WHY THE PERSONHOOD OF THE HOLY SPIRIT MATTERS

At a time when the greatest growth explosion in Christianity is among charismatics, a greater clarity regarding the person of the Spirit is warranted. Borrowing imagery from a children’s story, Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen points out that today the Holy Spirit is no longer “the Cinderella of the Trinity,” being left alone at home while her two sisters go to the ball. “Nowadays, it will not do to speak about the Holy Spirit as the theos agraptos—the God about whom no one writes—as did Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century.” There is a revolution going on regarding the Holy Spirit. This revolution is experiential and ecumenical, as well as academic. Scholars today search for greater clarity on a topic that has always remained elusive: Just who is the Holy Spirit?

The search is timely, and especially so for Christians whose understanding of last-day events place today’s world on the brink of a great deception by Christ’s archenemy. What we understand regarding the nature of the Holy Spirit will influence our response to His work in our lives.

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By Ron E. M. Clouzet

The Study of the Person of the Spirit

Seventy years ago Samuel Chadwick, referring to Puritan John Owen’s works on the Holy Spirit, contended that “the last great book on the Spirit was written in 1674.” John Owen’s work was a tour de force on the topic of the Holy Spirit, but much more surfaced on the subject in the 20th century. From small beginnings in Kansas City and Los Angeles—giving life to classical Pentecostalism—to the charismatic renewal among Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, to today’s Third Wave that includes large numbers of evangelicals, the “silent” theology of the Spirit of yesteryear has turned into a veritable postmodern Tower of Babel.

But not everything written or said about the Spirit these days contains truth. Contemporary approaches to pneumatology vary a great deal. And much serious work on the Spirit bypasses His nature, focusing instead on His function and work. It is not surprising, then, that our very own 2005 edition of Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . covers the person of the Spirit, the question of His divinity, and His relationship with the Godhead in only two pages, while more than twice that many are spent on His mission alone.

If understanding the person of the Spirit is so critical for our times, why is it so difficult to accomplish? Obviously, one reason is that comparatively little is explained in the Scriptures. Much is assumed, but little is explained. And even though the New Testament mentions the Spirit tenfold more often than the Old Testament, it remains concerned with ethics and not with nature. True, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is “one of the most elusive themes in the Bible or in theology,” but should we not seek to understand what is revealed for the sake of our instruction, as Paul suggests (Rom. 15:4)? Surely, we must do so with great reverence and humility, yet with determination, for “the dispensation in which we are now living is to be . . . the dispensation of the Holy Spirit.”

For many Christians, the Father is seen as fairly impersonal and transcendent, and the Son as far removed in history, while the Spirit “is the point at which the Trinity becomes personal to the believer.” Since this is so critical, study we must, while not forgetting an important warning penned by Ellen White at a time when, in 1911, popular interest in the Spirit was growing rapidly: “It is not essential for us to be able to define just what the Holy Spirit is. . . . The nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery. Men cannot explain it, because the Lord has not revealed it to them. . . . Regarding such mysteries, which are too deep for human understanding, silence is golden.”
Fundamental Questions Regarding the Person of the Holy Spirit

In 1906 Ellen White wrote that “The Holy Spirit has a personality, else He could not bear witness to our spirits and with our spirits that we are the children of God. He must also be a divine person, else He could not search out the secrets which lie hidden in the mind of God.”

The statement alludes to three fundamental questions that must be answered to begin to understand the Holy Spirit and the implications of His personhood: (1) Is the Holy Spirit God? (2) Is the Holy Spirit a person in the Godhead? (3) What is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to God Himself? Though much of the biblical evidence may be familiar to the reader, it nevertheless bears repeating for the sake of our proposal.

1. Is the Holy Spirit God? We must admit that the direct scriptural evidence on this question is scant. This, no doubt, is one key reason that so many sincere believers throughout the history of the Christian church have not been convinced of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Even though Paul’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit may be more central in the New Testament than his doctrine of justification by faith, “the deity of the Father is simply assumed . . . that of the Son is affirmed and argued, while that of the Holy Spirit must be inferred from various indirect statements found in Scripture.”

However, God has left enough evidence for us to understand basic truths. The clearest of these may be the statement by Peter in Acts 5, where he asks deceiving Ananias why he had lied “to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:3) regarding the sale of his land, and then declares, “You have not lied to men, but to God” (vs. 4). For Peter, “lying to the Holy Spirit” and “lying to God” were interchangeable expressions, his point being that Ananias was not merely lying to the apostles of the budding New Testament church, but to God Himself. This is all the more significant considering that Luke wrote his account from the point of view of the mighty acts of the Spirit, as “the promise” of the Father (Luke 24:49) had finally been realized. This critical event in the life of New Israel mirrored that of the old.

The day of Pentecost was known among the Jews as “the day of the giving of the Law,” in reference to when the Law of God, written with the finger of God—or Spirit of God, according to Jesus (compare Matthew 12:28 with Luke 11:20)—was given at Mount Sinai. It was only days later that some in Israel, in spite of experiencing mighty signs and wonders by the covenant God who had shown His superiority over the gods of Egypt, brazenly chose to follow gods of their own making in the form of two golden calves.

In AD. 31, on the Day of Pentecost, “the finger,” or Spirit, of God descended with mighty signs and wonders upon the waiting believers to begin writing God’s law upon their hearts (Acts 2). But just like their predecessors, some, like Ananias and Saphira, chose to make a pretense of following God while their allegiance remained with Mammon. Their fate was the same as that of the 3,000 that fell in the wilderness that day (Acts 5:3–11; Ex. 32:21–28). Why such harsh punishment? Because just as the affront 1,500 years before was shamelessly made before Almighty God, the same happened with the rebellious couple before the same mighty God as before: God the Holy Spirit.

Paul gives another example of interchangeable expressions in 1 Corinthians 3 and 6. In chapter 3:16, he writes, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Three chapters later, he uses almost identical language: “do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you” (6:19). Paul uses the temple of God or the temple of the Holy Spirit interchangeably. “The Holy Spirit is not a mere spirit,” said Martin Luther, “a creature, for example, or something apart from God and yet given to men by Him, or merely the work of God which He performs in our hearts—but that He is a Spirit who Himself is God in essence.”

Jesus also used the words “God” and “Holy Spirit” interchangeably. During the night encounter with Nicodemus, Christ made reference to how possible it was to be born again—a common reference to salvation—by the Spirit, even if the secret disciple considered it impossible, saying: “‘How can these things be?’” (John 3:9). Later in His ministry, when another group of disciples gathered to inquire how it could be that people not expected to be saved could be saved, Jesus responded: “‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’” (Matt. 19:26). Clearly, for Jesus it was
A number of statements in Scripture mention all three members of the Godhead, making Them equal in nature and rank, though not in function. The well-known baptismal formula that was part of the Great Commission states that Christ’s followers must baptize new disciples “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

God who made salvation possible, even as it was the Spirit who made human beings born again. This is because the Holy Spirit is the one with the ability to bring about conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11).

In the Book of Hebrews we find the only biblical reference to “the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14), whereas in the Book of Deuteronomy we find the only biblical reference to “the eternal God” (Deut. 33:27). We shall live. . . . Do not marvel at this; the only biblical reference to “the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14), where as the only biblical reference to “the eternal God” (Deut. 33:27).

In the discourse given on the night of His betrayal, Christ announced the coming of the para- kletos, often translated in English as “Comforter” or “Helper” (John 14:16, 17). Linguistically, this alludes to the “parallel” status the person introduced has with the One introducing Him. This is why Christ referred to the Holy Spirit as “another” Comforter, He being the first the disciples knew. The point to be made here is that Christ would “ask [‘pray’ in the King James Version] the Father” for the Spirit. Just a few minutes earlier, Christ had referred to Himself and His Father as equals (John 5:26). A few years later, Paul echoed Jesus’ words when he wrote, in Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you.” The same Spirit who raised Jesus will raise you and me from the dead because, like God, He too has life in Himself.

The Holy Spirit possesses attributes belonging only to God. He is omnipresent, making the Psalmist exclaim: “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (Ps. 139:7).

