Without using the word grace, Christ left us with the clearest possible expressions of it.

Grace is generally defined as “God’s unmerited favor toward humanity and especially his people, realized through the covenant and fulfilled through Jesus Christ.” The idea of “unmerited favor” is generally highlighted in such definitions because it is perceived as the essence of grace in biblical terms.

Two of Jesus’ parables place the emphasis of grace on unmerited favor, not in the typical God-to-person context, but in the person-to-person context. Indeed, the teaching is decidedly pastoral. These parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35) share the following characteristics:

1. Both are introduced as Jesus’ responses to questions posed by His hearers. In the first the query of the expert in the law is, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25, NIV) and more specifically, “Who is my neighbor?” (vs. 29). In the second Peter inquires, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matt. 18:21).

2. Both deal with how a person treats another. Hence, they are in the concrete context of human behavior.

3. Both are triadic. In the first, the thieves, by having the same intent, are lumped together as one character; the priest and Levite, since they are both religious persons, form the second; while the Samaritan is the third. In the second parable, the king is the first character; the unjust servant is the second, and his colleague is the third.

4. Both deal with characters operating according to similar principles. The parables demonstrate similar philosophies of life as illustrated in the characters. These indicate how people live their lives.

5. Both deal with the idea of mercy. This forms the concluding issue for both parables.

Grace in the Context of the Enemy

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the discussion begins because a lawyer wants to test Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25, NIV). His motive appears to be negative because this New Testament use of the word test usually expresses such a connotation. Further, the words “What must I do?” “implies that by the performance of one thing eternal life can be secured. What heroic act must be performed, or what great sacrifice made?” This emphasis on doing something to gain eternal life points in the direction of merit by human action and achievement. Jesus directs the lawyer’s attention, most appropriately, to what the Law teaches. The man responds by quoting portions of the Law (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18, respectively) to show that total love for God and one’s neighbor insures eternal life. Jesus answers with an imperative: “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28, NIV). The implication is that eternal life cannot be accomplished by merit, as the lawyer suggests.

Not grasping the implications of his own words, the lawyer seeks self-justification by posing another question: “Who is my neighbor?” (vs. 29). The Jews believed that the neighbor could be only one who belonged to the covenant community, not an outsider. Already there is a hint that this definition is too limited, because the word for “neighbor” quoted in Leviticus 19:18 means more than one who lives nearby or next door.

Interestingly, Jesus does not directly answer the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Instead, He turns it around and, by telling the parable, answers a different question: “Whose neighbor am I?” In other words, He teaches how one ought to behave neighborly. The story represents the perspective of the needs of the wounded man, who is the only person who remains on the scene of action throughout the account.

This man, whose ethnicity is not mentioned but is generally understood to be Jewish, was attacked by robbers on the notoriously dangerous 18-mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho. His desperate plight is captured in verse 30: “[The thieves]
stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.” This verse also introduces the first character in the triad. Since the thieves all had the same intention, they are grouped together. From their violent and vicious actions, they manifest a certain philosophy of life that says, “I will take what you have.” It is their actions, based on such a philosophy of life, that place the unfortunate victim in a state of emergency—indeed, in a life-and-death situation. His desperate need results directly from their atrocious and barbarous behavior.

Verses 31 and 32 describe the second triad. Since both priest and Levite are religious persons, they are grouped together. To Jesus’ listeners, the arrival of the priest would have signaled hope for the wounded man. If anyone is expected to help a mortally wounded person, surely it would be one who works on behalf of people in distress. However, “this prime representative of the religion that, in the person of the lawyer, has just agreed upon the fundamental place of love hardens his heart and passes by on the other side.”

Next comes a Levite. As a religious person, he would be expected to help, though that expectation would be less than that of the priest. But he too chooses not to get involved and passes by on the other side. The similar action of these religious figures demonstrates the same philosophy of life: “I will keep what I have.”

There is much discussion about the reasons these two avoided the wounded man. Regardless of the reason, however, we must realize that the focus here is not on why the religious leaders refused to help, but on the fact that they did not help. By telling the narrative in this way, Jesus masterfully plots the story so as to have a heightened effect on the hearers. The role of these two religious personages is to create hope and then quickly dash it to the ground: If these two do not help, who will? Further, by bringing together the priest and Levite, Jesus makes the drama even more intriguing. Certainly the priest is expected to help; but since he does not, it is not expected that the Levite will help, as Levites were subordinate to priests. Relegated to menial and secondary tasks in the temple, they were of lower rank than priests. Who, then, will help the fallen man?

“At this point the story is open to a number of possible developments. (Is it after all an anti-clerical story, and now an ordinary Israelite will come along and save the day? Will God intervene with angelic help and shame the religious figures? Is the story to be a tragedy in which the injured man’s demise brings shame upon the covenant community?)”

Instead, Jesus now introduces the Samaritan, from whom hearers would have expected nothing. The historic enmity between Jews and Samaritans was well known. To be called a Samaritan was a deep insult, and the groups avoided contact with each other as much as possible.

The impact is heightened by Jesus’ use of contrast: “‘But a Samaritan, . . . came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him’” (vs. 33, italics supplied). Whereas those who are expected to act with compassion toward the helpless victim deliberately refuse to do so, the one who is hated and despised deliberately stoops to help. Furthermore, he risks himself in doing so, and this action defines compassion.

The compassion is illustrated in what the Samaritan does for the injured man. He administers first aid, provides transportation to a safe place, pays for the man’s immediate basic needs, and makes arrangements for any future attentions he may need. In so doing, the Samaritan demonstrates his philosophy of life: “I will share what I have.” It is in this sharing that love is exemplified. Therefore, the Samaritan’s philosophy and action in life indicate that he is fulfilling the ethical demands of the Law: “‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Lev. 19:18). As such, he, an outcast, is closer to eternal life than those who count themselves as privileged members of the elect community. By their refusal to live out their own ethical system, the priest and Levite have made themselves the (new?) outcasts. They are far from eternal life.

Though the word grace is not used in the story, the idea of it is quite evident. From the perspective of the victim, grace is experienced. The sufferer does not merit favor, especially since Jewish fanaticism would prefer death rather than receive help from a Samaritan. But by his very actions, this Samaritan exemplifies grace.

In His conclusion to the parable, Jesus then asks the lawyer, “‘Which
According to Jesus, the neighbor is anyone who addresses the needs of the other. Jesus emphasizes the concrete actions of sympathy, empathy, and compassion. This is the essence of grace. It is being neighborly to those in need. From the perspective of the desperate and disenfranchised, neighborliness is the choice to share what one has. When one loves God and people, such a choice, as exemplified in the Samaritan’s actions, demonstrates grace.

of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (Luke 10:36). The answer is obvious: “The one who had mercy on him” (vs. 37). Yet, the lawyer’s answer shows his deep-seated racism. He avoids putting the scornful word Samaritan on his lips and mutters a non-specific designation: “The one who showed mercy” (vs. 37, NASB). He denies identity to the Samaritan. But it is precisely the merciful acts of the Samaritan that give him identity. On Jesus’ lips, he is the real person.

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Grace in the Context of Forgiveness

The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35 illustrates grace in the context of forgiveness. It is introduced by two questions posed by Peter: “How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). Jesus had just been talking about forgiveness (vss. 15-18). In that discourse, he said nothing about the number of times you should forgive someone who wrongs you. Hence, Peter’s queries. It would seem that since seven represents the perfect number, then seven instances of forgiveness would be superlative. Jesus answers that one should be willing to forgive 490 times. This wide contrast clearly dwarfs Peter’s assumption and puts the matter in bold relief. Certainly, what Jesus is teaching is that forgiveness should be limitless, even infinite. To illustrate this, He tells the parable of the unmerciful servant.

This is one of the kingdom parables; Jesus likens the kingdom to “a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants” (vs. 23). It is closely connected to the same genre of parables in Matthew 13 that deal with the kingdom of heaven (vss. 11, 24-30, 31-32, 33-43, 44, 45-46, 47-50). Kingdom parables often deal with the actions and behavior of the residents of the Kingdom. This parable is no different. This is underlined in that the king is about to settle accounts with some of his subjects. The parable is clearly triadic, with the main characters being the king, the first subject, and the second subject. The first subject appears in all scenes of the story, which is told from his perspective.

In the first encounter, the servant has an astronomically high debt. The use of the word loan, together with the extraordinarily excessive debt, suggests a royal contract with a tax collector. Hence, these servants were not slaves but officials who managed the administrative affairs of the state. The debt is described in a way that suggests an incalculable amount. It meant that the servant was absolutely incapable of repaying such a large sum. Owing to this, the king ordered that the servant and his family, together with all their possessions, be sold as repayment (Matt. 18:25). In so doing, the sovereign is following a well-established tradition. The point here is that the servant is not in a position to repay the debt. Although he has power and influence, he is in an impossible situation. To avoid the shame and loss of being sold into slavery, he throws himself on the mercy of the king: “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything” (vs. 26). Again, even this is insufficient. Further, the plea approaches even a humorous dimension with the promise to repay everything.

Despite these factors, the king accepts the plea for mercy. In fact, he goes beyond the man’s request. Instead of allowing him the opportunity to repay as requested, the king “took pity on him, canceled the debt” (vs. 27). The record is completely expunged. The servant has nothing to commend himself on the mercy of the king: “I will share what I have.” And this motivates the act of grace: unmerited favor to the underserving.

