than merely being right. For good business the customer is always right!

There is the classic story of the customer who bought a pair of jeans which turned out to be too short and so he shortened them into cutoffs. The customer then decided the cutoffs were not what he wanted and so took the three pieces of “jeans” back for a refund. The store refunded the full price and won a customer forever.

**Debate**

Debate implies confrontation and is energy intensive. To debate is at least to question if not to insult a position the other has taken, and we know it takes 7-12 compliments or affirmations to negate one insult if the relationship is to be preserved.

Debate is adversarial by nature, an attempt to separate truth from error. Most judicial systems depend on debate even though it creates a win/lose situation. Many parliamentary systems are grounded on debate, debate between government and opposition.

There are negative outcomes which can result from a preoccupation with being right. I know of congregational leaders who have had heart attacks at church board meetings or
shortly after a precipitated heated debate. I know of two missionaries who came to blows on Communion Sabbath about an issue none of the witnesses of the confrontation can remember now. In South Africa the early evangelists for Adventism used to hire the town hall and advertise a debate over which was the correct day on which to worship. They won most of the debates, as well as only a few converts and a town full of enemies.

Today, in many quarters, it seems one only has to mention wine and the Bible, the ordination of women, or what constitutes sacred music, and a good debate is in progress. Debaters seem to believe they will be proved right when Jesus comes, and the others will be proved wrong. I remember debates which I have won, while at the same time I have lost what really mattered, the relationships I needed to keep.

We must debate from time to time, truth is as stake, but we need to remember that if we only debate, the results are rejection and isolation. This is the price we must pay for cold debate.

The language of debate is: “You should . . .,” “If you would . . .,” “It is time you . . .”

The differences

It is helpful to list the differences between debate and dialogue:
- Debate happens when:
  - I focus on facts or truth.
  - I feel or am responsible for telling truth.
  - I feel it is important to understand truth.
  - I communicate to convince.
  - I argue back and forth on the same point trying to make the point clearer.
  - I am concerned with my views.
- Dialogue happens when:
  - I focus on relationships and people.
  - I feel or am responsible for loving you.
  - I must try to understand you.
- I communicate to care for you.
- I affirm you and care for you, back and forth, for a long time, so my love is clear.
- I am concerned with your views.

Having said all this, we must also concede that there are some advantages to debate. Often the energy mustered for debate overcomes apathy and lethargy. However, if no dialogue is established in addition or consequent to the debate, soul communication is missed and we are left either triumphant or depressed. Include debate as part of the dialogue, but only as a part.

Today and tomorrow we must communicate with each other. We can communicate with purpose and we must do so. Life includes the weather, who is ill and who has a new baby, but life is really about how we care for each other and seek to encourage one another on the journey of living.

Debate and dialogue in the Bible

Healthy interpersonal relationships require at least the desire to understand the feelings and experiences of the other person. The priests in the Old Testament had their ears anointed with blood (Exod. 29:20). They were to develop listening skills and those skills were to have an intimate connection with the blood of Jesus. This was a serious commitment to understanding those who came to speak to them.

Jesus debated with some who would have this way of communication. Perhaps they knew no other way. In His spellbinding conversation with Nicodemus there is debate but it is only an introduction to the most profound dialogue ever recorded.

Jesus’ favorite way of communicating was with stories. Stories are just that, accounts of how we experience life, and they are a way for intimate dialogue. In dialogue I unravel my story for you, but in doing so I also unravel my story for myself. When you tell me your story, your story becomes reality for you. This is the power of words in dialogue. Here is the reason we must tell the story of our relationship with Jesus.

In telling our experience of His presence in our lives we confirm and extend the reality and the power of this divine human relationship. There can be no silent Christians any more than there can be silent marriages or silent families. We are created for communication and we find our meaning and fulfillment in dialogue.

Jesus in dialogue with a congregation

Here is an example of Jesus in dialogue with a congregation. He is telling His story and also our story. “He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

‘Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’ All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ they asked” (Luke 4:16-22, NIV, italics supplied).

As a citizen of the kingdom of God, desire the delight of dialogue above debate. In this way the Spirit of the Lord is upon us too, for His glory and our joy. 

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Overcoming the Superman syndrome
Meeting needs while ignoring our own

Stephen Lim

A s the wheels of my car jumped the curb, the jolt awakened me, and I saw a palm tree looming in my path. I slammed the brakes as my car smashed into the tree. Emerging from the wreck, I thanked God that He had protected me from injury.

The schedule I had created for myself led to this accident. For years I had set my alarm clock for 4:50 a.m., when I had dragged myself out of bed and dressed. By 5:00 a.m., I was sitting at my desk for devotions, and then I worked for a few hours. Often my mind failed to engage and the time passed unproductively.

I had convinced myself that I could function adequately on no more than six hours of sleep. After all, as a pastor with many important responsibilities, couldn’t I accomplish more by sleeping less? After all, as a pastor with many important responsibilities, couldn’t I accomplish more by sleeping less? Often during the day I felt sluggish, drowsy. Rarely did I work effectively. And occasionally as I drove, my eyes would momentarily close.

Now I realize that much of this was symptomatic of the “Superman Syndrome.” This common affliction of ministers consists of the failure to recognize our human needs and limitations, while seeking to meet the needs of others. I believed, “It’s up to me to meet the needs of the members and the church. Furthermore, the world is perishing, and I’ve got to do everything possible to save as many as possible. So I’ve got to keep pushing.” Ironically, I accomplished less than if I had accepted my humanness.

For years I did not recognize the symptoms of the Superman Syndrome as they manifested themselves in my daily life. Also, while my motives sounded noble, I learned that other forces lurked just beneath the surface. What are the symptoms, consequences, and causes of this syndrome? And what can spiritual leaders do to overcome it?

Symptoms

A basic symptom is the desire to make everyone happy. We want to live up to people’s images and expectations, however unrealistic. So we strive to meet all of their needs and find it hard to say No to any requests.

In our own minds we may create and strive to maintain an image of ourselves as heroic problem solvers. We see ourselves as the extraordinary person, maybe even a little “messianic,” who is less vulnerable to personal needs than other people are. Rescuing others from their plight makes us feel good about ourselves.

In our compulsion to meet every need in the church, our time is progressively squeezed until there is none left for anything but “the work.” Gradually we discard the needs that every normal human being has. We can simply do without. We repress our needs for adequate rest, play, spiritual renewal, and personal growth. Taking time to enjoy the scenery is a luxury rarely indulged. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we don’t need nurturing. In denying our humanness we live behind the mask of self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, we hide our true selves, fearing that our weaknesses and struggles will be discovered. One writer observes, “We try to disguise ourselves as Superman, but beneath the surface, we are really only Clark Kent. Is it any wonder that we won’t pull open the buttons on our shirt to let people see who we really are?”

Also, frustration takes residence. For no matter how hard we try, we will disappoint some people. We simply cannot meet everyone’s expectations—especially when they conflict. Nor can we be the perfect person we strive to be. Despite our best efforts, a sense of hypocrisy and guilt intrudes. Our sense of unmet needs only adds to our frustration.

Consequences

What consequences result from the Superman Syndrome? As expectations and
demands increase, fatigue builds. That's why I crashed into a tree. On another occasion I experienced severe nausea and weakness for days as my body rebelled against the demands I placed on it.

In our weariness and frustration, we begin to resent those we help. As they become a burden we grimly bear, joy ebbs from our hearts, and it's often replaced by anger.