Finally, a number of statements in Scripture mention all three members of the Godhead, making Them equal in nature and rank, though not in function. The well-known baptismal formula that was part of the Great Commission states that Christ’s followers must baptize new disciples “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). The formula highlights a single name, not three different ones, making one and all of them of the same substance (hupostasis) as the others. The apostolic blessing of 2 Corinthians 13:14 reveals the same triune God: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”

And the spiritual gifts discourse makes the same point by speaking of “varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 13:5) and varieties of effects, but the same God” (vs. 6). In Peter’s greeting, we find the triune Godhead linked together as before, yet giving hints of their various functions: “Peter, . . . to those who reside as aliens, scattered . . . , who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Peter 1:1, 2).

2. Is the Holy Spirit a Person? The personhood of the Holy Spirit was something that early Adventist pioneers struggled with. Along with anti-Trinitarian views, some thought of the Holy Spirit as less than a person. Long-time church editor and General Conference Secretary Uriah Smith, for example, as late as 1891, described the Holy Spirit as “that divine, mysterious emanation through which they [the Father and the Son] carry forward their great and infinite work.” A year earlier, he had pictured the Spirit to be a “divine influence” and not a “person like the Father and the Son.” The lack of clarity in the Adventist Church regarding the person of the Holy Spirit was the result of a lack of a truly Trinitarian understanding of God. Even Ellen White, quoting the King James Version, kept referring to the Holy Spirit as an “it”
in her writings. However, all that changed by 1898. A new understanding of the nature of Christ and the person of the Spirit made her clearly state that “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived”; and the personal pronoun “He” was used in reference to the Holy Spirit, who was said to be “the Third Person of the Godhead.” The publication of The Desire of Ages propelled a paradigm shift that surprised many and was so skeptical of the changes that he sought to ascertain whether or not this was her own writing. In 1902, after visiting with Ellen White in her Elmshaven home and seeing the manuscript, he was convinced that it said to be “the Third Person of the Godhead.” The publication of The Desire of Ages propelled a paradigm shift that surprised many and was so skeptical of the changes that he sought to ascertain whether or not this was her own writing. In 1902, after visiting with Ellen White in her Elmshaven home and seeing the manuscript, he was convinced that it was so.

Today, the Seventh-day Adventists’ official statement of beliefs clearly states that “the Bible reveals that the Holy Spirit is a person, not an impersonal force.” This is standard Christian doctrine. But Christian theological tradition has never been a good enough reason for Seventh-day Adventists to settle on biblical teachings. What, then, is the Bible evidence for the personhood of the Spirit?

At times, people have viewed the Holy Spirit as an “it,” in part, because the neuter gender for Spirit, both in the original Greek—pneuma—and in English, have contributed to this concept. Romans 8:16 is an example, where the KJV translates the text: “The Spirit itself” (emphasis added). Since pronouns are to agree with their antecedents in person, number, and gender, you would expect the neuter pronoun to be used to represent the Holy Spirit. However, when John the Beloved recorded the words of Jesus, he used the masculine pronoun ekeinos (“he”) when referring to the Holy Spirit. “‘When the Helper comes, . . . that is the Spirit of truth, . . . He will bear witness of Me’” (John 15:26). “‘When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth’” (16:13). “‘I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever’” (14:16). Either John made a consistent grammatical error or he purposely called the Holy Spirit a “he.” Since no similar error is made in the rest of John’s Gospel, we conclude he did it to make a point: Jesus referred to a Person and not a thing. Not much should be made of John’s use of the masculine personal pronoun; his point was not a specific gender but personality.

The Bible also identifies in the Holy Spirit a number of attributes characteristic only of persons. For instance, the Holy Spirit wills. Paul and his companions were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them” (Acts 16:6, 7). In 1 Corinthians 12 we are told, after several gifts of the Spirit are mentioned, that “the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (vs. 11).

Also, the Holy Spirit is said to have a mind. Paul reminds us that “He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is” (Rom. 8:27). Such mind is used by the Spirit to intercede on our behalf “for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes . . . with groanings too deep for words” (vs. 26).

As only persons can, the Spirit gives instruction as well. Paul writes to Timothy: “The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Nehemiah reminisced how God had given Israel His “good Spirit to instruct them” (Neh. 9:20). And Jesus promised His disciples that when facing danger or stress because of Him: “the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:12).

A further characteristic is the fact that the Holy Spirit is capable of feelings. Paul counsels the Ephesians to make sure not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph. 4:30); and Isaiah recalls how Israel had so stubbornly “rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy” (Isa. 63:10).

And the Spirit has influence. Paul assures us that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Jesus promised that “when [the Spirit] comes, [He] will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8).

Finally, only persons can love, and all three members of the Godhead love (see John 3:16; 13:1). Paul appeals to the Romans: “I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit [to pray for me]” (Rom. 15:30). And he had already told them, in Romans 5, that “hope does not disappoint, because...
When Jesus announces the coming of the promised Comforter, He says, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, . . . the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16, 17).

Though we clearly see evidence that the Spirit has and exercises His will, we find in this text that it all depends on the two other members of the Trinity: the Son’s request and the Father’s provision.

the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (5:5).

3. What is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Godhead? Seventh-day Adventists assert that “from eternity, God the Holy Spirit lived within the Godhead as the third member. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are equally self-existent. Though each is equal, an economy of function operates within the Trinity.” In examining this economy of function and the role of the Spirit as the third member of the Godhead, we must keep in mind that there is less explicit revelation in the Bible regarding the Holy Spirit than that regarding the Father and the Son. This is never easy to understand. Though it is true that in the New Testament the Spirit is regarded chiefly in relation to the church and the Christian life, the question of the Spirit’s relation to God can be answered by Scripture.

Whereas the Christological controversies in the early centuries of the Christian era were the result of the dual nature of Christ, the resistance to accepting the Spirit as a person and as fully God stems from His role in the Trinity, this “economy of function.” Is this in Scripture? Though the Bible does not provide a systematic discussion about the Holy Spirit, the closest treatment can be found in Christ’s Passover night dialogue in the Upper Room. There we find striking statements that reveal what appears to be a voluntarily subservient role of the Spirit to the rest of the Trinity.

When Jesus announces the coming of the promised Comforter, He says, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, . . . the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16, 17). Though we clearly see evidence that the Spirit has and exercises His will, we find in this text that it all depends on the two other members of the Trinity: the Son’s request and the Father’s provision. Through the Spirit, Christ indwells His disciples: “In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (vs. 20). Then Christ adds that He will disclose Himself to them then (vs. 21). In fact, the promise is that both Father and Son will come to make Their abode with them (vs. 23), and even though no explicit mention is made about the Spirit being the third Guest in their hearts, it is the Spirit who will aid the disciples in comprehending what He has just said. We find here a clearly subordinate role in the person of the Holy Spirit, even though He is another Spirit, another like the Son.

This in no way should be understood to mean the Spirit is somehow a lesser God than Christ or the Father, but appears to be the Spirit’s role and function in the Godhead, not His status or rank. In chapter 15, the Spirit’s subordinate role appears: “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me” (vs. 26). Finally, in chapter 16, we may find the most clear statements regarding this triune relationship: “When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said, that He takes of Mine, and will disclose it to you” (vss. 13–15).

Just as the Son reveals the Father’s love and character, and just as the Son chooses not to take His own initiative but yields such prerogative to the Father (see John 5:30; 6:38), so does the Spirit in relationship to the Son. The danger here is to harbor a subconscious Arianism that sees the Father and the Son on one plane but the Holy Spirit in a lower, subservient plane because of His function in the plan of salvation, just as Arians’ followers read statements in the Bible pointing to Christ’s subservience to the Father and concluded He could not be fully divine. In fact, in this functional economy, it appears as if the Father is the source, the Son the mediator, and the Spirit the one who applies what God designs to do.

The concept of a plural union within the Godhead that is interactive and mutually submissive is seen even in the passage Jews have used for generations to voice their monotheism: the Shema. “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut. 6:4). The word translated “one” means “one among others, the emphasis being on a particular one.” According to Otto Christensen, “the possibility of there being others in this ‘oneness’ is inherent.” Moses could have used another word to
The same word is used to describe the submissive union between the first pair: “A man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). A match made in heaven who, loving one another supremely, choose to become one.