In the second encounter, the forgiven servant meets a colleague who owes him a mere 100 denarii. This is minuscule in comparison to the debt from which he has been so recently released. Suddenly he is
enraged and treats his associate with violent hostility: “‘Pay back what you owe me!’” (vs. 28). The man offers a plea that is almost identical to the one made earlier by his assailant. The only difference between both pleas is that the latter omits the word everything. His debt is so small that it is ridiculous even to suggest that he needs time to repay everything. That is assumed. This makes the first servant appear in an even worse light. He promises to repay everything, but he is really unable to do so. And now he refuses to give the same leniency to one who, given time, could repay more than the entire balance owed. He who has just experienced grace now acts in un-grace. He lives by the philosophy, ”I will keep what I have.” He has just received forgiveness, but now selfishly keeps that same gift to himself.

Jesus deliberately contrasts these first two scenes to put the action of grace into bold relief. This also heightens the impact of the story on the hearers.

The impact is clear: Treating another person without grace, especially when one has just received grace, indicates heartlessness and cold evil. It betrays an inner inhumanity. Even the minimum of forgiveness is not attained. Little wonder that in the third encounter (vss. 32-34), the other servants report this incident to the king, who immediately summons the unjust servant. The king reminds him that he has received grace but has not shown grace, so he deserves to be characterized as “wicked” (vs. 32). This leads to his rhetorical question: “‘Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’” (vs. 33). This question places the emphasis squarely on treating others as one would like to be treated. Just as the king willingly gives to the undeserving servant, because of his grace, so too the unmerciful servant should have been willing to share what he had just received. Instead, he has refused. In treating his colleague in this way, he is destroying the kingdom. Such cannot be tolerated. Hence, no one is saddened when the king rescinds the earlier pardon (vs. 34).

In the final verse, Jesus points out that the measure by which we forgive others is the same one the heavenly Father uses when we ask for forgiveness. The application is poignant. So back to Peter’s original query concerning the number of times we should forgive a person who wrongs us. The answer is found in our reflection on this question: How many times do we want God to forgive us? Unlimited. Though undeserving of forgiveness, we would like grace extended to us time and again (even 70 times seven). The point of the parable is “that the spirit of genuine forgiveness recognizes no boundaries. It is a state of heart, not a matter of calculation.”

Although these two parables do not mention the word grace, they certainly illustrate the premium placed on grace in the teachings of Jesus. Indeed, true religion is seen in how we treat one another. Grace enables us to be a neighbor and help even those who treat us like the enemy. This is what the first parable teaches. The second teaches us that grace enables us to forgive others even as we would like to be forgiven by God. In both, it is our concrete actions toward other human beings that are important.

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THE SCANDAL OF THE BOOK OF JOB

We must face the same questions that Job faced—and be prepared to embrace the answers.

God is for us and never against us. And if He is for us, who can be against us? Satan tries through his many inventions to separate us from God, but he is totally unsuccessful with his various activities if we stay in a personal trust relationship with the Lord. Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39).

This truth is evident in a careful reading of the Old Testament Book of Job, which, in the scriptural canon, was probably written first (along with Genesis). It thus provides a preface to the whole of God’s revelation, introduces the Pentateuch, and gives significant insight into the Great Controversy.

First, it must be stressed that the Book of Job is not primarily about Job, but about the God of Job, about who He is. It reveals the characters of the three main protagonists in the book, namely, God, Satan, and Job, but the book is first of all a revelation about our God.

The book opens with a prologue that describes two heavenly scenes of intense controversy between God and Satan (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7). There was a heavenly assembly before a sovereign Ruler of the universe when the sons of God gathered before Him. Satan, the adversary, “also came among them” (1:6, NKJV).

The word also suggests that he was not a regular member of that group. The immediate context gives the impression that he behaves like the one to whom the Earth belongs: “roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it” (vs. 7). Satan is characterized as an intruder; playing the role of the accuser and the possessor of Planet Earth.

According to Job 1:8; 2:3, God justifies Job in front of the solemn assembly gathered before Him. Twice in these first two chapters, God declares Job to be right, i.e., blameless, upright, fearing God, and shunning evil. His character is without question, but not because he is sinless. Job knows he is a sinner (7:21; 10:6; 14:17); he can be blameless only through God’s transforming grace. In these two encounters, which God initiates, God directs His words to Satan, and He engages with him in heightened dialogue.

From the very beginning of this biblical book, God is presented as passionately standing up for Job. But Satan does not share God’s loving affection for Job. Instead he involves Job in his argument against God, and his evil devices go to the very root of his dispute with Him.

The Issue in the Great Controversy

Satan does not agree with God pronouncing Job righteous; he opposes His standing on Job’s behalf and tackles Him with a frightful, subtle, and seemingly innocent question: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (1:9, NIV). This cynical question introduces the theme and the plot of the book. At first glance, it is directed against Job, but in reality it is an attack on God by attempting to disprove His statement about Job. Thus the main theme of the Book of Job is the justice of God. The real drama turns on the fact that He is for us and proclaims us just.

Is God just when He is justifying us? Satan’s question expresses his hidden thoughts. To understand Satan’s motive, it is necessary to study the key words in the question: “for nothing.” The Hebrew term for this occurs four times in the book (1:9; 2:3; 9:17; 22:6). It can be translated also as “gratis,” “gratuitously,” “without a reason,” “for nought,” “freely,” “disinterestedly,” “for no purpose,” “in vain,” “without cause.” Satan’s question can be stated thus: Does Job serve God disinterestedly? Is his piety unselfish and devotion wholehearted? Or expressed differently: Does he serve God out of love, i.e., for nothing?

Why is Satan’s question—whether Job serves God out of love (whether we serve God out of love)—so evil? Why is it so bad to question our motives? Because in such situations we cannot defend ourselves. Only time (and usually a long period of time) and difficulties of life (problems, persecution, suf-
Satan’s Claim

Satan has no evidence against Job’s actual behavior, but he claims that no one serves God unselfishly because, according to him, that is impossible. He declares that God is surrounded only by hypocritical sycophants who confess their love to the Lord, but who in reality serve Him only because He blesses them. Satan asserts that created beings are not following God because of His goodness, kindness, beauty of character, and personality, but for the many benefits and abundant privileges they receive from Him. They are devoted to Him because He is bribing them. God is not only blessing them now, but even promises them eternal life. Why not, then, serve Him for all these wonderful things?

Satan thus presses God not to speculate about something that does not exist, namely, that people truly love Him. Humans do not worship the Lord for nothing, even if they claim to, but for gain—for selfish reasons. Satan is depicted here as never accepting the possibility that someone can serve God for His loving kindness, for His sake, for just being God. He denies the existence of unselfish service to God.

Satan’s Request

Satan argues that God is surrounded by good actors and actresses. To prove his argument, he demands that God take everything from Job, because only in this way will God see Job’s facade crumble: “He will surely curse you to your face” (vs. 11, NIV). Satan requests that God remove His blessings from humans because their real selves will be revealed.

Satan, therefore, charges, “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land” (vs. 10, NIV). It is as if Satan were saying: “Of course it is easy for Job to serve you, because you give him everything that humans desire!” Interestingly, even Satan has to admit that God blesses His followers, cares for them, loves them, gives them prosperity, and protects them. But of course, he now turns it upside down and tries to use the goodness of God against Him.

The Scandal of the Book

When Satan attacks Job’s integrity, God allows him to try Job: “Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands” (vs. 12, NIV). What a horrible and incredible statement! This is more than a simple puzzle or a riddle.

Those who believe in a good, loving, just, and all-powerful God have an immense problem with this picture of Him. Believers confess that the Creator and the King of the Universe is the Protector of life, Giver of happiness, Prince of Peace, Intervener into human affairs, and Friend of humans. It seems that Job’s is a different kind of God than they know from other parts of biblical revelation. Faith makes no sense, and to some extent it makes the situation even worse.

Why didn’t the omnipotent God protect His servant? This is the real scandal in the experience of Job. We would like to see the omnipotent God intervene and immediately silence Satan’s accusations and prevent him from harming Job. We wish that God would stop at once the abuse of children, rape of women, concentration camps, murders, suffering, car accidents, plane crashes, collapse of towers, pain, violence, hurricanes, tsunamis . . . People ask the poignant question in times of tragedies, loss, and war: “Where is God?”

The Book of Job begins with a tension. On the one hand, God is putting a hedge around Job, protecting him from any harm, blessing him so generously that he becomes the Bill Gates of his time. On the other hand, Job is abandoned (for a time) by God to the hands of Satan. There is no logic to this. The situation seems self-contradictory.

We live in a world in which evil reigns, and evil is irrational. Let us not try to find a logical answer to the problem of evil. We need to learn how to live with our unanswered questions. From that angle, the Book of Job is really a quest for God’s visible presence in life.

When you lose the most cherished things in your life, what would be your attitude toward God? Will you serve or curse Him? And if you stay with Him, from what motives would you follow Him?

The only answer to questions about suffering is that God was exactly in the same place where He
In the story of Job, only Job himself, who is weaker than the devil, can refute Satan’s argument, defeat him, and thus prove that God is right when He is justifying him and standing on his side. Job overcame the devil not because he was so good or strong, but because he totally surrendered his life to God.

was when His Son was murdered at the cross. God is always on the side of the oppressed, suffering person. In our suffering, He suffers. “In all their distress he too was distressed, . . . In his love and mercy he redeemed them” (Isa. 63:9, NIV).

How Can Satan Be Defeated?
All these pertinent, disturbing inquiries go back to the core of the problem: How can Satan be defeated? This question needs to be answered to shed greater light on the whole conflict of the Book of Job and the standpoint of God.

Satan cannot be defeated by logic because against each argument is a counterargument. To refute someone only with facts has no lasting results. If Satan could be defeated through debate, God would have done it a long time ago, for He is the Truth (Ex. 34:6; Deut. 32:4; Ps. 31:5; John 17:17).