Buried in human demands and needs, we fail to maintain spiritual health through intimacy with God. Gradually we lose a keen sense of divine calling and the spiritual energy it inspires. Though outwardly we may still appear to be effective, spiritually we dry and wither.

Emotional burnout results from spending our inner reserves without replenishing ourselves spiritually and personally. It also arises from our frustrating inability to live up to our Superman image.

Finally, we neglect our families. In theory we know they are our first and most important ministry, but in practice, we fail to live this out. In trying to meet the needs and expectations of others, we don't have adequate time for them. "They'll understand," we repeatedly rationalize, "and one day when my schedule is less hectic I'll make it up to them." This can eventually lead to their alienation from us, and even from God. My problem contributed to my older daughter's enduring a rocky adolescence before her life turned around.

**Why we want to be Superman**

While the importance and urgency of God-given tasks served as my rational, conscious motivation, I gradually came to realize that four unconscious forces formed a powerful undercurrent shaping my behavior just as powerfully. If strong enough, just one of these can trigger the Superman Syndrome.

First, the low self-esteem, which I had suffered since youth, generated two unhealthy dynamics: It created an acute need for approval, so I craved acceptance and appreciation by others, and liked to think of myself as the hero who rescued them. This sense of inferiority drove me to strive for success in order to prove to myself that I had value as a person. Unfortunately, the anesthetic of achievement only temporarily numbed the pain, before I needed another dose. In reality, then, my desire to be Superman stemmed from feeling like "sub-par man."

Second, we may possess an erroneous theology that causes us to believe that God's servants are not to consider their own needs and wants—or at least put them too far down on the list of priorities. To attend to these, we think, would be selfish. In this kind of theology, the beautiful reality of "dying to self" becomes a matter of killing ourselves.

Compounding the syndrome is our legitimate desire for significance—wrongly pursued. God created us to love and obey Him, and to serve Him.

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according to our individual gifts, opportunities, and calling. In this we find our own highest purpose and fulfillment, especially as we do our best and leave the results in God’s hands. As in my case, the problem arises when we equate significance with outward achievement. I mistakenly thought that the more I worked and accomplished for God, the more valuable my life would be.

Finally, in some cases of the Superman Syndrome a more subtle force is the fear of dependence, which results from several childhood conditions. Some have had overly controlling or protective parents—which I experienced. As adults we fear that depending on others will lead to the further smothering of our spirits. So we decide that we do not need the nurture of others.

**Taking off our capes**

Trying to be more than we are results in being less than we could be. How can we resign the role of Superman (or Superwoman) to live a more balanced and God-honoring life? With God’s help, we can take the following steps to remove our capes.

First, we need to recognize our human needs. Like everyone else we get tired, frustrated, and wounded. We need refreshing and renewing of mind, body, and spirit. As leaders under special stress, we much need the love, support, and encouragement of family and friends. If we have difficulty seeking and accepting these, we need to discover why.

Second, we must place a priority on nurturing our relationship with God. Not only is He the source of our joy and strength, but our only means of bearing lasting spiritual fruit. “I am the vine,” Jesus said, “you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5, NIV).

Third, we need to reveal our human-ness to others. By doing so, we make it harder to pretend to ourselves or others. Bill Hybels, as the pastor of a megachurch, has consistently tried to be open with his staff and congregation, eliminating any pretense of perfection. Because this enables others to identify with him, it actually gives him more credibility and enhances the effectiveness of his ministry.

Fourth, we need to consciously do our best and leave the results to God. One of my professors at seminary shared his experience in counseling a suicidal woman for hours late into the evening. Around midnight he told her, “I’m going home and going to bed. If you’re still alive in the morning, we’ll talk some more.” Was he callous? No. He realized that he had done all he could to help, and that it was not up to him to solve everyone’s problems. The woman survived.

While emergencies arise which demand exhausting hours, this should not become the standard practice in ministry. In getting enough rest I actually find myself far more productive and creative in my ministry. I can do more, do it better, and do it much more joyfully.

Fifth, we need to practice what we preach—that God is in control of our lives. We are to serve faithfully, believing that it is not up to us but God to prosper our ministries in the ways He chooses (1 Cor. 3:6-8).

Finally, we need to make ourselves accountable to trusted individuals, who know us well enough to discourage us whenever the urge arises to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Jesus reminds those who find Superman’s cape heavy, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). We need to hear God say to us, “Lighten up! You don’t have to save the world. Only my Son can do that. You’re not the Savior; you’re not even Superman. Take off your cape!”

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2 Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary.
It was no doubt an accident, but it did carry a message. In printing the preacher's sermon, the local newspaper carried an interesting mistake in the introductory verse: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not clarity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1).

Inadvertently placing an “I” in the place of the “h” in the word “charity” and thus making the word “clarity,” suggested to my mind a deeper truth: without clarity, the message we seek to convey in our preaching may well cause our proclamation to come across as a sounding brass or clanging cymbal.

Clarity calls for simplicity, but simplicity in preaching does not mean shallow or superficial preaching. What is needed is clarity of thought and expression—the ability to tell others what one has seen and felt until they see and feel it for themselves.

Fog is good for lima beans; they prosper in its clammy dampness. But fog has little to offer people. Scientific experiments have indicated that a bank of fog three feet thick, six feet high, and one hundred feet long contains less than one seventh of a glassful of water! One cannot quench thirst with fog. There is only one thing to do with fog, and that is to keep out of it. There was no fog about the gospel when Christ and Paul presented it. A sermon should help people live in a difficult and complicated world.

Augustine once said, “A wooden key is not so beautiful as a golden one, but if it can open the door when the golden one cannot, it is far more useful.” Luther added, “No one can be a good preacher to the people who is not willing to preach in a manner that seems childish and coarse to some.” John Wesley wrote all his sermons in full, and read them to the maid. All the words she couldn’t understand, he eliminated.

An 11-year-old girl, after hearing a new minister for the first time, said, “Daddy, that preacher is not so smart. I understood every word he said.” That preacher was not only brilliant but also wise, for he had followed the example of Jesus. He preached in a language that all could understand. He preached with power.

In all our preaching, let us be simple, plain, much to the point, and deeply in earnest. Some preachers have the instinct of aviators—they announce a text, taxi for a short distance, then take off from the earth and disappear in the cloud. After that only the din of exploding gas is heard, signifying that they are flying high, very high above the heads of their hearers. It could be said of them in the language of an ancient event, “While their hearers beheld, they were taken up; and a cloud received them out of their sight.” The miracle of the Ascension is still manifested in some of our pulpits. A sermon, rightly, is not a meteor but a sun. Its true test is, can it make something grow?

The Lord did not drop golden tablets which could not be deciphered. He spoke and still speaks through the prophets, the apostles, and through His Son. If He has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation, He also expects us to preach to people, not over their heads. We must study for ourselves the concepts and motives which change lives. Then our task begins anew; we have got to study for the sake of others the ways of describing those ideas so that they can see them as clearly as we do. “He preaches over our heads” is no compliment.

Morris Chalfant is a pastor in Kankakee, Illinois.
The courage to face our fears

It is the early hours of the morning. A loud bang outside your bedroom window jolts you out of a snooze. Clunk, clunk, again. You are now bolt upright, uncertain about whether you should wake your wife who is still sound asleep. Then outside the window a shadow passes, cast by the streetlight. Is it a burglar? Perhaps even a serial killer, the one you heard about on the TV news the night before. Your imagination is running wild. Your heart is beating hard and you are bursting to at least tell someone else that there’s someone outside with evil intent.