This concept, as simple as it is, is nevertheless revolutionary, in part because sin has managed to make lonely units out of all of us. However, God had other ideas from the beginning. In every family with more than one child in the home, it becomes obvious to the adults that each young sibling has significantly different philosophical, stylistic, and general ways of approaching life and issues. Even if much of their shared experience is the same, parents soon notice that these two, or three, or four young persons are definitely not alike, though living under the same roof, eating the same food, and originating from the same parents.

If one considers the injunction that God gives to humankind through Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth”’ (Gen. 1:28) simple mathematics leads to the conclusion that it would take at least three children per couple to do so, one in addition to the two it would take to replace themselves.

appropriate, considering the Trinity. The command in verse 28 comes right after we are told that God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (vs. 26) and then corroborated it with: “And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (vs. 27, emphasis supplied). From plurality to singularity and back to plurality again: male and female. This idea is also true in marriage. What do two people find attractive about one another so as to be married? One key attraction is how unlike one another they may be: opposites attract.

Why is this in society? Because it mirrors, in a small and pale way, what it means to live and to love and to be. God, as a solitary one, would not reflect these values as clearly as God can be a union of three persons. And so He wishes for us to experience the same. Since “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and love cannot become a practical reality unless it can be shared with others, God then is Three as One.

The Godhead, then, is a society. Not a group of Gods but a union of three Persons who practice and express perfect love in perfect humility. And why three? Perhaps because with three “there is a dimension of openness and extension not necessarily found in a relationship between two persons,”19 which could be more closed in nature.

There is a divine humility in all this that becomes the more astonishing the more one ponders it. Since God then is a God who is in relationship within Himself first, it follows that He would seek to create in order for others to experience the same. However, the intrinsic presupposition to self-sacrificing love is freedom of exercise, including the freedom to withhold it. Every new creation in the universe becomes a risk. Why does it matter to understand the Holy Spirit as a person in the Godhead? The story of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 gives us a clue: If we don’t understand or refuse to understand that the Holy Spirit is a person in the Godhead, we will tend to treat Him as an “it” and incur our own destruction.

This is why the unpardonable sin is the one committed against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31, 32). For us, the point of contact with God is through the Holy Spirit: “Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence?” (Ps. 139:7). The point
of most immediate contact is not through the Father, and not even through Jesus. Whereas Christ is the sinner’s intercessor as our High Priest in heaven (Heb. 7:17–8:2), the Spirit is our intercessor as parakletos—one like Him—on Earth (Rom. 8:26, 27), in our midst. It is only through the ministry of the Holy Spirit that we can access the efficacy of Christ’s intercessory ministry. Without Him it would be impossible even to understand or accept Christ as our Savior and Lord.

If we treat the Holy Spirit as an “it,” a mere emanation or influence devoid of personality and will, we find it especially easy to ignore Him, to lend deaf ears to His voice and invitation to leave self behind and abandon it to the hands of a God with whom all things are possible.

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now. Donald Williams has pointed out that the reason for this is because “there is no conflict between submission and equality.”

The Christian God—three in one—is completely different from the gods in the Olympic pantheon or the Nordic tales. The gods with “the small g engaged in constant warfare one with another. They each had an individual will and plan and clearly were not of one purpose. They each had their pride and their turf to protect. Such gods remind us of the conflict and pride that existed among those who wrangle and push one with another. They each had an individual will and plan and wished to preach in Asia and twice were prevented from doing so by the Spirit, they ended up in Macedonia instead, “concluding that God [notice, the Spirit here is called God] had called [them] to preach [there]” (16:10).

Such open interaction can be achieved only among persons who love and respect one another. The Spirit is much more than an impression in Paul’s mind. He is his constant Guide. When the glorified Jesus in Revelation addresses the churches in Asia through the Holy Spirit, He admonishes seven times to pay attention to “what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The warnings and counsels by the Spirit to the churches presuppose an established relationship. One can have such relationships only with persons. To recognize the voice of the Spirit means believers have spent enough time listening to such a voice. He is not a heavenly ghost—the Spirit speaks so we can listen.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


9. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible.


15. Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . ., p. 70.

16. Ibid., p. 71, italics supplied.


18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., p. 59.


When God literally dwelt in the midst of His people, they enjoyed a system of governance based on timeless corporate values.

In ancient Israel, the Lord governed His people from His sanctuary, which served as the headquarters of His administration at the center of Israelite life and worship. The ways in which God’s presence interacted with His people there teach us enduring principles for success that apply to His “new covenant” church community as He guides, unifies, and empowers it to reveal Himself to the world. There are at least 15 of these principles.

1. Do Not Take God for Granted.
When Aaron and his sons inaugurated worship at the sanctuary by performing their first priestly offices, the Lord’s glory appeared, and He consumed the sacrifices with fire to complete His acceptance of the sanctuary (Lev. 9:23, 24). Somewhat similarly, the Sumerian Cylinder B of the ruler Gudea describes inauguration festivities when the god Ningirsu and his consort Baba, as represented by their idols, were settled into their new temple. Their entrance was accompanied by offerings, as well as purification and divination procedures. Gudea presented “house-warming gifts” to the divine couple (cf. Numbers 7), prepared a banquet for Ningirsu, and offered animal sacrifices. 1

Comparison between the Israelite and Sumerian procedures yields a stunning contrast. The protocol for Ningirsu and Baba followed the standard ancient Near Eastern pattern: Installation of deities, represented by images, was part of a ritual process carried out by human beings. But Israel’s deity moved Himself, not His image, into His tabernacle before any consecration or inauguration rituals were performed (Ex. 40:34, 35) to rule out the possibility that anyone could think that humans had moved Him in! By implication, of course, He could also leave on His own if He chose to do so because His people rejected Him (Eze. 9–11). God wants to be with His people (Ex. 25:8), but they should never take Him for granted.

2. Make God the Unifying Center of His Community.
Our modern culture revels in personal independence. Commercials from all directions reinforce what we already know: We are the center of the universe, and our desires govern it.

The second chapter of the Book of Numbers, however, disagrees with our egocentric worldview. In the Israelite camp, the Lord spatially demonstrated the only proper place of the Most High: at the center. The wilderness war camp formed a hollow square, with the tabernacle of the divine Presence in the middle. He was the Source of strength, the “nuclear reactor.” God’s people were not islands of destiny, but a community under God, with each individual and every subgroup fully accountable to Him.

At the center of ancient Israelite life and worship was holy fire. At its core, the religion of God’s people was not a social club, political bloc, or system of dogma. It was an ongoing encounter with the divine. For this experience to continue, the “pilot light” had to remain lit (Lev. 6:8-13 [Hebrew vss. 1-6]). Sparks of any other kindling were ruled out. God’s response to Nadab and Abihu’s unauthorized fire (Lev. 10:1, 2) showed for all time what He thought of that approach, which puts humanity in place of God at the center of worship.

As in Old Testament times, God’s
ministers of the 21st century A.D. are to be keepers of the flame and teachers of instruction (Torah) from the Lord, not lighters of the fire and inventors of their own doctrines. Like the Olympic torch, God’s gospel fire is to be relayed around the world in all kinds of ways, but it must come from the source—the sacred, eternal flame.

3. Worship God in His Way.

In the Book of Leviticus, God instructed the Israelites how to approach Him in worship at His sanctuary. Because the Lord is the superior party, He controls protocols of interaction with Him. Unlike Cain’s vegetables (Gen. 4) or the Israelites’ golden calf (Ex. 32), our worship should approach God according to His principles so that He will want what we have to offer.

Divine principles of worship allow for tremendous variety, including cultural diversity. The Psalmist’s “joyful noise” (e.g., Ps. 95:1, 2; 98:4-6) is as legitimate as Habakkuk’s silence (Hab. 2:20). However, usurping divine prerogatives, failing to exalt God as the supreme center of our worship, or misrepresenting Him by violating instructions for religious practice that He has specified constitute serious problems.