Can Satan be defeated by force? Nothing would please him more than to face force in whatever form. This is exactly what he wants to prove about God. He wants to accuse God of using force, but he lacks evidence; he cannot demonstrate it. Of course, Satan could be silenced by power if God chose to do so. The omnipotent Creator is also the Mighty Warrior (Ex. 15:3; Isa. 42:13; Jer. 20:11). In that case, however, God would be accused of not playing fair and thus having an advantage over Satan. The Great Controversy does need to be won, but in a different way.

If God were to use force to gain victory, Satan would confront Him with defiance: “God, are you not ashamed to beat me who is weaker than you? You won because of power, not because of love or truth.”

Satan draws weapons from an evil arsenal: ambition, pride, selfishness, lies, deceit, violence, anger, hatred, prejudice, racism, terrorism, addictions, manipulation. . . Satan can be overcome only by love, truth, justice, freedom, and order. God uses only these pure weapons. Satan, however, exercises any means and any strategy available.

How often we wonder why our Almighty God allows tragedies to happen in the lives of good people, not knowing or forgetting that Satan can be defeated only by someone who is weaker than he is.

Victory Through Weakness
This is the reason for the incarnation. The God of the whole universe had to become weak in order to defeat evil. Only with the frailties of humanity could He defeat Satan. On the cross of Calvary, the Creator God demonstrated His love, truth, and justice. The suffering God, hanging on the cross, is a victorious God. What a paradox! Sin started with pride, but was overcome by humility (Isa. 14:12-15; Phil. 2:5-11).

In the story of Job, only Job himself, who is weaker than the devil, can refute Satan’s argument, defeat him, and thus prove that God is right when He is justifying him and standing on his side. Job overcame the devil not because he was so good or strong (Job 7:21; 10:6; 14:17) but because he totally surrendered his life to God. He did this in full confidence and trust in the God who gave him strength and victory (13:15; 19:25-27; 42:5). Paul says eloquently: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10, NIV).

This is a true paradox of life. When we realize our complete dependence on God, when we humbly admit and accept our frailty, when we trust God and not ourselves and allow Him to work in our lives, victory is ours because He fights for us. We cannot win this battle unless we stay in a close personal relationship with Him. We need to fight a good fight of faith (1 Tim. 6:12), not against sin, but for a close relationship with Christ, who is the only one who can give us victory. He can bring us victory because He is the Victor. He came to Earth with a clear purpose: to save us from sin and not in sin (Matt. 1:21). In Him and because of Him, we are victors, too (Rev. 12:11).

What Was Left When Job Lost Everything?
Paradoxically, even after Job lost everything, seven things remained:
1. His life, though one of misery. In a sense, it would have been easier for Job to die and not to undergo the painful suffering.

But God had set a boundary for Satan: “‘You must spare his life’” (Job 2:6, NIV; compare with 1:12). The good news is that God promises we will never be tested beyond our ability to cope (1 Cor. 10:13). In the controversy between God and Satan, Job’s death would not answer the issue under contention. Jesus Christ had to go through the ultimate test of loyalty. When Jesus died, Satan was defeated, and once and for all it was demonstrated that pure love and obe-
At the end of the book, God Himself twice stated that what Job said about Him was correct. His three friends were rebuked (42:7-8). Very often people who say harsh things about God because they have been hurt by the unrighteous, or by the unjust things of life, can be closer to God and to the truth than those who always try to defend God.

6. His God. Job was longing and searching for God’s perceptible presence in his life because God was seemingly hidden and far away. The great news is that God is with us in our problems and carries us through them. He suffers with us in our sufferings (Isa. 63:9). He never abandons us, even though it seems very often that He is a faraway God. He gives victory over all kinds of temptations, struggles, problems, and suffering. He is always with His people giving them power to overcome and persevere. Paul states: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13, NIV).

7. His personal trust in the personal God. Job, with full confidence in his God, whose actions he did not understand, confessed: “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face” (Job 13:15, NIV). His personal faith in a personal God triumphed.

Job’s relationship with God was severely tested, but by faith, he clung to God with all his strength. He trusted Him and served unselfishly. Nothing, even pain, suffering, or unanswered questions, could separate him from God. His integrity was vindicated.

Because Job had cultivated a trusting relationship with God in the past and was relying on His promises, he could go through the present crisis victoriously. Past experience with God helped him to survive Satan’s savage attack.

Troubles of life, suffering, and persecution have no power to create faith in us, but instead they reveal our faith. Difficulties of life help us to discover what really is inside us, and they may also further develop and strengthen faith (Rom. 8:28). Job himself declares that his relationship with the Lord was deepened: “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (42:5, NIV). Even though he did not understand his existing situation, he completely trusted His God. Job retained his faith in Him, even though he lost everything, because his confidence was anchored in God, not in the prosperity of life. He preferred to fulfill God’s will before his own; he was willing even to die for Him, to lose everything. Job’s obedience and faithfulness to God was stronger than his desire to preserve his well-being and happiness. He served God even though God’s promises apparently failed.

Final Outcome

In the darkest situation of life, God revealed Himself to Job as the Creator (chaps. 38–41). This was His answer to Job’s suffering. By presenting Himself to Job as the Creator, God declared that He is above all, He is in control, He is the Source of life, He is able to re-create. He is able out of nothing, even chaos, to create something new, valuable, and permanent.
We look at events that have taken place in the political and religious arena in recent years, two questions surface with eschatological urgency. The first is the question Jesus asked His disciples: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13-15, NKJV).

This was the question that Lucifer originally stumbled over. It is the question that every angel in heaven had to answer: “Who do you say that I am?” Lucifer and his angels fell from heaven because they refused to acknowledge the rightful authority of the Son of God. “Lucifer was envious of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone. . . . Angels that were loyal and true sought to reconcile this mighty, rebellious angel to the will of his Creator. . . . They clearly set forth that Christ was the Son of God, existing with Him before the angels were created; and that He had ever stood at the right hand of God, and His mild, loving authority had not heretofore been questioned.”

What was Lucifer’s response? “I will be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14).

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This was the question that Lucifer originally stumbled over. It is the question that every angel in heaven had to answer: “‘Who do you say that I am?’” Lucifer and his angels fell from heaven because they refused to acknowledge the rightful authority of the Son of God. “Lucifer was envious of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone. . . . Angels that were loyal and true sought to reconcile this mighty, rebellious angel to the will of his Creator. . . . They clearly set forth that Christ was the Son of God, existing with Him before the angels were created; and that He had ever stood at the right hand of God, and His mild, loving authority had not heretofore been questioned.”

What was Lucifer’s response? “‘I will be like the Most High’” (Isa. 14:14).

Every one of us is confronted with the question: “Who do you say that I am?”

*Jack J. Blanco, Th.D., is the retired dean of the School of Religion at Southern Adventist University and author of The Clear Word, a Bible paraphrase.
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This was the question that Lucifer originally stumbled over. It is the question that every angel in heaven will be different, Job’s experience is our experience. Everyone has to endure trials of life just as Job did. Satan tries, unfortunately often successfully, to separate us from the love of God through his many inventions. We are all engaged in the battle between good and evil.

But in God’s hands we are absolutely safe and no one can remove us from His caring arms. We are His sons and daughters. Our identity lies in Him. Paul states in Romans 8:35-39 that absolutely nothing and no one on Earth or in the whole universe can separate us from the love of God, even though Satan is a master in his attempts and intrigues. Of course, this can be true only on the condition that we stay in a close, intimate, and trusting relationship with our loving, holy, and awesome Lord. The Lamb of God has the final word in the cosmic controversy between good and evil: “They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14, NIV).

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Today, there is an ever-increasing urgency to Jesus’ confrontational dialogue with His disciples. As we look at events that have taken place in the political and religious arena in recent years, two questions surface with eschatological urgency. The first is the question Jesus asked His disciples: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13-15, NKJV).

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In a democratic society, authority flows from the individual upward, not from some authority figure downward. This does not mean that Christianity is incompatible with individual freedom and democracy, but God’s relationship to us is not democratic. His authority is not up for vote. He is not one among equals. This is what produces a crisis in the heart of democratic humanity.

with Christ’s question: “Who do you say that I am?” We cannot escape it. When Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), he essentially acknowledged Christ’s Lordship. Jesus blessed him and said, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (vs. 17). No one will be in the kingdom who does not accept Jesus Christ as King and Lord. For it is the Father’s will that, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:10, 11). When Christ returns, He will return as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16).

Salvation is a two-step process within the heart. We are invited to accept Jesus Christ not only as Savior but also as Lord. As Savior He offers us forgiveness, and as Lord and King He expects trustful obedience. If we accept Him as Savior but not as King, we miss the whole point of the Great Controversy and forfeit our entrance into God’s kingdom.

The very essence of any religion requires a willingness to recognize and submit to a higher authority. In our modern democratic age, however, with its emphasis on the importance of the individual, this is becoming more difficult. Before the modern era, submission to kings and masters was the political norm; acceptance of a higher authority in religion did not seem so difficult. But after democracy became the political norm, the authority flows from the individual upward, not from some authority figure downward. This does not mean that Christianity is incompatible with individual freedom and democracy, but God’s relationship to us is not democratic. His authority is not up for vote. He is not one among equals. This is what produces a crisis in the heart of democratic humanity, who have difficulty submitting to divine authority, for they see it as being incompatible with individual rights and freedom.