A small, almond-shaped area of your brain called the “amygdala” is doing what God created it to do. It is receiving signals of a potential danger, and it is letting off a series of alarms throughout your body to prepare you to protect yourself. After all, this may be a threat to your very existence! Clunk, clunk. There it is again. Now you know that you are not imagining it. It certainly is not a bad dream. But then the amygdala begins to get additional messages. In the bright moonlight you can make out the wavering images of a branch of the tree close to your window and a strong wind blowing. No need to bolt or scream out. Your fear is firmly snuffed out and all the alarm systems are reset. Calm returns, though you may still feel super-alert and vigilant for a while. Now you’re glad you didn’t wake your wife. You would have paid for it in untold tales told at ladies’ gatherings about just how “scaredy-cat” some men are!

Unraveling the fear response

We live in remarkable times. On one hand, since September 11, Americans and others have experienced a dramatic upward shift in our general level of fear arousal. The sudden loss of security, our scared psyches, the uncertainty about what the future holds, grappling with the downturn in the economy with loss of jobs and a general increase in feelings of vulnerability, are taking their toll. Even though for some non-North-American readers it might feel that the United States is a long way away, the impact of terrorism is being felt throughout the world with a consequent increase in everyone’s fear level. I was in Australia on September 11 and experienced firsthand the dramatic effect it had there. On the other hand, we are slowly unraveling the fear response and finding new and effective ways of dealing with it when it gets out of control.

As in the previous two articles, my goal is to help Christian leaders understand as best they can all that we currently know about important emotional problems people face today. By understanding the “fear circuit” it is hoped that we will develop more effective treatments for fear-related disorders such as phobias where fears are taken to extreme.

In a previous article I made a distinction between fear and anxiety. The two become so entangled that sometimes we cannot tell the one from the other. Clearly, fear will give rise to anxiety when imagination takes over and exaggerates the fear. But anxiety, we now know, uses different brain mechanisms. For instance, and this is an important point for a pastor to keep in mind, we have effective medication to control anxiety when it gets out of control, but no medication can directly help us deal with fear.

Fear involves a “hit and run” process in the brain. Survival is its sole purpose. Anxiety, however, stirs a slower reaction that lasts a while. In fact, anxiety, as we’ve previously established, can take over and entrench itself in such a way that it appears to be there all the time.

The take-home point I want to communicate to Christian leaders here is that it is extremely important that we help people bring their fear responses under control as soon as possible. Failure to do so will result in an escalation, even entrenchment, of some form of severe anxiety disorder.

Unresolved fear is a powerful stressor that turns even a healthy fear into an ugly fretfulness. It’s the form of stress that is designed to be short lived. You can prevent prolonged fear from becoming damaging through informed counseling and by preaching a healthy acceptance of fear. Pastors, especially preaching pastors, can play a very significant role in these frightening days in helping people avoid becoming traumatized by prolonged fear.

Kinds of fear

Psychologists study many kinds of fear. Not all fears are of the dramatic, life-threatening sort. So, while fears persist about terrorist attacks we should not ignore the more common variety of fearful reactions that are very much more commonplace.

There are “lesser” forms of fear that can be just as debilitating as the major forms. Take for instance, someone with an extreme fear of germs. They intellectually know that germs don’t inhabit every piece of furniture or doorknob. But intellectual reasoning has nothing
to do with obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is what I am describing here. Such people will incessantly wash their hands after touching something like a doorknob, often to the point of causing lesions and bleeding. All this is because they fear that germs are invading their skin. The fear of germs leads them to try and eradicate the imagined, invading microbes.

Another very common group of fears are phobias. Phobias are irrational fears: While the feared object has some reason for creating fear, the sufferer cannot control the fear through reason. A fear of flying, high buildings, snakes, and spiders are all quite natural in that these can harm you. But a normal person can keep the fear in check by understanding the limits of the threat. If a snake is behind a glass wall it cannot bite you. For someone with a phobia, a glass wall makes no difference to the fear.

One particular fear related anxiety disorder, called Generalized Anxiety Disorder (abbreviated GAD), is quite common. While it is referred to as an “anxiety” disorder it is more akin to fear than anxiety. Affecting at least four million people in the U.S. alone, it afflicts twice as many women as men.

People with GAD have an exaggerated and persistent fear sensitivity and it can cause an enormous amount of stress. While there is some strong evidence that a small genetic factor may play a role in its development in that identical twins have a high rate of concordance in developing GAD, the actual mechanism is the tagging of fear with certain memories that do not fade like other memories.

Such a person, then, has a brain that is tagged and a fear structure is put in place. This is why trauma needs to be dealt with as early as possible. Seeing a friend killed or facing a severe risk to one’s own life can, in people who are vulnerable, permanently fire up their fear response.

Helping people deal with the memory of some tragedy or fear as soon after the event has occurred is, therefore, an extremely important aspect of ministry. In particular, victims of trauma must be given an opportunity to talk about their feelings surrounding such trauma.

Externalizing one’s feelings is part of how the brain is designed to heal them. I say this because I believe that spiritual resources, especially having a healthy faith, can help to heal these memories by robbing them of their sting.

Understanding the fear response

It is vital that all “people helpers” understand the fear response, if only to avoid perpetuating damaging beliefs that could reinforce unhealthy fears. Although a reaction to some fearful event is perfectly natural, it can be quite unpleasant. As mentioned earlier, it all starts in the amygdala that is weighing the evidence coming from all the body’s sensors and searching for a possible threat. If a threat is sensed, it immediately sends out signals to the adrenal glands, which in turn cause the heart to pump more blood to the brain and muscles. Breathing quickens, pupils widen, saliva dries up, and the hands become cold and clammy—all very necessary for survival and part of how God has created us. One of the consequences of this inbuilt alarm system is that fear weakens the ability to concentrate. You are easily distracted and cannot focus on much besides what is causing your fear.

While this is healthy in an extraordinary fear-provoking situation like the clunks mentioned earlier, when the danger is less acute and prolonged, this response can be debilitating. This is the effect many are now experiencing given the time that has elapsed since September 11 of last year.

People need to be helped to “let go” of fears that are no longer imminent and to embrace a more positive outlook toward the future. Reassurance of so much that has and is being done to make our world safer, needs to be embraced in the context of our faith in a God who does control our world, even though the way He is doing it may not always be obvious.

Bringing fear under control

The first and one of the most important ways for dealing with fear is help the person find out where the fear is coming from. Is this fear a carry-over from some bad childhood event? For many, bad childhood experiences have inculcated a conditioned response in which any similarity between something in the present (that might be quite harmless) with something in the past (that was terrifying) triggers a fear response that really doesn’t belong in the present.

This is illustrated in the experience of a couple I once counseled, who were having marital difficulties. The husband happened to be a pastor who was a little impatient and reactive. Whenever he raised his voice at his wife she would go into a catatonic state and start to tremble from fear. He couldn’t understand this extreme reaction and so he became angry with her when she reacted in this way. Of course, this only made matters worse.
As we explored her reaction (and his temper) it emerged that her father, also a pastor, would lose his temper and physically slap her. So, even though her husband would never do this, just a slight anger reaction in him would bring out all the fear that was connected to her father.