For example, after Gideon’s divinely empowered military victory, he made a golden ephod, which was a garment worn by priests (Judg. 8:27; Ex. 28:6-14). It was not long before this unauthorized instrument of worship became the object of worship, an idol. The medium overpowered the message. Once people focused on the instrument more than on God, they lost sight of Him, and it was easy to switch gods and turn to Baal worship (Judg. 8:33, 34).

What happens when church buildings, liturgies, music and musicians, sermons, and ministers of the gospel become the focus of attention? All of these may be wonderful and legitimate by themselves, testifying to the quality of that which they honor. Indeed, God Himself is the founder of fine aesthetics. According to the Book of Exodus, it was He who directed the Israelites to make gorgeous high priestly vestments and a magnificent tabernacle for impressive ceremonies (cf. Ecclus 50:5-21). But how do the infrastructure and procedures of our worship shape attitudes toward God, who should be at the center? True worship is like the ministry of John the Baptist, who said of Christ: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30, NKJV).

4. Follow God’s Leading.

For the Israelites in the wilderness to be with God’s resident presence, they had to move with Him. It was no use lingering to venerate the spot where He had been or running ahead to be where He might go next. The important thing was to know where His cloud was and to follow it (Num. 9:17-22; 10:11-13). God’s leadership calls for readiness to move at any time, and also patience to stay put until He directs otherwise.

It is not that divine leading is a shortcut to do away with decisions and risks. “Indeed, God wants us to develop good judgment, and there is no way to develop it apart from a process that involves choices and risks.” But His guidance serves as a Global Positioning System, a dynamic reference point and framework for navigating the challenges of the way.

The Lord doesn’t merely give His people a detailed map of their journey; He Himself is their map. To avoid getting lost, we can find out where God is leading and follow Him. Although we have no visible divine cloud to follow, we can discern His will through a combination of avenues, such as His Spirit (including His Spirit of Prophecy), our consciences, the Bible, providence, and balanced counsel from mature believers.

5. Cooperate With God in an Orderly, Efficient Manner.

The census and organization of Numbers 1–2 were important steps to make a mob of ex-slaves into a focused, disciplined, conquering army. Around the fully functioning sanctuary of the divine King at the core of the war camp, every able-bodied man was in his place and accounted for. All was in order for efficient and effective deployment.

God provided all the order, efficiency, and power the Israelites needed, and to Him went the glory for every victory, but He did not do for them what they could and should do. Canaan was His gift to them, but they could receive it only if they would go up and take it. When they did go up, they needed careful strategy and precise execution of plans to get the most “shock for the shekel.” Today, as at Jericho and Ai (Joshua 6–8), confidence in superior numbers leads to sloppy arrogance, but victory comes through cooperation with the Lord, who empowers fully utilized and
As in the days of the apostles, social and administrative problems can drain the time and energy of modern pastors so that they have little left for crucial spiritual leadership. Why not return to the early Christian solution by resuscitating the original job description of deacons? They were administrators and social conflict managers, not simply ushers. As such, they freed spiritual leaders to lead spiritually.

6. Value Every Contribution to the Lord’s Work.

At the ancient Israelite sanctuary, the Levites did what appeared to be menial labor: maintenance, guarding, packing, and hauling (Num. 3–4). But all of it was honorable and vitally important because it was for the divine King. Similarly, the smallest and most insignificant task that contributes to God’s work today is important: cleaning the church, changing its light bulbs, preparing food for a social event, visiting a sick person, teaching a Scripture song to a child, encouraging a neighbor, and so on.

Just as Levites were specially set apart to do tasks for the benefit of the priests and the Israelite community (Num. 3:6, 7; 8:5-22), deacons were set apart to serve the Christian community by doing administrative tasks so that the apostles could be free for spiritual leadership (Acts 6:1-6), devoting themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (vs. 4, NKJV). Just as the dedication of Levites involved laying hands on them before the Lord and standing them before the priests (Num. 8:10, 13), when the Christians chose deacons, “they presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6, NIV).

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7. Touch Those in Need Without Fear of Contamination.

Leviticus 11:29-38 lists eight crawlies and creepies, including several kinds of lizards, and then proceeds to describe how their carcasses defile all kinds of nonhuman objects. However, verse 36 says: “A spring, however, or a cistern for collecting water remains clean” (NIV). A source of purity cannot be made impure. This principle explains how Jesus could touch lepers and a woman with an impure hemorrage in order to heal them, without becoming impure Himself (Matt. 8:2, 3; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48).

Although God is the ultimate Source of purity and life, Christ makes His followers into secondary sources. Jesus said: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38, NIV). Thus, His disciples performed miracles of healing and deliverance as He did (Matt. 10:1, 8; Luke 10:9, 17; Acts 3:1-10; 9:36-42; 16:16-18; 19:11, 12). When God’s people are sources of His purity and healing in the world, they do not need to worry about being defiled as they mingle with those in need.

8. Motivate and Mentor God’s People to Success.

At the beginning of Israel’s history as an independent nation, the Lord employed several strategies to turn His people into a winning team:

First, He showed that He was a winner. By defeating Egypt (Exodus 7–14), He showed the Israelites that if they were on His team, they would be winners, too.

In simple ways regarding practical matters such as food, water, and physical security, God emphasized the foundational principle that winning comes through trust in Him.

The Lord tested His people over their basic lessons by giving them opportunities to demonstrate what they had learned (e.g., Ex. 15:25—at Marah “he tested them”).

When the Israelites flunked a test, God repeated it until they could pass. Thus, they encountered lack of drinkable water at Marah (15:23), Rephidim (17:1), Kadesh (Num. 20:1, 2), and on the Red Sea road detour around Edom (21:4, 5). Each time they faithlessly grumbled. Finally, at Beer they trusted the Lord (vss. 16-18). At Kadesh they refused to go with God into Canaan and then tried to take it by themselves, as a result of which they were driven back as far as Hormah (Numbers 14). Decades later they came back to Kadesh (20:1) and were tested by an attack from the king of Arad, which became Hormah, but this time they relied on God and won (21:1-3).


Dwight L. Moody understood the
value of delegating. He said, “I’d rather get ten men to do the job than to do the job of ten men.” God delegated Moses to run a nation, and Moses in turn had to delegate, although this was not always easy for him. Jethro found him trying to do the job of 10 men and urged him to appoint judges, which he did (Ex. 18:13–26). The Lord found him crushed by the burden of leading the people and instructed him to choose 70 elders, which he also did (Numbers 11).

Theodore Roosevelt said: “The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.” This is what Moses did. When he assigned a job, he delegated the authority necessary to accomplish it. He did not over-manage by hovering over and interfering with his subordinates, but he expected and demanded that tasks be done right for the sake of God and Israel. The leadership style of God through Moses teaches us that while we are bound for our promised paradise, we are not to hoard tasks or the authority that goes with them, but to pass them on.

10. Teach Wisely as God Does.

In Numbers 9:1-14 we see several aspects of God’s character at work. First, He took the trouble to remind the Israelites that Passover was coming again. Second, He was flexible in His requirement to observe the festival, bending the religious calendar for those who were stuck in a dilemma because of their unavoidable impurity. Third, He was generous and farsighted, going beyond the immediate need by also providing for people on long trips to celebrate Passover at a later date. Fourth, He was economical, setting up ongoing rules as answers to similar questions in the future. Fifth, He was not susceptible to manipulation, but emphasized that exceptions applied only to those who actually needed them. Sixth, He allowed guests (non-Israelites) to participate, as long as they followed the same rules as everyone else.

In short, the Lord sounds like a wise and well-balanced teacher! He is caring, recognizing the weaknesses and challenging circumstances of His “students.” He is reasonable and fair, but firm about extending deadlines listed in His “syllabus.” He foresees potential problems and systematically pre-empts them in advance. Finally, He lets “auditors” experience the “class” if they are serious about it and do not disrupt things by irregular behavior. Here in Numbers 9 we learn about God’s effective “teaching style,” which would tend to encourage His “students” to remain committed to His “class.”