The Authority of God

Though democracy places the locus of political authority in the individual, it does not mean we cannot also grant God ultimate authority in religious things. If these two foci are not sharply defined, however, individual political and social autonomy will be carried over to challenge all religious authority, except what each individual approves for himself or herself. And if we make our personal agenda a priori to Scripture, that agenda will shape our theological answer. In both the Old and New Testaments, God is asserted as the sole and supreme authority in matters religious. Only as God’s authority is made a priori to the understanding of Scripture can our sinful actions and attitudes come under judgment. Without God as the locus of religious authority, the legitimacy of the whole structure of Christianity is called into question.

Scripture begins and ends with God, for in Him is located all authority. As Paul says, “When God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself” (Heb. 6:13). Biblical authority, then, is rooted in what God Himself is, and what He is can be known by His self-disclosure. Therefore God’s authority and His revelation in Scripture are two sides of the same reality. It is not possible to reject one without rejecting the other.

Scripture is the truth from God about God. It is about a God of love, about an authority saturated in grace. There is no imperial force in grace, no forced obedience. God’s authority as seen in Jesus Christ is full of grace and truth (John 1:17; 3:16, 17; 14:8, 9; 17:3). This sets Christianity apart from other religions. Through God’s gracious authority, those who come to Him in faith are set free from all forms of destructive authoritarianism.

We need to be careful not to substitute human authority for God’s authority, either through liberalism’s subjectivism, which massages the Scripture into an image of God acceptable to modern thinking, or through Catholicism’s ecclesiastical authoritarianism, in which the finite sits in the place of the Infinite. There must be no dilution of God’s delegated authority as seen in Scripture. To disobey the utterance or writing of a prophet or an apostle is to disobey God and to deny Him His rightful authority to direct our lives. The Protestant principle “the Bible and the Bible only” recognizes God as the sole authority in matters of religion and that He has spoken to us through Scripture. Therefore, sola
scriptura, the authority of Scripture alone, continues to be our watchword.

Over the years, modernism and the Enlightenment with their emphasis on reason tried to liberate humanity from a God-ordered universe and promised a new freedom and progress for humanity. Though modernism is not dead, postmodernism has made its debut, in which no objective truth exists, and all religion simply reflects a historically conditioned bias. Consequently, culture is not critiqued and interpreted by Scripture, but Scripture is critiqued and interpreted by culture, especially by each reader’s own culture. This allows for as many interpretations of Scripture as there are cultures, and the authority of God is set aside for the authority of the individual, who essentially says, “I will be like the Most High.” Reason and intellectual freedom became the god of modernism; spiritual freedom and the right to interpret Scripture as one sees fit has become the god of postmodernism.

Democratic Humanity

Democratic humanity continues to assert political and religious freedom. But unguided and undisciplined religious freedom is not a blessing. To obey is to become free. Without obedience, freedom is a curse. Our passion for liberty and individual freedom is not a priori to the kingdom of God, but the first thing must be the enthusiasm for obeying the King in His self-revelation. If we push God’s revelation aside, we have no protection against theological error. No church or minister or believer has a right to claim freedom from God’s Word, but only to be free to uphold the Word. If we speak of spirituality without Scripture and place culture or religious experience above God’s Word, we have denied God’s rightful authority. Though God’s authority is within experience, it is not identical with the authority of religious experience. Rather, it is His authority experienced.

This was the case with Abraham. He experienced the authority of God by believing what God promised and then modifying his life in harmony with a promise not yet realized (Heb. 11:8-16; Gal. 3:6). Therefore, only those who have the kind of faith that will obey are the children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7).

Ironically, when God’s authority is set aside in favor of freedom, claims to authority increase. A cacophony of voices vies for attention. And when everything counts as theology, scarcely anything counts. If we accept biblical authority only to the extent that it fits our definitions or our limited experience with God and deny the accurate account of biblical events, our churches will become full of people brought up on substitutes. Soon there will be no Christian Church but only a social institution.

It is incumbent on the church never to lose contact with the source from which it derived its authority. It has no authority within itself. It receives its teaching authority from the Word of God. And having received it, the church is responsible for not losing contact with its source of authority or losing sight of Scripture’s repeated connection of God’s rightful authority back to Creation. This is why the fourth commandment is so essential. If the church fails to capture and maintain its primitive spirit of submission to God’s will and embraces only contemporary religious references, it will soon lose all vitality in its religious life, and its worship and witness will degenerate into form without substance.

Choosing a King

A frightful example of rejecting God’s rightful authority is seen in Israel’s demand for a king of their own choosing. “Israel had become tired of pious rulers who kept God’s purposes and God’s will and God’s honor ever before them according to God’s instructions. They wanted a reformed religion that they might by external, flattering prosperity be esteemed great in the eyes of the surrounding nations.”

Today the question of God’s authority in the light of the Great Controversy presses upon us with even greater urgency. “Who do you say that I am?” Not only do we need to respond as Peter did, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), but more appropriately, as the centurian did when he came to ask Jesus to heal his servant, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, “Go,” and he goes; and to another, “Come,” and he comes; and to my
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servant, “Do this,” and he does it.” When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”’ (Matt. 8:8-10).

We also are people under authority, Christ’s authority. He is our Lord and King. He is the Captain of the Lord’s host. When He says, “Go,” we go; when He says, “Come,” we come; and when He says, “Do this,” we do it, because we love Him. And it is this relationship that gives us identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of dignity. We are the sons and daughters of the King sent on a mission. Jesus said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:18, 19).

The Spirit of Sacrifice

The second question with eschatological urgency is Jesus’ next question of His disciples: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. . . For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:24, 26). The answer to this question, like the first one, determines our destiny. No one will be in the kingdom of God who is not a willing sacrifice for the God who sacrificed so much for us. Though Christianity is not incompatible with an abundant life, if we ever lose the spirit of sacrifice, we have lost the spirit of the gospel, for the spirit of sacrifice is the heart of the gospel.

With eschatological urgency, this question presses upon democratic humanity, focused as we usually are on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As the Scripture says, “Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent; . . . He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, . . . ‘Gather My saints together to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice’” (Ps. 50:3-5). “When men appreciate the great salvation, the self-sacrifice seen in Christ’s life will be seen in theirs.”

Just as the question of authority is rooted in the nature of God, so is the spirit of self-giving. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish” (John 3:16). He gave Him as a sacrifice for sin to bring a rebellious world back to Him (Isa. 53:10, 11; Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:18). It is the glory of God to give. This glory is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. In God’s universe, everything has been created to serve. From the angels, whose joy it is to minister to a fallen race, to the Sun that shines to gladden our world, to the oceans and springs and fountains, everything takes to give. Everything except the sinful heart of humanity. But above all lesser representations we see in Jesus Christ the actions of a God who cares. As Jesus said, “I seek not Mine own glory, but the glory of Him who sent me” (John 8:50; 7:18). These words express the great principle which is the law of life. No one has a right to life without the spirit of self-giving.

Receiving the Spirit of Christ

The spirit of Christ is the spirit of the gospel. Christ received all things from God, but He received to give. Self-giving becomes a natural part of the Christian’s life. When the Son of Man comes in His glory, He will separate those who lived to serve from those who did not. As the King blesses the righteous, they will wonder why the Lord is commending them so. Then the King will say, “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. . . . Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you” (Matt. 25:40, 34).

“Christ gave all for us, and those who receive Christ will be ready to sacrifice all for the sake of their Redeemer. The thought of His honor and glory will come before anything else.” When God spoke to Abraham, he obeyed and left his home in Ur of the Chaldees, came to Canaan, and was willing to sacrifice his only son at God’s command (Gen. 22:10). God accepted Abraham’s willingness to do so and called to him, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me” (vs. 12). Abraham loved God more than his own life, more than his own son. Therefore, those who love Christ are “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

Sacrifice.

God also wants to see how much we love Him. He is asking us to give Him and His service first place in our lives. Minister or physician,
business executive or farmer, professional or mechanic, each is responsible to do everything possible to advance God’s kingdom. Everything should be a means to this end. Consecration of the life and all its interests for the glory of God is the call of heaven. The question Jesus asked His disciples: “What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” directs the attention of God’s remnant to both the fourth commandment and the 10th commandment. While the fourth commandment will test our loyalty externally, the 10th commandment will test the reason for our loyalty. This was the case with Paul, who at first kept God’s commandments for his own glory and the glory of Israel, which he mistakenly thought was for the glory of God. On the road to Damascus, however, Jesus Christ appeared to him and exposed his motives. As Paul says, “I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire... I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died... Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:7-9, 12). After his conversion, Paul had an entirely different attitude. “I also count all things loss;” he said, “for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things” (Phil. 3:8).

As we see recent events in their eschatological setting, the question of accepting Christ as our Savior and Lord and being willing to give up life itself for Him as He did for us, takes on an urgency as never before. If we want to remain loyal to the King, we need to practice loyalty. If we want to keep the spirit of the gospel alive in our hearts, we need to be willing to sacrifice. Many have sacrificed for far less worthy causes. Should we do less for Christ?

REFERENCES
1 All scriptural references in this article are from the New King James Version.
2 Lift Him Up, p. 18.
4 The Desire of Ages, p. 273.
5 Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 49.
6 Close paraphrase of Prophets and Kings, pp. 221, 222.

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I t took place about a month after graduation. I was a very young minister attending a youth ministry retreat in northern California. The speaker told a story to highlight the challenge teachers and others in formation vocations have with young collegiates. A college professor was lecturing to his class in a sizable amphitheater-type classroom. In the course of the lecture, he wrote on the blackboard the word apathy. A young male on the last row, leaning so far back he was nearly horizontal, his legs up on the seat in front of him, attempted to read the word: “Ah—pay—thee. Ahpaythee.” Elbowing his slumbering seatmate to the left he asked: “Hey, what’s that?” His young friend, rubbing his eyes, looked at the board and read: “Ah—pay—thee.” After a long silence, he finally declared: “Oh, who cares!”