We worked at helping her “disconnect” her fear for her father from her husband’s reactivity, and, obviously, helped the husband to stop his behavior, which now he knew was traumatizing to his wife.

Second, the person should also be helped to explore whether the fear is imagined or not. Not all fears are based in reality. Sometimes we create fears in our imagination or by reading or hearing about something that happened to someone else. Such improbable fears need to be challenged, not left to do their damage. God designed us to deal with real fears only.

Third, the imminence of the fear should be examined. For instance, we all fear death. But most of us don’t expect to die in the foreseeable future. If we have just received traumatic news of some terminal illness then it is appropriate to be fearful and then to take steps to deal with the certainty of that fear. For those who fear death a long way off, inevitable as it is for all, they need to be enabled to put that fear aside and get on with the business of living.

Lastly, because it is not possible to eliminate all threats and therefore all fear (we’d be creating a monster if we did), we need to facilitate ways in which a person can better tolerate reasonable fear. Here are some suggestions for pastors to consider in helping themselves and others:

- Reassure people that they are not crazy to continuously feel bothered by current events and threats. It is normal to be afraid, even for months afterwards. As concentration-camp survivor Viktor Frankel remarked: “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.”
- Reactions to fear that may be expected include preoccupation with recent events, some sleep disturbances, resurgence of previously frightening memories, limited ability to attend to normal routines, and increased emotionality such as depression and crying.
- To prevent these reactions from becoming excessive, limit attention to media coverage (turn off the news if it bothers you), focus on distracting tasks or hobbies, and carry on your life as you normally would. Do what you would normally enjoy.
- Look for a positive perspective on negative events. Find ways to help others and engage in constructive discussion only with those who have a positive outlook.
- Take extra time to rest; exercise and eat healthfully, and avoid taking on too many outside activities.
- Spend time with God—in praise, meditation, and prayer. After all, Scripture still has the most powerful antidote for fear: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4: 6, 7, NIV).

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Editorial note: This is the third in a six-part series entitled “Pastoral Pressure Points,” by Dr. Hart. The remaining three articles will appear in our July, September, and November issues.
Positive ways to deal with criticism

Teena M. Stewart

To avoid criticism do nothing, say nothing, be nothing” (Elbert Hubbard). While serving as Ministry Empowerment Director of a church, I worked rather closely with some church members. This meant having to deal directly with criticisms and complaints. As a people pleaser who wants to keep everyone happy, I have discovered how difficult it is to please everyone.

Our church offered regular gift-discovery classes. I oversaw the follow-up placement process connecting volunteers with lay ministry opportunities. My responsibilities included supervising a group of ministry consultants. We made progress with our volunteer placements and were excited to be putting people in positions they felt passionately about. Despite the positive results of ministry mobilization, after one recent placement session every consultant voiced a different complaint. They proceeded to criticize everything they saw wrong, and each seemed to have a separate agenda for how he or she wanted things to work.

I walked away from the meeting deflated. Didn’t anyone see how far we had come? Just two years earlier we had no placement process in place and people were virtually clueless when it came to knowing how to get connected with volunteer ministry. I had worked hard to set the wheels in motion and it was working. The lay mobilization process was making a difference with the number of volunteers we had, but no one seemed to notice the good stuff. They were focused on everything they saw wrong. I couldn’t help but think that if they were personally expected to bring about the changes they wanted they would quickly give up. To them it was a church leadership problem and they were quick to find fault.

I am married to an ordained minister, and we have served in numerous churches. Criticism comes with the territory. Lay constituency frequently holds staff members to a higher standard. First Timothy 3:1-13 explains how overseers and deacons must be beyond reproach. When you couple this expectation with the fact that people are paying a leader’s salary, the standard for excellent performance is higher.

Although we are called to be exemplary leaders, we are still works in process, saved by grace just like other believers. Unfortunately, members occasionally forget this little detail, developing a higher set of expectations for their leaders than for themselves.

The cold hard fact is, we will never please all of the people all of the time. Understanding why people criticize and learning how to handle those criticisms, helps me, as a leader, equip and fortify myself to withstand the waves of criticism.

Reasons people criticize

Those with poor self-esteem are often the quickest to find the “speck” in their brother’s eye because tearing someone down seems to lessen the scrutiny of their own faults. Administrators often operate under the unspoken premise, “I wouldn’t manage things that way,” assuming alternative methods would make things work more smoothly.

Still others are perfectionists and cannot tolerate imperfection. Someone has said, “Criticism is the disapproval of people, not for having faults, but having faults different from your own.” Criticism stems from a personality clash and sometimes it happens because people don’t have a clear understanding of the church’s internal mode of operating.

A pastor friend told the following story: “Stress factors from my pastorate were causing my wife, Esther, and I to have enormous marital and family difficulties. At times it was nearly beyond our ability to cope. After one
particular bad day of criticism, I left work terribly angry. I drove home and parked my van in a vacant lot next to my home. Still fuming, and alone, I got out of the van, slammed the door, and huffed and puffed my way into the house.

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"Unknown to me, a friend and neighbor, whom my wife had just led to Christ, watched from her two-story window. If I'd known, I certainly would have hidden my anger.

"A day later, Esther happened to meet with our neighbor. The neighbor brought up the incident. 'Your husband must have been having a bad day,' she said. 'When I saw him, I began praying for him. Is he all right?"

"I was much better after hearing her response! Such a response from a parishioner after seeing her pastor being so human, was not only encouraging for us, but is unfortunately rare!"

A church regularly encouraged members and visitors to complete communication cards in order to give feedback and updates on addresses and prayer needs. One Monday morning staff members sifted through the cards. On one card a member had written, "The pastor's sermon was good but it's too long. It needs to be about ten minutes shorter." Another card in the same pile read, "The sermons are too short."

Trying to please everyone is like walking a tightrope. If we try to perform so that we don't ruffle any feathers we lose our effectiveness totally. So, what's the answer?

Answers to criticism
Reducing criticism. If you are a people pleaser, your first inclination is to do everything in your power to please your critics, but the impossibility of doing this soon makes itself known, since everyone wants something different. People pleasers are more likely to listen to complaints.

At my ministry consultant meetings I was setting myself up to receive complaints by allowing consultants to get off track and chase rabbits. Sticking to a set agenda and bringing consultants back to task reduces the opportunity for criticism. Keeping God's purpose and will at the forefront puts everything in its proper place.

Drop the act. People can spot a phony a mile away. If I put on an irreproachable air of perfection I set myself up as a target for criticism. If I admit I am capable of error, those around me will be more likely to forgive me when I make a mistake, or when I take a course of action they don't like.

Attitudes toward critics. Use gentleness and compassion. "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Prov. 15:1, NIV).

Pastor Dan's eyes filled with tears as he read a scathing letter from one of his core leaders. The man gave a blow-by-blow account of everything wrong with Dan's leadership and teaching style. The leader-critic was so displeased he resigned from his position and left the church.

Dan felt betrayed and deeply hurt, but rather than respond with bitterness he "retaliated" by continuing to send the leader birthday cards, letters, and even invitations to breakfast. All his efforts, however, were rebuffed.

Two years passed. Then one day the leader returned and stood before a gathering of Dan and other church leaders where he asked forgiveness for his poor judgment and wrong attitude. Dan's gentleness and perseverance were instrumental in his transformation and restoration.