Whether we are raising our own children, teaching, ministering, administering, interacting with others at work, or socializing, we would do well to follow God’s model. Are we considerate, flexible, reasonable, fair, patient, farsighted, generous, organized, economical, and firm as He is? Do we give second chances, as He extended another opportunity for the redemption that Passover symbolized to those whose life journeys had taken them far away from home (cf. the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-24)?

11. Encourage and Protect Leaders.

In the Bible the Lord was hard on some kinds of people, but He was remarkably gentle and encouraging to stressed and burned-out leaders. For instance, at Kibroth-hattaavah, God did not berate Moses for his negative reaction to complaints. Instead, He addressed the problems that had brought undue pressure to bear on Israel’s human leader (Numbers 11).

The Lord expects His people to follow His example in supporting their leaders. Privilege and influence carried responsibility not only for Israelite leaders but also for members of their families to present rightly the Lord’s character to the people. Any PK (priest’s kid) was supposed to be exemplary, much like a preacher’s or politician’s kid today. Failure of a child would harm the influence of his or her father (e.g., Lev. 21:9—“she profanes her father” [NASB]). So the spirit of the exhortation in Leviticus 21:8 for the Israelites to respect the holiness of priests would include the idea that laypeople should help all members of priestly families bear the burden of exemplary living. Don’t undermine their distinctiveness out of envy in order to lower them to your level, whether by unjust criticism, competition, ridicule, deception, or obstruction. Attempting to destroy
Racism is natural in a sinful world and respects no boundaries. It preys on any racial group in the world and can quietly flourish and spread like leprosy under the beautiful surface of a Christian business, school, or church. Combating it requires continual vigilance by everyone. Anyone who claims to be exempt from the potential of a problem in this regard should read Numbers 12:1-10, where even Miriam and Aaron failed.

12. Respect and Value God’s Children of All Races.

The fact that Moses’ wife is described as “Cushite” (Ethiopian) only in the context of derogatory talk regarding her by Miriam and Aaron (Num. 12:1) suggests that they looked down on her for having darker skin (cf. Song of Sol. 1:6). While a racial slur was only on the “skin” of an underlying issue of status and control, the Lord’s punishment of Miriam indicates that He took her xenophobia very seriously by making her skin flaky and/or ghastly white (Num. 12:10). It is as though He were saying to her: “Miriam, if you can’t get used to the idea that dark is beautiful, see if you like your own skin—which pales by comparison!” After wishing to exclude Moses’ wife socially, Miriam herself was physically excluded from the Israelite camp.° God’s devastating reaction implies that He regards such an attitude as intolerable moral “leprosy.”

As in the story of Miriam and Aaron, racism is always about status and control, and it is always an insult to God. Putting others down for their intrinsic genetic nature has the goal of boosting oneself and implies that God makes inferior products in His image (cf. Gen. 1:26). Racism is a grossly unfair low blow for exactly the same reason that it is attractive to those who are attempting to get, or maintain, the upper hand at any cost: People are born with their race and cannot change it.

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No doubt Moses’ wife would have endorsed the ideal articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

13. Keep Church Problems “In-house.”

God intended for non-Israelites, such as Balaam and the Moabites, to know and respect His blessing on the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:2, 3; Num. 22:12).° Even though the Israelites had given their beneficent Deity a hard time, many individuals had lost out on the benefits of the covenant due to their disobedience, and those who remained were still far from perfect, God’s plan to fulfill the divine promises to and through His corporate chosen people was unshaken and unshakeable.

The imperfections of the Israelites were between them and God. Though He disciplined them within their corporate boundaries, He did not air their “dirty laundry” in front of people from other nations, such as Balaam and Balak (Numbers 22–24). To non-Israelites He showed only monolithic solidarity with those He protected as His special possession. To attack them was to assault God.

The Lord’s firm resolve to bless the children of Abraham is also for Christians, who are “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29, NASB). Since God’s people are a channel of divine blessing to the world, it is to the benefit of others to accept them and counterproductive to reject them. It is also counterproductive and contrary to God’s example for His people to open up their problems unnecessarily to the outside world (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

14. Faithfully Carry Out Discipline When Necessary.

When it comes to the deceptive inroads of apostasy into the church,
In an emergency, when God’s people are in imminent danger of losing their connection with Him, it may take the swift, accurately focused, decisive leadership of a faithful and wise (not fanatical and unbalanced) person to spearhead a defense. We are not living under a theocracy that metes out capital punishment, so a modern Phinehas must make his or her point verbally rather than with a literal spear.

Christians may need to face some corporate core conflicts head-on, as Phinehas did in Numbers 25. When Jesus drove out those engaged in business at the temple, “His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’” (John 2:17, NIV). The rest of the verse from Psalms cited here reads: “and the insults of those who insult you fall on me” (Ps. 69:9 [Hebrew vs. 10]). Like zealous Phinehas, Christ identified with God to the extent that there was no difference between defending the Lord’s honor and that of Himself.

In an emergency, when God’s people are in imminent danger of losing their connection with Him, it may take the swift, accurately focused, decisive leadership of a faithful and wise (not fanatical and unbalanced) person to spearhead a defense. We are not living under a theocracy that metes out capital punishment, so a modern Phinehas must make his or her point verbally rather than with a literal spear. But there may be occasions that call for removing flagrant sinners from membership in the church (dismembering, not disfellowshipping) so that the Lord’s reputation, people, and work can be preserved (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5).

15. Maintain Loyalty to God.

At the Israelite sanctuary, the Lord provided ritual remedies for the imperfections of His people as long as they were loyal to Him. If they defied Him, however, spurned His remedies, or failed to demonstrate loyalty on the Day of Atonement, they were condemned (Lev. 23:29, 30; Num. 15:30, 31; 19:13, 20).

God does not reserve salvation for perfect people who have never sinned. It is too late for that because all have already sinned (Rom. 3:23). He knows that His people are faulty: mortal, weak, prone to fall, and unable to make themselves perfect. So He does not judge them simply on the basis of whether or not they have faults. Rather, what He requires is loyalty to Himself, the only one who can heal their faultiness. Loyalty is a matter of relationship, not merely of performance. Obviously, what we do to other people or to God reveals our attitudes in ways that help to shape our relationships with them, but the focus is on the health of the relationship.

By examining ways in which the Lord interacted with the ancient Israelites from His sanctuary headquarters, we have found a number of enduring principles for success that apply to our modern Christian faith community: Do not take God for granted. Make God the unifying center of His community. Worship God in His way. Follow God’s leading. Cooperate with God in an orderly, efficient manner. Value every contribution to the Lord’s work. Touch those who are in need without fear of contamination. Motivate and mentor God’s people to success. Delegate responsibility rather than hoard it. Teach wisely as God does. Encourage and protect leaders. Respect and value God’s children of other races. Keep church problems “in-house.” Faithfully carry out discipline when necessary. Maintain loyalty to God.

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Bangalore, India, a division president pointed out that in his part of the world, women members far outnumber the men. He stated that women in the church who wanted to marry would have to marry non-Adventists simply because there weren’t enough men in the church to go around. And the Minister’s Handbook now merely urges Adventist ministers not to perform weddings between members and nonmembers. Adventists are becoming increasingly open to interfaith marriages. To refuse to marry a non-Adventist to an Adventist, as one pastor recently put it, “is religious bigotry.”

A few years ago, a former Bible instructor who subsequently graduated in theology wrote of what she calls her “Martin Luther experience.” She describes her “unusual calling” from God that, she feels, came to her in a dream about being in love with another woman. She became involved with this woman, who was studying to become an Adventist, describing this love as something that “felt right in a way that transcends moral argument.”

And in the mid-1980s, a leading Seventh-day Adventist ethicist suggested that Adventist Christians should encourage homosexuals who do not believe they can change to live together in faithful homo-
The Pattern Established in Eden

The Book of Genesis provides a concrete account of the institution of marriage. The first two chapters of the Bible deal directly with the question of human sexuality. These opening chapters of Scripture are determinative for a biblical theology of sexuality, since here the pattern is established and pronounced “very good” (Gen. 1:31, NASB) by God Himself.