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ing young men and women to become the spiritual leaders of the church, the question is this: Will what is offered them change anything in them? Or will they say of the things of God, “Who cares?”

This is not an issue of knowledge or skills, but of character. For if the change they experience is merely going from darkness to being conversant with Karl Barth’s arguments, if the change is no more than going from stiffness on the platform to glibness behind a pulpit, if the change is simply from saying “church” in English to saying ekklesia in Greek, not much has been accomplished that is worthwhile. If their lives have not conformed to the loving will of the Master, teachers, mentors, and administrators have failed at their greatest task: that of character transformation.

Formation Lacking

The history of theological education in the Christian Church shows that a variety of paradigms have been used for leadership formation. The ascetic paradigm, with its emphasis on mystical religion, gave way to the scholastic paradigm of the 12th and 13th centuries. The 16th-century Reformation brought about a focus on Scripture and preaching. Two tracks can be identified as a result of this focus. One, taking deepest root in North America, was a mentoring paradigm, emphasizing relational interactions between a would-be pastor and his more-experienced pastor-teacher. The other, rising up in the German universities and eventually influencing American seminaries in the late 1900s, was an encyclopedic paradigm: the fourfold and now traditional structure of systematic, biblical, historical, and practical theology. Today’s paradigm is known in the literature of theological education as the professional paradigm, the currently dominant paradigm of the 21st century.

At every historical juncture, a goal never quite achieved was the spiritual or character formation of the future minister. The current paradigm reveals the same situation.

During the past century, four major studies were conducted on the state of theological education in comparison with the state of ministry.

The first study, conducted by Robert Kelly in the early 1920s, looked at 161 theological schools in America and Canada. The report included many aspects of theological education, but it also provided the first hint that something was amiss in the training of the inner person of the would-be parson. It indicated that the growth of Bible schools with enrollments as high as the seminaries “is an indication that the seminaries have not occupied the field of ‘theological’ education. The churches are demanding new types of workers.”

What did Kelly mean by new types of workers?

In the rise of Bible colleges, the churches longed for ministers whose exposure to the Word actually made a difference in their everyday lives, resulting in greater piety and evangelistic conviction. The irony today is that most of those once-unaccredited Bible colleges are now well-respected evangelical seminaries just as unable to transform their charges’ inner life as the schools they once criticized!

Ten years after Kelly’s study, a report found a proliferation of professional courses aimed at staying even with other professions, such as medicine and law. But it also recognized the paradigm’s inability to directly affect the inner life of the ministerial candidate. For example, regarding students’ spiritual development, the study admitted great concern:

“These [students] are, for the most part at least, looking forward to the ministry, and the specialty of the minister is religion. Unless the seminary succeeds in keeping the religious [spiritual] life of its students unimpaired, it has failed at the place where failure is most disastrous . . . many of our seminaries do not seem to be taking this responsibility with due seriousness.”

Another study in the post-World War II years’ enrollment boom, saw the role of the modern spiritual leader as the “pastoral director” of the congregation. The study provided insightful evaluation and deft analysis, but did not explore what could be done about the inner spiritual growth of the spiritual leader.

The most ambitious report to date, the Readiness for Ministry study conducted in the 1970s, became the spark that ignited the current trend of self-examination in theological education. One observer noted with alarm that the research “marked the beginning of a season of discontent in American theological education. . . . The worry was whether professionalism produced [spiritual] leaders. In and outside theological edu-
had mostly to do with pragmatic pedagogy for spiritual leadership. What had happened? Whereas works in the field of theological education, the States and Canada sponsored major Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. Theological Education, and the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada sponsored major works in the field of theological education. What had happened? Whereas until then, all discussion on theological education for spiritual leadership had mostly to do with pragmatic issues of curriculum, resourcing, governance, and development, suddenly the entire center had shifted to aims and purposes of theological leadership training. This shift has caused a revolution in the field, producing hundreds of articles and a host of well-articulated, book-length proposals on what is theological about theological training.

But no proposal yet has a handle on how to bring about the spiritual formation of the leader. No one knows! It is either taken for granted, considered outside of educational boundaries, or viewed as of such a personal nature that it is left alone. Yet, all seem to realize that this is key for leadership formation and that something ought to be done about it. Evangelical seminaries have acknowledged poor marks when it comes to the spiritual development of their students. One independent report said:

“We generally agree that the spiritual development of the pastor is extremely important. . . . But we have been unable or unwilling to give to the development of the character and spirituality of [our] students nearly the time and attention that we have given to the intellectual skills necessary for careful handling of the Scriptures.”

In an interview with the coordinator of the spiritual formation component at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in 1996, he considered the seminary’s efforts at spiritual formation a complete failure, noting that students were very resistant to accountability in spiritual direction. It was not working. Dean Alan Jones has said it well: “In some ways seminary training is too practical. Students are forced to acquire too many ‘skills for ministry’ without ‘the one thing needful,’ a maturing sense of self and a hunger for God.”

The lack of power in spiritual leadership, the inability to influence a world careening to self-destruction, is perceived even by those whose interest in religion is minimal at best. Not long ago, John Piper, at a meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, quoted Karl Meissner on Albert Einstein’s view of preachers and their relevance: Einstein had profound respect and awe for the design of the universe. Meissner considered Einstein more truly religious than many preachers, certainly than shallow, thoughtless, and powerless ones. Meissner said: “He must have looked at what preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined. [The preachers] were just not talking about the real thing.”

Elisha: The Real Thing

Do you think ministerial students would want to see “the real thing”? Do you think they would like to learn at the feet of someone who has bowed so low before God as to have touched the heavens? Few lives can have more impact on would-be spiritual leaders than a teacher’s well-lived life, soaked with the living Spirit of the loving God of the universe.

Consider an Old Testament example: “Elisha died, and they buried him. And the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land in the spring of the year. So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let...”
Does this remind you of the Master, whose only self-description, found in Matthew 11:29, tells us that He is “gentle and humble in heart”? (NIV). Do you think students could profit from mentors who have a humble spirit and whose hearts are impressed by the Spirit?

It is interesting to note that at the time of Samuel, the schools of the prophets were known as the “band” or “company” of the prophets, but at the time of Elisha, they were known as the “sons” of the prophets. The “bands” became the “sons.” The Semitic idiom “son of” carries a much deeper sense of imitation than the English expression, which mainly deals with identification. The sons of the prophets functioned in a spirit of close community with their mentors, especially in the time of Elisha. When the school at Jericho needed bigger quarters, Elisha felled trees for construction alongside the students. When he was at the Gilgal campus, he shared instruction and meals with them. This is even demonstrated linguistically. R. Payne Smith had noted that when the sons of the prophets are found “sitting before” Elisha (2 Kings 4:38, NKJV) and “dwell[ing] with” him (6:1, KJV), the verb and preposition are the same. The verb yashad is translated in its more literal sense in the first passage and denotes an academic activity. In the second text, it denotes a domestic activity, a daily routine.

This was “a master-disciple relationship in mutual commitment to service of God.” That relationship was so valuable that when a financial crisis arose on the part of the widow of one of the sons of the prophets, she was led to seek Elisha’s help (2 Kings 4:1). Why would she do that when at the time such requests were normally made of the next of kin? For the same reason God had those “sons” be so close to their teacher: so they could see that God was alive and well in Israel.

“In these ‘schools of the prophets’ young men were educated by those who were not only [1] well versed in divine truth, but who themselves [2] maintained close communion with God and [3] had received the special endowment of His Spirit. These educators enjoyed the respect and confidence of the people both for learning and piety. The power of the Holy Spirit was often strikingly manifest in their assemblies, and the exercise of the prophetic gift was not infrequent” (Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, July 20, 1882; italics supplied).

This is the real thing, a Christlike character yielding Christlike power. The times of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha were dark, and apostasy was omnipresent in Israel. How else could God stay the final decline of His people into the hands of the uncircumcised except by nurturing a group of youth, leading them to be so close to those who knew Him best.
that absolute trust in the mighty hand of Jehovah was not for them an academic exercise but a living reality, seen day after day after day? Those teachers “had received the endowment of His Spirit.” The servant of God noted that “the power of the Holy Spirit was often strikingly manifest in their assemblies.” Can they see God in those today who have the responsibility of molding future spiritual leaders?

**Seeing God**

The challenge of leadership formation for this new millennium and for always has never been about the knowledge or skills imparted to students, as fundamental as these things may be. The challenge of leadership formation has to do with whether students can see God in their mentors, teachers, and administrators, the infinite, loving, powerful, wise, and transforming God of the heavens in the lives of those with more education and experience. Can they see this in the way classes are conducted? Can they see God in those today who mentor who, already at the top, can climb a mountain conquered by a mentor who, already at the top, can see the wonders of the living God in the classroom. They may appear nonchalant, they may pretend not to care, they may look like all that matters in their world is money and fun. But they too, in the words of C. S. Lewis, want to be surprised by joy. They want to believe what they have heard and not seen: that God is alive in regular people. That what the Bible says is actually true, not only because it is merely written there but because it is lived by regular folk.

Take a 20-year-old junior, a sixth-generation Adventist, in a theology, homiletics, or New Testament class. What do you think he is after? He is more anxious than the freshman. He has logged two-plus years already, and time is running out. He is more conscious of his character flaws, his weak points triggered by an inconstant enemy. He has seen things and tasted things that originate in the throne room of heaven. But consistency in these matters has been elusive. He longs to know if there are any Elishas left in the land. He would like to witness a miracle-working life, but he will happily settle for knowing a genuinely Christlike soul in whom God lives unrivaled.