St. Francis de Sales once wrote, "When you encounter difficulties and contradictions, do not try to break them, but bend them with gentleness and time."

Pray. Have people pray for your leadership on a regular basis. Likewise, pray for those who criticize you. The pastor who was struggling under the burden of his parishioner's criticisms was encouraged and uplifted when he learned that someone was praying for him. God can work in the hearts of our critics (even the chronic ones). Ask Him to uncover the truth and the root cause of the criticism.

Consider the source. "Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head" (Ps. 141:5, NIV). Some people are just natural faultfinders but within our congregations there are certain members we respect because of their wisdom and godly ways. A reproof from one of these members carries a lot of weight and I am more likely to receive it as truth.

Look for the grain of truth. If one person corrects me I may or may not take their words to heart, but if two or more people are raising the same issue, their words carry more weight. If the criticism seems totally out of line with no true merit, cast it aside. If there is a grain of truth, then adjustment of my actions and/or behavior is probably in order.

Responding to criticism. If you want to really tick off a critic then just give a pat answer. They'll see right through you. I don't want to come across as flippant and uncaring but I have developed some ready-made responses that have proven helpful. Sincerely saying, "Oh, I can see why that might bother you," or "Thanks for bringing that to my attention," are ways I show I care.

When someone corrects me I listen attentively, then make the judgment call. If I immediately see the criticism is on target, I tell the giver what action I will take to correct
it. If I feel the criticism isn't merited, I tell them gently but firmly.

If a particular church member continually criticizes it helps to pinpoint the cause. I've discovered that the most critical members are often not serving in any capacity and have too much time on their hands. I can help alleviate some of the friction by finding an area where they are gifted to serve.

When others are being criticized

But what about when criticism is leveled at someone else? On several occasions I have been approached by individuals who level criticism at a fellow staff member or lay leader because they see me as being on the inner circle of leadership.

Recently a lay worker "dumped a load," regarding some issues she was having with how prayer requests and church notices were being handled. The people pleaser in me didn't handle it well. I already had scheduled a meeting with the pastor who administered in that particular area, so when I met with him I raised the issue and explained the lay worker's complaints.

The pastor patiently listened and explained why things stood as they did, giving me an entirely new perspective on the situation. He gently pointed out that I should not have shouldered these issues because they were really out of my realm of responsibility.

At the time I was annoyed that he seemed to brush the issues aside, but later, after mulling over what he said, I realized he had handled it well. When I got back to my office I contacted the lay worker and gently shared the new information I had gleaned. Then people-pleaser me did something I was really proud of, I put the responsibility back on the lay worker's shoulders and suggested if she still had issues, she should set up a meeting with the pastor in charge of those areas.

People pleasers carry invisible backpacks. As we go along and hear criticisms, we add a stone to the pack. Before long the weight of the bulging pack is unbearable. Now, when someone criticizes another coworker, instead of placing the stone in my backpack, I hand it back to the initiator and suggest they address the leader directly.

Don't dodge. Criticism can be so unbearable that sometimes we are tempted to hide from the situation. Usually, however, dodging the problem makes the situation and the critic more hostile. Meet the criticism head on. Even Christ, when confronted, dealt with His critics.

When we follow His example we sharpen our problem-solving skills and grow in the process. The better we become at dealing with painful circumstances and individuals, the more resilient we become as leaders.
Ordination in the New Testament?

Nancy Vyhmeister

The elders were kneeling in a circle around George, who was about to become a deacon. The pastor was praying for George, for his family, for his ministry to the church. As laying on of hands was mentioned, each elder reached out to touch George.

Was this the way ordination took place in the times of Peter and Paul? I went home and turned to my Bible that afternoon. Unfortunately, the New Testament gives little specific information about services such as the one I saw that morning. Twelve passages speak of some kind of appointment or commissioning, but none uses the word “ordination.” To understand the topic, let’s briefly review the biblical terminology for commissioning, followed by an analysis of these 12 passages.

Terminology

The term “ordination” comes from the Latin ordinare, “to put in ordo,” with ordo meaning “row, rank, or order.” In ancient Rome, ordo referred to a category of people, as in the “order of senators,” distinguished from the plebe.

In ecclesiastical Latin, ordo refers to the “holy orders” and ordinare to the ceremony of induction into holy orders. According to Canon Law, the “sacrament of holy orders” constitutes some faithful Christians as “sacred ministers by means of the indelible character

with which they are marked.”

While the English verb “ordain” can mean to “issue an order,” its ecclesiastical meaning is “to invest with ministerial or priestly authority.” Such a meaning is not present in the New Testament.

Biblical terminology for induction into office, especially in the Old Testament, includes anointing and laying on of hands. For commissioning or induction into office, the New Testament uses additional words, none of them associated with “ordination” in the ecclesiastical sense.

Anointing

In the Old Testament, things, places, and persons are anointed to make them holy, to set them apart for a holy use. For example, Jacob anointed a memorial stone at Bethel (Gen. 28:18) and the Levites anointed the tabernacle and its contents (Exod. 40:9) in order to “consecrate” them.

At the beginning of their priestly service, Aaron and his descendants were anointed with fragrant oil (Exod. 30:30-32). While there is no specific mention of the ordination of each of the kings of Israel and Judah, there is evidence that anointing the king at the beginning of his reign was habitual. This was done either by a priest, such as Jehoiada who anointed Joash (2 Chron. 23:11) or by a prophet, such as Elijah who anointed Jehu (1 Kings 19:16). The verb used is mashach, to smear, to anoint with oil. The king thus became a mashiach, an “anointed one.” This Hebrew term was equivalent to “Messiah.”

In the New Testament, two different Greek verbs are used to convey the meaning “anoint.” One is aleipho, which appears eight times. Four refer to the anointing (with perfume) of Jesus by a woman (Luke 7:38, 46; John 11:2; 12:3), two to the use of oil in the healing of illness (Mark 6:13; James 5:14), one to the burial of Jesus (Mark 16:1), and one to cosmetic anointing (Matt. 6:17). None of these examples has any connection to ceremonial anointing for induction into office.

The second verb is chrio, “to anoint,” from which comes the title Christos, “the anointed one,” corresponding to the Hebrew mashiach. The verb itself is used only five times, always referring to anointing by God. In four cases, God anoints Jesus (Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38; Heb. 1:9). In the other, God gives spiritual anointing to believers (2 Cor. 1:21). A
related verb, echthrio, appears in the invitation to Laodicea to anoint their eyes to regain sight (Rev. 3:18).

**Laying on of hands**

Laying on of hands can refer to giving a blessing (Gen. 48:8-20). It also appears in two Old Testament examples of induction into office. At the beginning of their ministry the Levites were purified by washing and shaving; then they received the laying on of hands by the whole congregation.

Their induction ceremony was completed by their laying hands on the bulls to be sacrificed (Num. 8:5-26). According to Numbers 27:12-23, Moses appointed Joshua as his successor by laying his hands on him. Even though Joshua had authority and was endowed with the Spirit of God, he was to receive divine instruction through Eleazar the priest.

The Greek phrase equivalent to “laying on of hands” occurs 26 times in the New Testament. In the largest number of times (12) the phrase is used in the context of the laying on of hands to bring about healing. Of these occurrences, eight have to do with Jesus: He lays hands on a person who then receives healing (Matt. 9:18; Mark 5:23; 6:5; 7:32; 8:23; 8:25; Luke 4:40; 13:13). Once the disciples are promised the gift of healing through laying on of hands (Mark 16:18). In Acts, three verses speak about healing brought about by the laying on of hands (Acts 9:12, 17; 28:8).