“Foundational to a Christian understanding of sexuality is God’s plan in creation found in Genesis 1 and 2.” Though some information is to be found in Genesis 1, most of the data relating to marital form appears in chapter 2. The passages that specifically relate to the institution of the first marriage are located in Genesis 1:27, 28; 2:18, 21-24:

“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth. . . .’

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him. . . .’

“So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh at that place. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. And the man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.’

Various biblical scholars have analyzed these passages and have come to several conclusions regarding the essence and meaning of marriage. Before addressing the actual form of the original marriage, the question as to whether marriage is simply a social custom or a fundamental divine institution must be considered.

The Originator of Marriage

Some have posited that marriage is merely a societal or secular institution, or one of the options in Western culture. J. S. Wright and J. A. Thomp-son give the following definition: “Marriage is the state in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship with the approval of their social group.” If this is so, then whatever form of marriage a society approves, whether monogamous or polygamous, heterosexual or homosexual, infrafaith or interfaith, must be considered acceptable.

Beyond being simply a sexual relationship approved by society, however, marriage in the first chapters of Genesis involves a divine dimension. Genesis 1:27 says that God created them, “male and female,” and charged them to be “fruitful and multiply” (verse 28). This conjugal relationship is explained further in the following chapter. Genesis 2:18 records the words of God: “I will make him a helper.” In other words, it was God who decided to create “a suitable companion” (vs. 18, TEV) for the man. Then, it was God who “brought her to the man” (vs. 22) to be his wife. Thus, both passages specifically state that God is the originator of the marriage relationship.

Clearly, God was the creator of this union. He was the one who instituted marriage in the beginning. Samuel Dresner notes that “the Midrash suggests that God Himself performed the first wedding ceremony for Adam and Eve.” As Ellen White observed, “God celebrated the first marriage. Thus the institution has for its originator the Creator of the universe.”

The Number of Partners

From Genesis 2:21-24 it becomes clear that this marriage took place between one man and one woman. The repeated use of singular nouns and pronouns in this passage is noteworthy: God decides to make “a helper” for “the man” (vs. 18); He selects “one” rib from “the man” (vs. 21), and fashions it into “a woman” whom He then takes to “the man” (vs. 22); “the man” says that “she shall be called Woman” (vs. 23); thus, “a man” leaves his parents and is joined to “his wife” (vs. 24). In this distinct

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“This first marriage is an example of what all marriages should be. God gave the man one wife. Had he deemed it best for man to have more than one wife, he could as easily have given him two; but he sanctioned no such thing.”

way the original marital form can be seen to be monogamous.

Wright and Thompson correctly note that “monogamy is implicit in the story of Adam and Eve, since God created only one wife for Adam.”

“Even Eugene Hillman, who attempts to prove that polygamy was legitimate according to Mosaic Law, admits that “if we accept it as divinely revealed truth that our species started from only one pair of human beings, then certainly the original marriage must have been monogamous.”

“This first marriage is an example of what all marriages should be. God gave the man one wife. Had he deemed it best for man to have more than one wife, he could as easily have given him two; but he sanctioned no such thing.”

“The Gender Issue

From both Genesis 1 and 2 it becomes plain that this marriage took place between two people of the opposite sex. The repeated use of contrasting gender terms illustrates this: God creates a “male” and a “female” and charges them to be fruitful (1:27, 28); He fashions the rib He took from the “man” into a “woman,” and then takes “her” to the “man” (2:22); the man calls her “woman” because she was taken out of “man” (vs. 23); thus a “man” leaves his parents and is joined to his “wife” (vs. 24). In this well-defined manner it can be easily noted that the original marital form was heterosexual.

The obvious complementary anatomical differences serve to further illustrate this point. Further, the fact that the commission to “multiply” (Gen.1:28) can be fulfilled only by means of people of the opposite gender additionally supports this view that God’s original pattern for matrimony was decisively heterosexual.

In commenting on the first biblical passage concerning the creation of the human species (Gen. 1:27), Dresner recognizes the fact that “heterosexuality is at once proclaimed to be the order of creation.” Greg Bahnsen is much more direct, noting that the creation account reveals that sex is to take place only within the context of a marriage that is “exclusively heterosexual in nature.”

The Faith Factor

Though the concepts of monogamy and heterosexuality can be seen quite plainly from the text of Genesis, the issue of the similarity of the religious faith of the marriage partners requires a deeper search.

Genesis 2:18 records God’s words: “I will make him a helper suitable for him.” Other biblical versions: “I shall make a partner suited to him” (REB); “a suitable companion” (TEV). These Bible versions better capture the true essence of the Hebrew term kenegdô, which means a “counterpart,” one “corresponding to him.” Obviously, for Eve to be a truly suitable partner to Adam, she had to have the same basic faith perspective as her spouse. Studies by Umberto Cassuto and others appear to bear out this contention that the Bible indicates a compatibility of ethical and religious beliefs as part of the original marital pattern. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary suggests that the context of Genesis 2:18 shows that the woman is to be a partner with the man in the areas of both family and worship.

A second passage in the Creation story that suggests this indispensable religious concord is located in Genesis 2:24. The man and woman are to cleave to each other and become “one flesh.” This is a covenant partnership, a mutual dependence and a genuine reciprocity in all areas of life, which is impossible for two who hold differing religious convictions.

Ellen White consistently spoke out against marriage between an unbeliever and a believer, which she defined as one who has “accepted the truth for this time.” She described these interfaith marriages as forbidden by God and prohibited in the Bible. Thus, she admonished that it is better to remain unmarried than to violate God’s clearly revealed will.

What significance does this first marital pattern have for believers? Is it merely a desirable, yet optional model? Is it simply an ideal? Or is this first marriage to be viewed as an unchanging standard, a biblical mandate?

Significance of the First Marriage

The passage in Genesis 2:24, which forms the closing statement about the first marriage, begins with a Hebrew term that the New American Standard Bible interprets as “for this cause.” Several other English Bibles render it “therefore.” The writer of the Pentateuch frequently utilized this concept when making explanatory statements about an occurrence. This happened when people or place names were being identified.

More important, this usage also occurs in passages in which the

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writer explains the reason behind the observance of certain regulations and laws. In the fourth commandment, for example, “On the seventh day of creation he rested; for this reason . . . he ordered that the sabbath should be observed.” Genesis 2:24 is similarly structured. “The initial ‘therefore’, in fact, certifies beyond any doubt that [the inspired Bible writer] intends here to explain something.” Thus, Angelo Tosato concludes that this passage “speaks of marriage in a normative way.”

Other scholars have likewise noticed the significance of “therefore,” or “for this reason,” in Genesis 2:24. Nahum Sarna states that this term introduces an observation on the part of the writer in which some fundamental aspects of the marital relationship are traced to God’s original creative act and seen as part of the ordained natural order. Similarly, Herbert Ryle recognizes that this sentence beginning with ‘therefore’ supplies the application, or relation, of the ancient narrative to later times. Thus, it appears that just as God had instituted the monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith marriage of the first parents of the human race, He intends that this pattern be normative for marital relationships for the rest of humanity for all time.

The significance of this first marriage is further underscored by the grammar of Genesis 2:24. The first verb, “he will leave,” is rendered, as the Revised Standard Version (RSV) has it, as something occurring customarily: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” However, the Hebrew can also be interpreted to express actions to be repeated in the future, as the several versions put it: American Standard Version (ASV) puts it: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (see also ASV, KJV, NIV, NKJV, NASB).

This form may also be used to express a command, informing people of what ought or ought not to be done. Genesis 2:24 could thus be legitimately translated: “Therefore a man should leave his father and mother, and cling to his wife, and they should become one flesh.” The verse can be interpreted as God’s direct intention. Since this text begins with the introductory term therefore, the Hebrew imperfect would be more faithfully translated as expressing a command, thus indicating that here a standard is being set, a norm established, a mandate given by God Himself.

Even though these words in Genesis 2:24 were evidently penned by a human being, since they are the utterance of divine revelation, “Christ could quote them, therefore, as the word of God (Matt. xix. 5).” Therefore, since it is a clear expression of God’s will, this statement is of great import for all.