Take a 30-year-old senior, a second-career man with a wife and two children, a man who decided to embrace the three angels’ messages only a few years ago. He has accepted a conference’s call to pastor and is taking a church ministry course or a seminary’s church administration course. What is he after? Oh, yes, he is after every single bit of pragmatic wisdom available—after all, ministry now has context. But what does he really want? He wants the assurance that with Christ, all things are possible. All things, indeed! And he wants to know if his professors and church leaders, of all people, have found that truth to be theirs experientially.

As John Piper intimated, the problem faced in our schools is a problem of the heart. As teachers and administrators have become expert professionals in their fields, as they have rubbed shoulders with the best and the brightest, as they have read some of the most amazing body of literature humans can produce, too many of them have become false teachers. Leaders in ministry have not abandoned the faith, certainly not in public, but some have grown personally cold and distant from the God who gave so much joy in private and produced such Christlike results in public. David Watson used to quote Carl Bates’ sad, yet accurate comment: “If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of our midst today, about 95 per cent of what we are doing . . . would go on, and we would not know the difference.” Even Karl Barth, in his farewell lecture in Basel, recognized the poverty of the spirit found in the teachers and shapers of spiritual leaders.
“Everything is in order, but everything is also in the greatest disorder. The mill is turning, but it is empty as it turns. All the sails are hoisted, but no wind fills them to drive the ship. The fountain adorned with many spouts is there, but no water comes. . . . There is no doubt piety, but not the faith which, kindled by God, catches fire. What appears to take place does not really take place. For what happens is that God, who is supposedly involved in all theological work, maintains silence about what is thought and said in theology about him (rather than of him as its source and basis). It does happen that the real relation of God to theology and theologians must be described by a variation of the famous passage in Amos 5: ‘I hate, I despise your lectures and seminars, your sermons, addresses, and Bible studies, and I take no delight in your discussions, meetings, and conventions. For when you display your hermeneutic, dogmatic, ethical, and pastoral bits of wisdom before one another and before me, I have no pleasure in them: I disdain these offerings of your fatted calves. Take away from me the hue and cry that you old men raise with your thick books and you young men with your dissertations! I will not listen to the melody of your reviews that you compose in your theological magazines, monthlies, and quarterlies.’

This from a man who spent his life studying and influencing, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. And this is his conclusion at the end of his career. Can the same be said of our own leader shapers? In true Pauline fashion: May it never be!

May those who have surrendered their trust to be formed and shaped understand the same message when they engage with teachers and leaders today: Believe in your teachers’ God, and you too will be delivered. Believe in the Master they represent, and they too will see their enemies defeated. For the challenge of spiritual leadership formation is not in what teachers and leaders know, nor in what they do, but in what they have become in Christ their Lord and Savior.

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TURNING THE TABLES

No human being lives outside the reality common to us all.

“The puppy struggles,” Smith said with pity; “the poor little puppy struggles. How fortunate it is that I am wiser and kinder than he.”

“Smith,” said the philosopher, “I shall go mad!”

“And so look at things from the right angle,” Smith sighed. “Ah, but madness is only a palliative at best, a drug. The only cure is an operation—an operation that is always successful. Death.”

As he spoke, the sun rose, turning the sky from pigeon gray to pink. Bells rang, birds sang, the roofs of the ancient town were lit with fire, and the sun rose farther with a glory too deep for the skies to hold. Suddenly the unhappy man on the last morning of his life could bear it no longer.

“Let me come off this place. I can’t bear it.”

“I rather doubt it will bear you,” Smith said, referring to the delicate

“I’ll help you out of your hole, old man,” said Smith with rough tenderness. “I’ll put the puppy out of his pain.”

“Do you mean to kill me?” the professor cried, retreating to the window.

“It’s not a thing I’d do for everyone,” Smith said with emotion. “But you and I seemed to have got so intimate tonight, somehow. I know all your troubles now, and the only cure, old chap.

“It’ll soon be over, you know,” Smith continued. And as the warden made a run for the window and leapt out awkwardly onto the flying buttress below, he followed him like a benefactor with a deeply compassionate look, the revolver in his hand like a gift.

Both men were surprised to see the first streaks of dawn. Their time together had begun nearly 24 hours earlier at Dr. Eames’s morning lecture. After a day packed with undergraduate affairs, it had resumed late at night in the warden’s rooms. Dr. Eames, it was known, was always in for his friends and favorite students at any hour of the night.

“I came to see you at this unearthly hour,” Smith had said as they started their ruminations, “because I am coming to the conclusion that existence is really too rotten. I know all the arguments of the thinkers who think otherwise, bishops and agnostics and those sort of people. And knowing you were the greatest living authority on the pessimistic thinkers—”

“All thinkers,” Eames had said, “are pessimistic thinkers.” And with a weary cynicism he had kept up this depressing conversation for several hours until something in Innocent Smith had snapped.

Now, with the dawn breaking and Eames’s legs hanging over the buttress and the buttress hanging over the void below, the mood changed again.

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h, hang the world!” The large, somewhat sullen undergraduate could take no more. He slammed his fist on the table and rudely broke into the professor’s speech.

“Let’s give it a bad name first and then hang it,” the professor went on unruffled, not realizing the mood had changed. “A puppy with hydrophobia would probably struggle for life while we killed it, but if we were kind we should kill it. So an omniscient god would put us out of our pain. He would strike us dead.”

“Why doesn’t he strike us dead?” the student asked.

“He is dead himself,” said the philosopher; “that is where he is really enviable.”

The eminent warden of the college continued, “To anyone who thinks, the pleasures of life, trivial and soon tasteless, are bribes to bring us into a torture chamber.” He was in full flood now, with all the jaded brilliance of an academic on a well-worn theme.

“We all see that for any thinking man mere extinction is the . . . What are you doing? . . . Are you mad? . . . Put that thing down!”

Dr. Emerson Eames, distinguished professor of philosophy and warden of Brakespeare College, Cambridge, found himself looking down the cold, small, black barrel of a cocked revolver in the hands of one of his brightest students, Innocent Smith.

*Os Guinness is Senior Fellow at the Trinity Forum in McLean, Virginia.
simply a flight of Chesterton’s imagination but the fruit of his own life.

In 1892 Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an 18-year-old student at the Slade School of Art in London. Far from the stiff-upper-lip primness of the caricature of Victorianism, the end-of-the-century world of art was swirling with decadence, cynicism, and pessimism. Chesterton himself was also drawn to the macabre and the occult. In other words, his world was remarkably similar to our postmodern one.
Radical relativists may deny that there are objective facts but are strangely insistent on circulating highly detailed résumés.

Postmodernist professors may claim that authors are without privilege in determining how their texts are interpreted, but woe betide the reviewer who misinterprets their latest contribution to scholarship and human knowledge.

ditional views commonly underscore the objectivity of truth in ever more earnest and labored ways. And then, when they fail to carry their point, they mask their frustration by issuing dire warnings of the consequences of disagreeing with them. The result is mutual incomprehension and a stalemate.

Peter Berger, however, has put forward two ways to counter radical relativism. The first effective strategy for countering relativism on its own grounds is negative: “Relativizing the relativizers.” By this is meant applying to skeptics the skepticism they apply to others, thus pushing them out toward the negative consequences of their own beliefs. Chesterton’s professor has one attitude toward life and death in his comfortable college rooms but quite another when hanging grimly to the buttress while staring down the barrel of a gun. When turned on him, his philosophy of life is cold comfort.

As Berger points out, the strategy rests on two assumptions. The first is that relativism and skepticism entail a hidden double standard—the relativism is inconsistent and incomplete. All too often, relativists relativize others but not themselves. They relativize the past but not the present. They pour the acid of their relativism over all sorts of issues but jealously guard their own favorite ones. A recent study of classical education in the universities points to this attribute when it defines the present-day American academic as a well-fed, elite, institutionalized thinker of the late 20th century, who crafts ideas for his peers, with the assurance that the consequences of those solutions should not and will not necessarily apply to himself.

The strategy’s second assumption is that consistency and clarity are linked. The task of encountering relativism, Berger writes, is to “see the relativity business to its very end.” Press relativism to its consistent conclusion and the result is surprising. Far from paralyzing thought, relativism is itself relativized, the de-
undergraduate in the 1960s, an Arctic chill was still hanging in the air that froze any serious appreciation of religion. The source had been the philosophy of A. J. Ayer, who asserted that only that which could be tested by the five senses could be verified as true. Theology was therefore “non-sense,” or as it was famously said, “The word g-o-d is less meaningful than the word d-o-g.”

The principle also holds true for nations, for ideas have consequences. Differences make a difference. Behavior follows beliefs as surely as thunder follows lightning. What starts in the studies will end in the streets. When it comes to postmodernism, the stunning fact is that we do not have to predict its consequences—we have already seen the influence of its core ideas on history. Do we really imagine there can be no consequences a second time around?

All people at some point behave true to their beliefs. Sooner or later they will act on the assumptions they truly hold and reap the consequences. We often say that people don’t “live up to their beliefs,” but it would be more accurate to say that, in a crunch such as temptation, they switch to other beliefs and live up to those instead. We do live by our beliefs. The question is, which ones?

Crisis and Opportunity

The strategy of “relativizing the relativizers” has both a sobering and encouraging side. The sobering side arises from the fact that ideas have consequences. The tactic can easily be reduced to a game—and a heartless one—but this obscures its real mercy: Because the skeptics’ view is finally untrue, it is in their interest to discover it in good time. But even if we care so little that we say and do nothing, life itself will most likely push the skeptics out to face reality anyway, and the final outcome may be far less pleasant.