Closely related to the idea of healing is the reception of blessing through the laying on of hands (Matt. 19:13, 15; Mark 10:16). The reception of the Holy Spirit and of the gifts of the Spirit is linked to the laying on of hands (four times each). In Acts, new converts were filled with the Spirit when the apostles laid their hands on them (Acts 8:17-19; 19:6).

Paul speaks of the spiritual gifts Timothy received with the laying on of his own hands (2 Tim. 1:6) and the laying on of the elders’ hands (1 Tim. 4:14). In Hebrews 6:1-2, “laying on of hands” is one of the basics of Christianity, along with baptism and resurrection, suggesting that this ceremony may have been part of the initiation rites of new believers.

Laying on of hands is mentioned three times in relation to appointment to office. The apostles commissioned the Seven by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6). The teachers and prophets at Antioch laid hands on Paul and Barnabas at their commissioning for ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 13:3). Paul instructs Timothy to be cautious in commissioning local church leaders by the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 5:22).

In the New Testament, inductions into office or commissioning for mission involve four distinct groups of people: (1) the disciples who become apostles, (2) the Seven of Acts 6, (3) Paul and Barnabas, and (4) local church elders.

Several different Greek verbs are used in passages that describe these ceremonies. In the analysis that follows, specific Greek words are given for each instance.

**Disciples to apostles**

Three texts refer to Jesus’ appointment of the twelve disciples. In Matthew 10:1-5, Jesus calls (kaleo) the Twelve to Himself and gives them power over disease and evil spirits. While in verse 1 they are “disciples,” in verse 2 they are “apostles.” In Mark (3:14-19), Jesus “makes [poieo] twelve” and “names” them apostles. He does this so that they may be with Him and go out to preach. Luke tells Him to preach and to heal. Their appointment is similar to that of the Twelve.

After Jesus’ ascension, the eleven decided to replace Judas. Following prayer they cast lots for Matthias. He was chosen (eklego), then “enrolled” or added to the eleven (Acts 1:21-26). His task thus became the same as that originally entrusted to the Twelve by Jesus.

Although they do not report any specific ceremony, these passages show a transition. The disciples become apostles; they form the inner circle of Christ’s followers; they receive power to heal and preach, as they further Christ’s mission.

**The Seven**

Acts 6:2-6 tells of the excessive work load for the Twelve and the ethnic disputes that led to the selection of seven wise and Spirit-filled men to “serve tables” and care for the widows. Thus the Twelve would be free to dedicate their time to prayer and preaching.

These men were chosen (eklegomai) by the church; the appointment ceremony included prayer and the laying on of hands. While their first task was to “serve tables,” two who figure in

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later events are noted for tasks other than the care of the physical needs of church members: Stephen was a great preacher, martyred for his Lord (Acts 7); Philip was an evangelist (Acts 8:40).

This ceremony approaches the ones we see today in Seventh-day Adventist and other churches. It marked the commissioning of seven men to a specific church appointment. Interestingly, these Seven are not called “deacons.” In the Pastoral Epistles, deacons appear as church leaders (1 Tim. 3:8; 12), ones who serve the church (diakonos). There is no mention of their ordination.4

Paul and Barnabas

Acts 13:1-3 narrates the appointment of Paul and Barnabas to ministry for the Gentiles. While the prophets and teachers in the church of Antioch were worshiping God and fasting, the Holy Spirit told them to “separate” (aphorizo) Barnabas and Saul for the work to which they had been called.

Verse 3 says that they fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them—but fails to specify who “they” were. This commissioning includes more elements than any other recorded in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit takes an active part; the local church leaders do the commissioning. Prayer, fasting, and the laying on of hands are included.

In his later years, Paul writes Timothy about his own appointment to service. He claims that he was “placed” (titheo) as a preacher, apostle, and teacher of Gentiles in witness to Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:7). He repeats the same assertion in 2 Timothy 1:11, noting that he was “put” (titheo) or appointed as preacher, apostle, and teacher for the sake of the gospel. No additional details are given, but one may rightly suppose he was thinking of the appointment described in Acts 13.

Ellen White calls this appointment an ordination. She indicates that this ceremony marked the beginning of Paul’s apostleship.5

Church elders

Three passages speak about the appointment of church elders, all in relation to Paul’s ministry. As Paul concludes his first missionary journey, he and Barnabas revisit the places they had evangelized. Among other activities destined to “strengthen” the “disciples,” they appoint (cheirotono) elders in the churches, after fasting and prayer (Acts 14:23).

The verb used for “appointing” is used only this once in the New Testament. In classical Greek usage, this word meant raising the hand as to vote. Whether it meant anything different, such as laying on of hands, in Paul’s Christian ecclesiastical usage, we have no idea. In any case, the appointment of local church elders as part of church organization seems to be clearly in view.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul delineates the spiritual qualifications for church officers—bishops, deacons, and “women.” But he gives no instructions on any induction ceremony until a passing mention in 1 Timothy 5:22. Here he warns Timothy not to “lay hands” (cheir epitithemi) prematurely on anyone as by doing this he might “share responsibility for the sins of others.” Evidently he is pleading for mature Christians to be church leaders.

Paul left Titus in Crete to set the church in order. Among others, the matters he was to “put in place” (kathistemi) was the function of elders in the different cities. This Titus should do “as I have directed you” (Titus 1:5). Unfortunately, Paul’s specific directives on this issue have not come down to us in Scripture.

To these three cases might be added Timothy’s experience. Paul reminds this young minister of the gift he received with the laying on of hands by the presbytery or elders (1 Tim. 4:14). Whether this was induction into office, a healing service, or the reception of the Holy Spirit is not specified. We can assume that at some point Timothy was made an elder, but no details are given.

Information about the work of elders, especially concerning their commissioning, is scarce. We know that these were church leaders, whose task was spiritual. They were called elders or presbyters because older persons were traditional leaders. Some kind of ceremony installed them in their church office. This installation seems to have included laying on of hands.

So what did I learn?

You have just read the results of my study—only partly completed that Sabbath afternoon. The information I gathered was not as much as I would have liked. There was practically nothing on the organization of the church. Yes, there were apostles, elder/bishops, and deacons. But how did they relate to each other? Apostles and elders were commissioned; nothing is said about deacons. Was there a ceremony for them?

Yet, I found enough information on New Testament appointments to ministry to be reasonably sure of the following:

(1) Qualified believers were appointed to specific ministries or tasks.

(2) Some kind of empowering took place: The ones invested became what they had not been until then.

(3) The appointments had distinct spiritual overtones: the Spirit led, Jesus called; there was prayer and fasting; thus the commissioning was not entirely human.

(4) The appointments were made by the church for the benefit of the church.

(5) Certain qualifications had to be met by those appointed.

(6) The ultimate object of appointment was mission—the spreading of the gospel.

What I did not find was any notion of hierarchy or power. Having hands laid on them prepared apostles and elders to do more work, to be bet-
ter servants, to be more responsible for their actions. This responsibility seems to have been to the congregation rather than to a central church authority, which of course did not exist as it does today.

Instructions on how, when, where, and even why believers were commissioned to specific tasks or offices may not be clear. However, it is evident that ecclesiastical appointment was—and is—part of the church’s legitimate activity. It seems to be one of those items which the church “binds on earth” (Matt. 16:19).