Gordon Wenham correctly understands this verse as “applying the principles of the first marriage to every subsequent marriage.” According to Sereno Dwight: “This is the Great Original Law of Marriage binding on the whole human family.”

Speaking about this first marriage, Ellen White said: “God gave to Adam one wife—showing to all who should live upon the earth, his order and law in that respect.” Thus, this first monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith marriage becomes the only acceptable biblical pattern and model for all marital unions.

The Model Evident at the Flood

It is also instructive to consider the marital structure evident during the second “beginning” of this world: the story of Noah and the flood. Even though a considerable amount of Genesis is devoted to the story of the worldwide deluge, it is apparent that not much is directly recorded about the marital status of those involved in the narrative. The few facts that are mentioned, however, suggest careful examination.

Genesis 6:1-4, 11-13 describes the corruption of the antediluvians: “It came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whom ever they chose. Then the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown. . . . Now the earth was corrupted in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked on the earth, and beheld, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.
“The Sodomitish practices which brought the judgment of God upon the world, and caused it to be deluged with water, and which caused Sodom to be destroyed by fire, are fast increasing.” In brief, the violation of the marital norm of heterosexuality was one of the reasons for the Genesis flood.

Then God said to Noah, ‘the end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.’ (Gen. 6:13)

The Genesis record is clear not only that “Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (vs. 8), but that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God” (vs. 10). When God decided to destroy the Earth with a flood because of its corruption, God called upon Noah to build an ark to preserve animals and human beings. The record simply states that, when the ark and all the necessary preparations had been made, “Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons with them, entered the ark” (7:13). That there were precisely eight persons saved in the ark is clear from both Old and New Testaments (Gen. 7:13; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5).

Some have said that one of the contributing factors to the depravity of humanity was the practice of polygamy. Others have disagreed.

The phrase in contention appears in Genesis 6:2, which reads literally, “They took wives for themselves, whomever they chose.” Most versions render this clause similarly. Robert Jamieson remarks, “the phrase ‘took them wives of all which they chose’ evidently implies something very different from the simple exercise of a free choice” and concludes that this phrase indicates the practice of polygamy. Understanding is clear in the Jerusalem Bible: “They married as many as they chose,” and this translation appears to be a legitimate rendering of the passage under consideration.

Other biblical scholars also understand this phrase as a reference to polygamy. And Dwight goes a step further: “The fact that Polygamy became general, or that men took them wives of all whom they chose, is here obviously assigned as the cause of that universal corruption and violence, which occasioned the Deluge.”

Ellen White understood this passage similarly: “When men began to multiply upon the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, they took them wives of all which they chose. This was one of the great sins of the inhabitants of the old world, which brought the wrath of God upon them. This custom was practiced after the Flood, and became so common that even righteous men fell into the practice and had a plurality of wives.”

The scriptural account reveals that the marriages of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth were all monogamous unions at the time of the Flood (Gen. 7:13).

On the contrary, polygamists were judged and destroyed by the Flood. Ellen White highlights this by discussing Noah’s monogamous marriage and his preservation in the ark in contrast to polygamy. In fact, she notes that these antediluvians “would not leave off their sins, but continued in polygamy,” and were thus exterminated. Thus, God’s direct judgment of polygamy—by means of the Flood, and not saving polygamous couples in the ark—makes plain His will concerning the number of partners in a marriage.

Genesis 6:12 is an additional key verse concerning marital structures at the time of the universal deluge, noting that “all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.” Dresner notes that the ancient rabbis interpreted the “flesh” corrupting its “way” as a reference to homosexual-
Jesus says that angels do not marry, which would contradict Genesis 6:2, 4 if that passage were talking about angels. This is especially true since the text utilizes the usual expression for marriage. John Willis adds: “If indeed angels were intended by the author, then one is hard put to explain why God did not become grieved with them and destroy them rather than mankind.”

Considerable evidence indicates, however, that it is preferable to interpret the “sons of God” as referring to human beings rather than angels.

John T. Willis theorizes that sons of God could be merely men who called on the name of the Lord or who walked with God. He points out that both the Old and New Testaments frequently refer to God’s people as “sons of God.” He further suggests that the daughters of men might be women who are worldly- or materialistically-minded, such as those who are frequently condemned in Scripture.

Similarly, H. C. Leupold, after citing several texts, states that Hosea 1:10 “is, if anything, a still stronger passage, saying specifically to Israel, ‘Ye are sons of the living God.’” He asserts that the Sethites described in Genesis 5 as having among them men who walked with God were men who worshipped God.

In the very next verse, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen. 6:3), God expresses His divine response of judgment on the people because of their mixed marriages noted in verse 2. This confirms the notion that these sons of God are indeed human beings. This interpretation makes the most sense, since it was humankind that suffered the destruction of the devastating deluge, and not angels.

Based on the textual evidence, there is no reason not to interpret “sons of God” in Genesis 6 as men. Indeed, this understanding is preferred in the setting of the passage.

Taking this study of the illegitimate marriage between the righteous and the wicked one step further, Victor Hamilton remarks: “The sin, then, is a forbidden union, a yoking of what God intended to keep apart, the intermarriage of believer with unbeliever. . . . The order of the two remaining verses [3 and 4] . . . is interesting. That is, the word about the divine displeasure comes between the cohabitation scene (v. 2) and the reference to the children produced by the unions (v. 4). By placing the verse where it is, the author is making the point that this forbidden union itself is offensive to Yahweh, rather than the fact that such a union produced (hybrid) offspring.”

Analogously, Ronald Youngblood has explained that the action of these men of God to intermarry with Cain’s wicked lineage resulted in the judgment from the Lord by means of the deluge. Ellen White hints at the same situation when she notes that the righteous descendants of Seth displeased God by intermarrying with the idolatrous Cainites.

In contradistinction to those who were destroyed by the Flood, it seems clear that each of the four couples saved in the ark had a monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith marriage. “Noah had but one wife, and their united family discipline was blessed of God. Because Noah’s sons were righteous, they were preserved in the ark with their righteous father.”

Apparently, by preserving in the ark only those who were not involved in polygamous, homosexual, or interfaith conjugal relationships, God was conveying His divine approval on the marital pattern that He had originally established in Eden.

When the Flood waters subsided, “Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him” (Gen. 8:18). Here was the beginning of the new world, with Noah as the second founder of the human race.

“Yahweh, so to speak, set about doing his work all over again. Noah became the new ‘first man’ and, like Adam, ‘walked with God’ (vi.9). This creation was an explicit covenant (ix.9) and God gave a renewed blessing to the marriage of the new ‘first man and woman’ (ix.7).”

The identical charge that God gave to the world’s first couple, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28), He now repeated to Noah and his sons (9:1), all of whose marriages complied with God’s original standard. In accepting these monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith couples to be the progenitors of the new race on Earth, God was in a sense repeating history.

It would be well for all Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, to promote and reemphasize God’s original standard and pattern for marriage—that everyone needs to abstain from all polygamous, homosexual, interfaith sexual alliances, and to uphold the God-given marital mandate as established in Eden: monogamous, heterosexual, intrafaith conjugal relationships.

“Heaven looks with pleasure upon a marriage formed with an earnest desire to conform to the directions given in the Scripture.”

REFERENCES
4 Ibid., p. 231.
6 Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references in this article are taken from the New American Standard Bible.
From a careful reading of the first book in Scripture, it is clear that God intended the Sabbath to be the crowning event of the Creation week.

The seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, plays a dominant role in the first Creation story (Gen. 1:1–2:4). The first Genesis creation account is written in a beautiful literary structure that naturally falls into seven parts, according to the seven days of creation.

This literary structure is built around two Hebrew nouns. One of these designates “without form” or “formlessness.” The other denotes “void,” “empty,” or “emptiness.” Both are found in the second verse of Genesis 1: “The earth was formless and empty” (NIV). Each of these two crucial expressions draws to itself a cluster of three creation days. The “forming” idea is closely linked with the first three days, when God created light and various spaces, represented by the left column in the table on page 46. The “filling” process, which appears in the right column, involves the next three creation days. Thus, three pairs of days are formed—first and fourth, second and fifth, and third and sixth—which correspond to one...