Put differently, all people at some point behave true to their beliefs. Sooner or later they will act on the assumptions they truly hold and reap the consequences. We often say that people don’t “live up to their beliefs,” but it would be more accurate to say that, in a crunch such as temptation, they switch to other beliefs and live up to those instead. We do live by our beliefs. The question is, which ones?

Now although someone’s beliefs and assumptions may not be true and do not describe reality, they will still drive their behavior. So if someone doesn’t believe in truth, count on him to lie. If someone says there are no objective facts, expect her to be careless with facts to further her own interests. If someone explains everything by referring to evolution and the “selfish gene,” be sure that at some point he will be extremely selfish on behalf of the fitness of his own survival. If someone describes newborn babies as “replaceable” and of no more value than snails, you can bet that she will become an advocate of “involuntary euthanasia” (in other words, murder), and so on.

The trouble for A. J. Ayer was that his verification principle couldn’t verify itself—it was self-refuting. To accept as truth only what can be tested by the senses is a principle that itself cannot be tested by the senses. It too is non-sense. Ayer’s approach, he later admitted, was “a blind alley.”

Again and again the lesson is simple: While no argument is unanswerable, some thoughts can be thought but not lived. So we should never stop halfway in dealing with skepticism but allow ideas uncompromisingly to their conclusion. When heads collide with the wall, they will have reached the limits of their position and will be open to reconsider. In this sense, reality is what we run into when we are wrong, for when we are right, we don’t run into it. “There are times,” Václav Havel wrote, “when we must sink to the bottom of our misery to understand truth, just as we must descend to the bottom of a well to see the stars in broad daylight.”
A Fresh-Thinking Smart-Bomb

Peter Berger’s first strategy for countering relativism—relativizing the relativizers—is unashamedly negative. This in itself leaves some people uncomfortable, and an added problem occurs when people use the approach in a purely logical way. In searching for any and all contradictions, they end up being tiresomely fussy and unconvincing.

In contrast, the real task is to be prophetic, not pedantic; to search for contradictions that matter—and matter not to us but to the people we are engaging. In other words, the goal is to look for the contradictions between logic and life, to search for the tension between the relativism or skepticism of their philosophy and the “treasure of their heart.” Only the latter will become a smart-bomb to detonate fresh thinking.

Because of the negative nature of the first strategy, many people are more drawn to the second tactic for countering relativism on its own grounds, which is entirely positive: “Pointing out the signals of transcendence.” By this is meant the strategy of drawing attention to the contradiction and yearnings within people’s beliefs that point beyond those beliefs toward entirely different possibilities.

Whereas “relativizing the relativizers” is negative because it highlights the negative consequences of false assumptions, “pointing out the signals of transcendence” is positive because it points toward the positive conclusions of true aspirations, unnoticed before. In the comfort of his room, Dr. Emerson Eames is mired in his gloom, but when confronting the starkness of death in the beauty of dawn, an enjoyment of life begins to shine in his eyes. This first contradicts his put-the-puppy-out-of-its misery pessimism. Then instinctively, intuitively, irrepressibly, and undeniably, his gratitude to be alive punctures his pessimism and points beyond it to the possibility of higher meaning in life. Gratitude quite literally became Eames’s pointer toward salvation, just as it did for his creator in real life.

Berger defines signals of transcendence as “phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality.” His discussion of them in A Rumor of Angels includes some signals that are positive—for example, order, humor, and hope—and some that are negative—for example, his “argument from damnation.”

The best-known example of a positive “signal” in real life is C. S. Lewis’s “surprised by joy”—experiences that prodded him toward being a “lapsed atheist” and set him off on a search for meaning. But Berger’s argument from damnation is particularly powerful and common, as in the poet W. H. Auden’s experience that stopped him in his tracks and turned him around to start his journey toward faith.

In 1939 Auden emigrated to the United States. In November, two months after the outbreak of World War II, he went to a cinema in the Yorkville district of Manhattan. The area was largely German-speaking and the film he saw was a Nazi account of their conquest of Poland. When Poles appeared on the screen, he was startled to hear people in the audience shout, “Kill them! Kill them!”

Auden was stunned. Amid all the changes of heart and mind he had passed through in his life, one thing had remained consistent: He believed in the essential goodness of humanity. Now suddenly, in a flash, he realized two things with the force of an epiphany. On the one hand, he knew beyond any argument that “human nature was not and never could be good”—the reaction of the audience was “a denial of every humanistic value.” On the other hand, he realized that if he was to say such things were absolutely evil, he had to have some absolute standard by which he could judge them.

Here, Auden realized, was the fatal flaw of his liberalism: “The whole trend of liberal thought has been to undermine faith in the absolute.” Or as he remarked to a friend, “The English intellectuals who now cry to Heaven against the evil incarnated in Hitler have no Heaven to cry to.” Spurred by this contradiction-cum-yearning, Auden left the cinema on a quest to renew his “faith in the absolute” and began the journey that led him to faith in Christ.

No human being lives outside the reality common to us all. Whatever people may say the world is or who they are, it is what it is and they are who they are. No argument is unarguable, but there are thoughts that can be thought but not lived. When all is said and done, reality always has the last word. The truth will always out. Standing up to falsehood, lies, and crazy ideas is never an easy task, but it is far easier than the hardest task of all, becoming people of truth ourselves.

Imagine standing, looking up to something in the distance. Your face and entire body are peeled like a peach, with your entire rubbery organ of skin, flayed and intact, draped over your arm like a raincoat.

This is the essence of Günther von Hagens’ “Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies.” Dr. von Hagens has invented a vacuum process called plastination, which replaces individual cells of the human body with brightly colored resins and epoxies, much as minerals replace the cells of trees in a petrified forest. As a result, he can preserve a human body, whole or stripped away to reveal its inner parts, and display the cadaver in an eerily lifelike pose.

Body Worlds, an exhibition of 200-plus preserved bodies, includes a woman eight months pregnant, reclining as if on a couch, her abdomen and womb opened to reveal the fetus resting head-down inside. Skinned athletes—a runner, a swordsman, a swimmer, a basketball player—assume their normal poses to demonstrate the wonders of the skeletal and muscular systems. There are even two flayed corpses, all muscles and bones and bulging eyes, kneeling before a cross.

Dr. von Hagens’ macabre exhibition of the naked and the dead has shocked and fascinated millions of people around the world. Is it art or anatomy? A ghoulish affront to human dignity or a way of understanding ourselves better? The German scientist believes his displays of real corpses can help us understand ourselves and our bodies better—as well as our corporeality and the reality of death (both of which our Western world tries to deny).

One of Body Worlds’ vivid displays is a man sitting intently at a chessboard. In addition to the exposure of muscles, tendons, and ligaments, his back has been stripped of muscle to the nerves of his spinal cord and his skull removed to reveal the brain. The frontal lobe projects above where the eyebrows would be. From behind, your eye naturally follows the spinal column from the medulla at the base of the brain down to the first lumbar vertebra, where it branches off in the sciatic rootlets and sciatic nerve reaching all the way down the back of each leg to the feet. It’s a fascinating display, showing how intimately connected the brain is to every part of the human body.

Physiologically speaking, the three-pound brain is central to human existence and identity. In addition to running the almost infinite needs of the physical body, it also plays a central role in determining the nature and value of our lives. Scripture teaches: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2, NKJV). Here we are confronted with a world of intangible things that Body Worlds can neither dissect nor put on display: the mind, intellect, reason, imagination, emotions, values, beliefs, convictions, will, character, orientation to God and to one’s neighbor. We are more than mere body, there is our inner world of the mind.

When Paul exhorts us to present our bodies a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1), he is not concerned about mere outward conformity to this age. He is worried about the inner world of the mind and how it influences what the body does—how we think, what we think about. Our worldview. Our emotions and values. Our beliefs and convictions.

Earlier in the Book of Romans, he traces a downward spiral of thinking that leads to moral dysfunction and all sorts of body-oriented evils (1:18-32). But this downward spiral is reversed in those who consecrate themselves to Jesus Christ. Human beings are transformed as their thinking is altered. We become what we think intellectually, spiritually, and morally. The body follows the mind. Paul says that we should give ourselves wholly to God and not be shaped by the old world order, that we should let new thought patterns transform our lives.

No clearer insight into the stewardship of the mind can be found. It is our greatest resource—determining everything we are and do. When we seek to make the most of all that we are and all that we have for Christ, our inner world of thought takes center stage.

The billboard message “A mind is a terrible thing to waste” effectively reminds us of our greatest resource. This is as true in the spiritual realm as it is in the academic arena. Paul asserts that the Christian mind is a terrible thing to waste because moral, spiritual matters are of importance now. We can glorify God with our mind now. What we think
The story of David and Goliath has captured the imagination of millions of Bible students through the ages. It is the story of the faith of a vulnerable young boy withstanding an armored Philistine champion. It is the story of an Israelite army cowering in the Valley of Elah while the Philistines taunt them and their God. Five stones against iron shields, helmets, and sword.

But what is the history behind the story? Was there a Goliath and a David? Recent critical scholarship questions the historicity of this biblical story. In 1992, Philip Davies, professor of biblical studies at the University of Sheffield, appealed to archaeology and wrote, “The biblical ‘empire’ of David and Solomon has not the faintest echo in the archaeological record—as yet.” He concluded that David and Solomon are no more historical than King Arthur of the Round Table.