The church is empowered to make decisions and carry out appointments in order to fulfill its mission. George’s ordination was appropriate, yet we cannot affirm that it was done “exactly as in the New Testament.” Neither should we insist that current Seventh-day Adventist Church organization and ceremony are modeled directly after the pattern of the New Testament.

Finally, I cannot help but consider the gospel commission (Matt. 28:18-20), “Go and make disciples,” as the ultimate commission, given to every Christian. This appointment parallels that received in ordination. It makes believers what they were not before (as Ellen White so poignantly notes: “Every true disciple is born into the kingdom as a missionary”), and empowers them for ministry.

This appointment takes place at baptism and includes those “upon whom human hands have never been laid in ordination, [who] are called to act an important part in soulsaving.” To fulfill this commission all—not merely the priests and kings of Israel—may be qualified by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. After all, we are, says Peter, a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). ☛

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1 Canon 1008, Canon Law of 1983.
2 To facilitate typesetting, no distinction is made between long and short Greek vowels.
3 At the beginning of chapter 30 of The Desire of Ages, Ellen White quotes the KJV of Mark 3:13, 14: “He ordained twelve” (290). Although she does call this their “ordination” (293), she says nothing about any ceremony.
4 Ellen White uses the term “ordain” to refer to what happened in Acts 6 (Acts of the Apostles, 90). In Acts of the Apostles the Seven are called “deacons” (90). In the Spirit of Prophecy (3:293) and The Story of Redemption (260), they are “chosen men,” not identified as deacons.
There is no question that contemporary western culture is changing in its philosophical outlook. Today, western culture is challenging the modern way of thinking, which emphasized objectivity and absolute certainty. Modernity’s distinctions between subject and object, knowledge and opinion, and science and superstition, are being blurred in the contemporary postmodern climate. Ministry in times like these calls for reflection, and Samir Selmanovic’s two-part article titled “Pastoring on the Postmodern Frontline” (see Ministry, July and September 2001) begins an important discussion on this vital issue. Indeed, it raised the crucial question: How do we minister in a postmodern milieu?

These articles raise a larger question about the crucial connection between ministry and theology or, stated differently, between praxis and theory. The author correctly perceives the connection between praxis and theory as unavoidable. In two places in the first part of the articles he alludes to this connection. In advocating the need for change in ministry as we confront the postmodern “hurricane,” the author writes, “We must change not only our methods but also our understanding of how people think and feel and thus how we are to think as we seek to meet their minds and hearts.” Again, we are admonished that in preparing to deal with practical ministry adjustments, “… there are three conceptual shifts we need to make to increase our understanding, respect, and compassion for postmodern people.”

The author discusses these three shifts as: from triumphalism to humility, from rationalism to mystery, and from objectivism to other ways of knowing. As we consider ministering to postmoderns in the context of these recommended conceptual shifts, a few questions come to mind: Where would these conceptual shifts, if we were to make them “really,” leave us theologically? Should we become postmodern to minister to postmoderns? Are these shifts being recommended only as adjustments of expediency, simply for the convenience of ministry? Or are we to make them to really reflect our frame of mind? These articles did not leave me with an unequivocal answer to these questions, yet the necessary connection between ministry and theology requires that we explore this question, because our ministry ought to be informed by our theology. Though I believe that a clear understanding of the postmodern situation is a necessary prerequisite to a successful ministry to postmoderns, I do not think that Seventh-day Adventists should be postmodern ourselves in order to minister successfully to this group.

**Postmodernism and modernism’s triumphalism**

In what sense did modernism represent triumphalism? Modernism’s triumphalism is said to consist in its striving for what has been described as the “grand narrative.” Postmodernists use the term “narrative” to describe a system of beliefs and values that legitimize a society by acting as a force that binds that society together. A narrative (i.e., the belief system that holds the society together) is “grand” when it is comprehensive in explaining and providing meaning to whatever the society does and believes. Such a belief system, which holds true always, and not only for a particular historic period, underlies and permeates every aspect of the society’s life. On the other hand, a belief system may sustain only a segment of people for a particular historic period. Such is a “local” narrative.

Modernism sought to explain and provide meaning to all reality on the foundation of reason. In other words, the world was what reason claimed it to be, and this was to be...
taken as universally true and for all time. Postmodernism claims that the very idea of a belief system that is always and universally true (i.e., a grand narrative) is no longer credible. It is argued that the very fact of our situatedness in particular historical contexts forces us to experience the world through our individual and unique perspectives ("local" narratives). To claim that one's viewpoint is always and universally true is to demonstrate lack of humility, a mark of arrogance and triumphalism. This was the hallmark of modernism's rationality. However, to be postmodern is to denounce grand narratives of any sort; the postmodern outlook "demands an attack on any claim to universality." 3

Postmodernism's insistence that all belief systems are unique viewpoints, contextual and, therefore, provincial has significant implications for Christian ministry in general, and for Adventist ministry in particular. What should Christian ministry do with such "grand narratives" as, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5)? Or, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12, RSV)? Do distinctive Adventist doctrines still have a place in evangelism in a postmodern context?

It is true that throughout Christendom we are urged to show respect for world religions and be accommodative to faiths other than our own. Obviously, ecumenism thrives in such a pluralistic postmodern context. It may be that the shift from triumphalism to humility in a postmodern context represents a "politically correct" move. But a real question remains: Should Christian ministry, and for that matter Adventist ministry, intend to bring postmoderns to an acceptance of biblical grand narratives, or should we not advocate them because they tend to paint our ministry in colors that reflect control and conquest?

It is quite significant to note that biblical grand narratives appear to predate modernism.

**Postmodernism and rationality**

We indulge in questions about rationality when we raise issues about the nature, place, and competence of human reason. It has been characteristic of philosophy from the early Greek thinkers to the modern period to use reason to explain reality in a way that brings coherence and unity of the individual phenomena of our experience. In this way, reality is brought under the grip of reason to serve as its principle and to explain its origin. Especially in the modern period reason took the form of scientific reason, and only that which was scientific in nature counted for reality.

Postmodernism properly criticizes this form of rationality as arrogant. There are thinkers such as Foucault who wish to dispense with the whole notion of rationality as a western tradition that has turned out to be a repressive myth. Others, such as Habermas, wish to replace modern rationality with a procedural rationality. Procedural rationality is what reason is denied the ability to describe what reality is, only the capacity to evaluate knowledge and moral claims in the context of a set of procedures.

Obviously, this challenge to modern rationality appears to make room for the notion of mystery. But will the shift from rationalism to mystery be a safe retreat? There may be questions that we cannot answer, and we should not lose our faith if we were to admit that we do not have all the answers. Nevertheless, Adventist theology and ministry is built on a concept of revelation-inspiration that should enable us, indeed force us, to employ a procedural notion of rationality within the confines of revelation-inspiration. While postmodern critique of modern rationality is a welcome development, I do not think that ambiguity and mystery represent the necessary alternative. We should not lose sight of the fact that postmodern epistemology

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**This Challenge to Modern Rationality Appears to Make Room for the Notion of Mystery, But Will the Shift from Rationalism to Mystery Be a Safe Retreat?**

May 2002

Ministry 29
Postmodernism and modernity’s objectivism

Since in philosophy reason tries to construct and explain all reality in a unified and orderly fashion, modern philosophy tried to conceive of our world as eminently objective. By this, modernists wanted to say that the world of our senses exists really apart from us and should be the proper subject of our study. Furthermore, modern rationality brought unity to all reality by assuming that everything consists of bodies in motion, and therefore everything conforms to a mechanical model. Being objectively real, modernism could easily say that the world could be known objectively through observation and induction. In the modernist system, such objective knowledge is universally and absolutely true. Postmodernism rejects the notion of an objective world, and consequently the possibility of objective knowledge. In adopting this position, postmodernism depends in part on twentieth-century linguistic theory. According to this view, what we generally assume to be an objective world is in reality a creation of ours through our use of language. It is in this sense that language is said to be our access to the world. By this they “contend that what we call the real world is actually an ever-changing social creation.” Therefore, there are no certain foundations to our knowledge of reality. Meaning, like reality is an ever-changing social construct, based in historical communities and comprising of a web of beliefs.  

Given the supposition that ministry (praxis) ought to be based on a sound theology (theory), a more fundamental choice faces us other than the one between the modernist conception of building beliefs on a foundation and the postmodernist notion of a web of beliefs. This is the choice between the belief in the existence of an objective world and the existence of a reality that is the creation of our language. Our choice will profoundly impact our approach to ministry.

Assumptions and consequences

Postmodernism’s critique of modernity centers on its concept of rationality, which supports an objective view of reality as explained above. Although postmodernity finds it objectionable to be defined as a worldview, it is precisely that, as Selmanovic rightly observes. This means that postmodernism, like modernism, employs reason to construct a view of reality, albeit different from that of modernity. Reality, according to postmodernism, is progressive and relative. In other words, there is not one view of reality that is true for all. Reality is as one conceives it from one’s particular viewpoint, hence the notion that “every point of view is a view from a point.” Therefore, the point is inescapable that in the context of belief, whether we approach ministry on the basis of modernity’s foundationalism or postmodernity’s web of beliefs, we function on the basis of reality as constructed by reason.

Is it possible to find an objective world that is not the creation of reason but in which the parts of all of its experience are meaningfully related? The Bible presents us with such a world not on the basis of reason but on the basis of inspiration. One’s stand on inspiration becomes operative here. From the perspective of a “high view” of inspiration for example, the answer to the postmodern challenge that all belief systems represent particular viewpoints may be not simply to state that one’s “faith commitment is grounded in history, embodied in the community of my Church . . . ,” a supremely postmodern answer, but to state as well the basis of the belief in inspiration. This means that we may not minister to postmoderns on the basis of beliefs that are grounded simply in the historic faith community, but preeminently on the basis of an inspired Bible.

Does this mean that in ministry we should not approach postmoderns from where they are coming? Not at all! We should understand the thinking and experiencing processes of postmodern persons in order to minister to them. Yet a sympathetic understanding of postmodernism does not necessarily require the epistemological shifts discussed here. In fact a shift from rationalism and objectivism to mystery and other forms of knowing respectively, represent a shift from one form of rationality to another. Who knows what epistemological approach may be in the offing? Compassion, respect, feelings, emotions, and intuition may all be elucidated from the biblical perspective if we patiently and conscientiously articulate them as we seek to minister meaningfully to postmodern persons.

Editorial note: We definitely appreciate the quality of this response to the Selmanovic articles. We do not believe the Selmanovic or Donkor articles advocate becoming postmodern in order to reach postmoderns.

1. Sam Selmanovic, “Failing on the Postmodern Frontier (part 1),” M Ministry, July 2001, 10
2. Ibid., 11.
5. Ibid., 173.
6. Grenz, 42.
9. Selmanovic, part 1, 23.
10. Selmanovic, part 2, 21.
A nyone who equates work-related travel with fun has yet to endure their third trip. Mind you, I love my work—especially when I arrive and can interact with pastors and their spouses, local elders, and ministerial secretaries. But the process of “getting to work” is often a frenetic, fatiguing, frustrating foray.

A few recent incidents demonstrate the old song’s veracity—“all day, all night, angels watching over me.” We don’t just believe in miracles, we rely on them!

Russell Burrill, of Andrews University Seminary, and I boarded a flight out of Egypt in the deep-night hours of September 10. In bemused observation, we commented about the lax security which allowed us to depart Cairo without a serious check of either our baggage or passports. By the next flight, we welcomed three-hour waits and multiple security checks in the aftermath of September 11.

Enduring longer waiting lines in exchange for enhanced security seems fair. Having an agent explain that either Sharon or I must endure a 14-hour flight cramped into a middle seat because the airline’s policy does not permit two passengers of the same family to occupy an aisle and window seat—or even two aisle seats—is unreasonable punishment, especially when standby fliers are boarded at the last moment and seated in exit-row aisles and windows.

Well-meaning friends also contribute to travel stresses. I vividly remember my keen frustration (hopefully it was concealed but Sharon doubts my ability to disguise my feelings) after an exhausting 30-hour, much-delayed flight itinerary when, rather than being taken directly to the hotel for a shower and rest, I was “shown the sights” of tourist interest and new church projects. At least I have learned to always use the restroom and secure a bottle of water before exiting the airport customs area. Then there was the Sabbath which began at 6:00 a.m. and concluded 15 hours later with my hosts’ bewilderment that I was unwilling to experience the treat of dinner at a restaurant featuring local delicacies. Sometimes the phrase, “killing with kindness” becomes reality.

Other times we bring our troubles upon ourselves. Chek Yat Phoon, Southeast Asia Union Ministerial Secretary, will not forget how we arrived at the Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) airport three hours early, the first passengers to check in for our flight. After proceeding through immigration to the transit area, we looked around a bit and then I settled in for a two-hour working session of paperwork while we waited.

As I completed each item, I tore the paper in half to separate “keepers” from trash and rejoiced in the amount of work I was accomplishing as evidenced by the growing stack of discarded paper that piled up beside me.

When the time arrived to head for the gate, I tossed all the scrap which had accumulated into a nearby trash bin and casually approached the boarding agent who asked to inspect my passport and ticket.

Checking my pockets and finding neither, I began to search my carry-on baggage. At first, Chek Yat thought this not all that unusual since he had observed me groping for documents at other stops, but after about ten minutes of fruitless searching, his tolerance level was reduced to the point that he grabbed my roll-aboard and began his own personal search through all my belongings.

No boarding pass. No passport. Stuck in Viet Nam. Who to call? And if you thought the denominational bureaucracy was complicated, try explaining your predicament to someone whose only word of English is “No!”

By this time the chief representative of Singapore Airlines had been summoned. She graciously but firmly instructed me to search again for the missing documents which she knew I had possessed when she checked me in and which I would have had to produce to pass through security and customs to this transit area.

After holding the flight for 20 minutes—and this from an airline known to be the world’s most efficient—the agent sent me onto the plane with stern admonition to keep searching because I surely would not be allowed ongoing transit or entry into Singapore. As we boarded, I was praying and grumbling aloud that heaven would have to find my passport since it was more logical that I had thrown it away as it was likely to be found in my carefully-searched briefcase. Both God and Chek Yat must have heard my prayer because he turned back and requested security to check the trash bin where, sure enough, they found my castoff passport and ticket in with my discarded paperwork.

The angels worked overtime, and I am certain they deserve—and I need—a vacation! So, watch your passport and say a prayer of thanks with me for providential blessings. ☺

May 2002

JAMES A. CRESS
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