But his argument is one from silence. In the view of Davies and other postmodern scholars, the characters and stories of the Bible must have a historical (archaeological) counterpart. “Unless this is done, there can be no real basis for claiming that biblical ‘Israel’ has any particular relationship to history.”

The Bible is considered guilty until proven innocent. But such arguments from silence are dangerous in any discipline. In archaeology—with hundreds of archaeologists working in the Middle East today—it can be devastating.

Just this past summer, an exciting archaeological discovery was made that sheds new light on the story of David and Goliath. According to the Bible, Goliath came from Gath, one of the five cities of the Philistines (1 Sam. 17:4). Modern excavations at Gath (Tel es-Safi) directed by Aren

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Maeir of Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, uncovered a broken piece of pottery with an inscription during the 2005 season. According to Dr. Maeir in his November 2005 presentation to the American Schools of Oriental Research in Philadelphia, the letters are written in a proto-Canaanite script (in Semitic letters). The letters written without vowels are: ALWT and WLT. Though the script is Semitic, however, it is written in the Indo-European language. The names could thus be constructed as “Wylattes or Alyattes.” In the hearing of an Israelite it might sound like this Wylattes/WLT/Goliath. That the names are written in Indo-European in a Semitic script is significant. Indo-European points to an Aegean (Greek) origin, which is the same place that the Bible describes as the origin of the Philistines (Gen. 10:14). Its writing in a Semitic script indicates some adaptation of the language in written form to the local Canaanite environment where the Philistines settled.

Where was this inscription found? As archaeologists uncover the ancient cities layer by layer, they can date artifacts stratigraphically within those layers. This inscription was clearly found below the massive destruction of the city that archaeologists have identified with the military campaign of Hazael of Syria (2 Kings 12:17). The inscription is then sealed in a stratigraphic context and can be dated to the 10th-9th centuries B.C., around 950 B.C. to no later than 880 B.C. The context is important, because it establishes that the name Goliath was known at Philistine Gath about 70 years after the event between David and Goliath as recorded in 1 Samuel 17. Dr. Maeir, a well respected archaeologist who is currently director of the Institute of Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University, concludes that though the inscription probably does not name the biblical Goliath directly, it does point to “a Goliath or rather two Goliath-like names.” This affirms that these names were used at Philistine Gath some years after the Bible records the conflict between David and Goliath.

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2 Ibid., p. 60.
I was eager to get my hands on the latest issue of National Geographic magazine. A friend had just forwarded an e-mail clip from the National Geographic Society featuring Seventh-day Adventists as a culture of longevity. I was proud to be an Adventist and curious to read the article for myself.

The article discussed three cultures whose people outlive their counterparts. These three were geographically diverse: Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; and Loma Linda, California. The author of the article found Loma Linda (representing the Seventh-day Adventist Church) to be the most surprising. Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle is not the result of a regionalized cultural inheritance. Rather, it is a belief-based system dispersed among and lived within many different cultures.

According to the video clip, Seventh-day Adventists tend to outlive the general population by about 10 years. Why? Because their religion reinforces positive healthful lifestyle behavior. The devout are vegetarian, non-smokers, non-drinkers, and take Sabbath every Saturday to separate themselves from the demands of the world.

I had always been curious about regional cultures of longevity and even somewhat envious of those who were born into those societies. Wow! So I, too, had the advantage of belonging to a culture of longevity—not because I was born in a unique geographical location, but because I choose to be part of a society that has a longevity edge!

What made this culture unique from the other disappearing cultures? Why is it that I didn't have to be born in Okinawa or Sardinia to be part of a culture of longevity?

As I thought about it, I paused for a moment to thank God for the wonderful message that He has given, a message that goes far beyond a healthful lifestyle. It outlines how to live at peace with God and fellow humans, how to know God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture, how to understand and live in the world around us that God Himself created. I gave thanks to God for the meaning and purpose this brings to life—to live in the presence of God, who created us, redeemed us, and longs to live with us throughout eternity.

And then I thanked God for the intentionality of those who purposed to share this overarching worldview with me, for those who sacrificed, spent themselves, devoted their talents, energy, and concern so that I and others could be part of this enduring culture. I thanked God for the revelation of Himself in the Bible, for the pioneers of our church, and His servant, Ellen G. White, for my parents, my teachers, my pastors, enthusiastic and committed Pathfinder leaders, church administrators, and my entire church family who caught the vision to create a heritage, to prepare a people of longevity, not just for the present, but for eternity.

Then I received a jolt from a bold claim in the clip. Of the cultures of longevity surveyed in the article, Seventh-day Adventism is the only one that will not lose its longevity edge because, by virtue of the church community and the nurture and education of its young people, it is the only culture that is still growing and carrying its principles forward.

Now more pointed questions occurred to me: Do we really have a longevity edge as the clip claimed? Do we really have the urgency as did our pioneers to pass on our culture of longevity? Is it true that the next generation is being nurtured in our heritage? Is our incredible legacy enthusiastically shared with them? Do we prefer compromise and doubt over the intentionality, sacrifice, devotion, energy, and concern of our forefathers?

Our descendents deserve no less than we have been given: the privilege of living in a culture that is not losing its longevity edge. And God has given us the challenge of sharing His message in its fullness to a world wandering far from God’s plan. This National Geographic article is a challenge for us to be true to our calling.
In addition to the barrage of e-mails that I receive asking me to act as an agent for the deposit of an astonishing amount of money to my personal bank account (in U.S. dollars, of course) or advising me that I’ve been approved for refinancing (even though I’m not buying a home and have submitted no application for such funding), I also receive an occasional message that has been sent with a subject line that goes something like this: “Fw: Fw: Fw: Fw: Something to Think About” or “Fw: Fw: Fw: Thought for the Day.”

Apparently for those who don’t have any thoughts of their own,” I mutter to myself, “and could use a few superficial ideas to fill the void.” By this time I must confess that I’m usually so fed up with all the vapid spam in my Inbox that I’ve become, well, ill-humored—or at times worse. Fleetingly I consider the possibility of firing back a withering reply that expresses my, shall we say, euphemistically, lack of appreciation for this unsought-for encroachment into my personal life. But I don’t. I know that these little moments in sharing are well-meaning efforts to stay connected.

As Charlie Brown would have said in that world-famous comic strip: “Sigh.”

So, OK, I acknowledge that this ill humor is a negative facet of my character that I have to work on. Scripture says very clearly that anger “only causes harm” (Ps. 37:8, NKJV). So, though I believe firmly in righteousness by faith, I also know that “the grace of God . . . teaches us to . . . live self-controlled, upright and godly lives” (Titus 2:11, 12, NIV). So self-control isn’t solely or simply a matter of works. Presumably we are expected to address it to such things as getting nettled by inane and annoying e-mails.

And all of this because we’re living in the so-called age of information.

Postmodernist philosopher Jean Beaudrillard has asserted, I think rightly, that “the media are so saturated with information, and with so many different voices demanding to be heard, that it is no longer possible to know what you either know or want any more.” ESPN, The National Enquirer, and Entertainment Tonight—all claim to be presenting news and facts. Talk shows and commentators artfully blur the line between opinion and fact. And the Internet provides so much raw data that it boggles the mind.

In an episode of The Practice, a serialized television show now in syndication that centered on the personal and professional lives of a group of lawyers in Boston, the practice was unevenly matched in a legal battle with a much more affluent and prestigious firm representing a transnational corporation with pockets so deep that they seemed to defy gravity. When the underdog practice subpoenaed the corporation for certain information, the opposing firm sent them an unnecessarily massive amount of office records in an attempt to discourage them from finding the specific information they needed. It contained so much data and documentation that the smaller firm simply didn’t have the resources to plumb it.

Whether this strategy is actually employed in the real world of jurisprudence or is just the figment of a script writer’s imagination, it’s still an apt illustration of the fact that it’s possible to bury the truth in information. If Satan has his way, that’s literally what all these media will be doing to us: submerging the truth under a Himalayan range of completely useless—and often destructive—strata.

So it’s become an inescapable conclusion that much of the information gathering that we indulge in is motivated by our hunger for more data—not for more truth. In the words of a popular song on the classic radio stations: “You don’t really need to find out what’s going on. “You don’t really want to know just how far it’s gone.”

Christian author Dorothy Sayers grumbled: “The public do not care whether they are being told truth or not.” And this was 60 years ago! Back in the time machine to a place where there was no such thing as a
blog, a podcast, or an infomercial. In its earlier days, the Internet was hailed in halcyon terms as the most democratic of the media. Because all could access all this valuable information, advocates crowed, we would at last be brought together into a golden future.

But this didn’t take into account the human element: The brutal truth is that most of us don’t rely on the media to seek a balanced menu in data; we go there to reinforce our presuppositions. It has become an instrument of polarization. The availability of all that fantastic information hasn’t changed us for the better at all. Instead, we’ve become more extreme versions of our former selves. “There is reason to think that the Internet is more likely to increase social fragmentation than it is likely to promote social consensus.” And none of the rest of the media is any better. Even the information that is supposedly reported as news is based on one ideology or another.

As we expose ourselves to these sources of information in the media, we must be continually asking ourselves: How important are these facts in the cosmic reckoning? How much time should I be devoting to accessing such facts? Am I devoting time to the receiving of these facts (this so-called news) at the expense of something more timeless, transcendent, or important?

How crucial is it, after all, to be aware that some newly released film has become the third-highest grossing film in history? Or that some someone has just purchased the Pope’s limousine in auction at an obscene price? Or that one celebrity is suing another for failing to live up to a contract?

Is it not possible that we may be “poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17, NKJV) when we think we’re rich in information as well as in material goods?

REFERENCES