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another and parallel one another. The first, second, and third days are related to the forming activity of God; the fourth, fifth, and sixth days are related to the filling activity of God. This literary structure demonstrates the beauty, balance, and unity of the biblical text.

God first created space, and then He filled it with inhabitants. On the first day, God created light, and on the fourth day, He put lights or luminaries (Sun and Moon) in their place as “inhabitants” of the light element. On the second day, He separated water from water by creating an expanse; and on the fifth day, filled the waters with fish and the sky with birds. On the third day, God formed dry land and the vegetation on it; and on the sixth day, He filled the land with the inhabitants He created—first a variety of land animals and creatures, and finally humans. He then gave humans and animals vegetation for food.

As a final and climactic act of His creation, God made the seventh day—separating it from the other days of His creation and making it holy. Sabbath is a palace in time. God created/formed a very significant temporal space, but—much more than that—He also filled the time with His holiness. Thus, in the creation of the Sabbath, both columns of the chart meet and find their culmination point—forming and filling kiss each other. The Sabbath is the only day where forming and filling are put together.

The literary structure of the first Creation story may be captured as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Literary Structure of the First Creation Account</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Forming</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The unformed is formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1st Day: Light—Division</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2nd Day: Light—Division</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3rd Day: Dry Land—Separated From the Sea</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7th Day: Sabbath—God in Relationship With Humankind</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A day of rest is formed and filled with holiness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the literary structure of the first Creation story, it is evident that the creation of the Sabbath is paramount; humans are not the ultimate point of this account. Humans are penultimate, but the seventh day is the climactic apex of the story. Significantly, the Genesis account mentions each day of Creation only once (1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), but the term “seventh day” is used three times. And these three occur approximately in the middle of each of three consecutive sentences. Each sentence consists of seven words in Hebrew (2:2a, 2b, 3a). It is purposely designed in this magnificent way.

The Sabbath not only has a unique place in the biblical Creation account, but “as an institution is unparalleled in the ancient world.” Nichola Nigretti points out that the seventh day “concludes, brings to perfection and overcomes the preceding six days.” This is a great surprise, maybe for some even a disturbing fact, because one would expect to have the creation of humans as a culmination point of this Creation account. Why is it not so?

Theologians stress that humans are the crown of creation. Nevertheless, the creation of human beings is not at the peak of the Genesis story, even though man and woman are perceived as the crowning act of God’s creative activity. “The conclusion of the Genesis creation story indicates that just as man is the crown of Creation, so the seventh day, the Sabbath, is the final goal of Creation.”

Why is the Sabbath and not humans the crux of God’s creation activity? Humans were the last of the physical objects God created during the Creation week. God first made the physical world, formed space, and filled it with different physical inhabitants like fish, birds, and animals—and finally He created man and woman. They came to the fully prepared natural world as a final masterpiece. Wenham emphasizes that the creation of humans in the image of God is “the climax of the six days’ work. But it is not its conclusion.”

The creation of the Sabbath is of another kind. You cannot see or touch the Sabbath, because time cannot be seen or touched, but only experienced. It’s of a different character than the physical; the Sabbath is a spiritual and temporal reality, spiritual in nature but nevertheless reality. The Sabbath is a time for fellowship in the context of rest. Humans were created in the image of God, but needed to maintain this image. Humans were made to the glory of God and for fellowship with God and other humans. They were created in total dependence upon God. They will always be creatures—for eternity; they will never become God. Only in main-
taining this status can they fully develop their humanity, flourish, live bountifully happy and satisfying lives, and fully grow in all their potential. The Lord not only made humans (on the sixth day), but He also put them into a special relationship with Himself (on the seventh day). The whole Creation story is thus God-centered and not human-centered. Without Him, human beings degrade and are doomed to perdition and death. Humans without a relationship with God will stay only on the level of animals. (They were created on the same day as the animals.) Every time humans try to become gods, they behave like wild beasts.

God made a special provision so that humans may stay truly human and humane: He created the Sabbath and set it apart as a special and irreplaceable gift for the first couple and for all following generations so they might stay in a right relationship with God! In other words, the culmination point of God’s creative activity is not the sixth day (humans as a crown of God’s physical creation), but the seventh-day Sabbath (humans in a vivid mutual relationship with their holy Creator, worshiping Him). This climax teaches us that the Sabbath is the most important, not humans per se, but only humans in relationship with God; this is what counts. Sabbath is first of all about a relationship of beauty and splendor, of God with humans and humans with God. In a palace the most important being is the king. But a king needs his people as much as the people need their king. In that sense, when we rupture our relationship with God, we break the Sabbath.

Gerhard Hasel identified four activities associated with the seventh day in Genesis 2: “(1) God ‘had finished’ His creative work on that day; (2) God ‘rested’ from all His creative work on that day; (3) God ‘blessed’ that day; and (4) God ‘made it holy.’”

God made a special provision so that humans may stay truly human and humane: He created the Sabbath and set it apart as a special and irreplaceable gift for the first couple and for all following generations so they might stay in a right relationship with Him and thus live honestly and nobly.

The Sabbath is a gift of God to humanity, allowing men and women to maintain their true human value.

The Creation Sabbath passage (2:2, 3) is written in a chiastic structure. Kenneth Strand draws it in the following way:

A God finished His work (vs. 2)
B And He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done (vs. 2)
C So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it (vs. 3)
B Because on it God rested from all His work which He has done (vs. 3)
A In creation (vs. 3).

This means that in the center of the Genesis account about the Sabbath is God’s blessing and God’s act of making it holy.

When God is the subject of blessing, it means He is giving His presence; He grants prosperity, well-being, and future. His favor extends to every aspect of life, and His gracious blessings are even warranted by covenant. God also made the Sabbath holy. “The first thing God consecrates in this world is not a thing or a place, but a moment in time.”

This unique recognition of sanctifying time and not a specific physical temple strongly suggests that humans can have fellowship with God at any place. This universal aspect of the relationship with God is in focus; it is a crucial function of the Sabbath. The author of the Creation account does not consider the seventh-day rest “as something for God alone but as a concern of the world.”

Thus, at creation God’s presence and blessing is not concentrated on a special chosen place. (This visible manifestation of God’s presence among His people will come later with the inauguration of the tabernacle in the wilderness [Ex. 25:8].)

What is God’s holiness performing? Holy means to set apart, to separate, but it also means to have the experience of awe. The holy Creator is an awesome God. His holiness, first of all, means His presence. The Sabbath rest is uniquely a work of God. Sabbath was formed and filled
When humans participate in the observance of the Sabbath, they are participating in God’s creative activity, and they are demonstrating their respect for their Holy Creator. This observance helps them to develop abilities to choose in everyday matters of life what is right and reject what is wrong, and helps them to make right decisions.

with the holy presence of God. Sabbath is lived correctly only if the Person of God is worshiped through maintaining on that day of rest a living relationship with God. “The day derives its special character solely from God.” God not only made the Sabbath holy, but He also wants humans to keep it holy (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12).

The Sabbath without God is missing its target and its goal. The reason lies in the Hebrew understanding of time. The biblical concept of time is always closely identified with its content. The same is true with the concept of holiness, because there is no holiness apart from God. “The Sabbath is holy because God fills it with His presence; therefore, the Sabbath is not just a day; but a Person!”

The Creation week is about separation and division, and this principle is deeply rooted also in the Sabbath—the wonder of God’s creative activity and His offer to humanity.Creation is a process of separation, division, and distinction. The word for “separate” or “distinct” is used five times in the Creation story itself (Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18). This phenomenon is very important, considering that in the Pentateuch itself this expression is used only 20 times. One-fourth of these occurrences relate directly to God’s creative activity, which reflects intentionality and design. God separated light from darkness, day from night, the heavens from the waters (sea), land from water, the Sabbath from the other six days.

The same separating activity must be involved in the decision-making process when we separate/distinguish between holy and work days. “The sanctification of the Sabbath constitutes an order for humankind according to which time is divided into time and holy time, time to work and time for rest.”

When humans participate in the observance of the Sabbath, they are participating in God’s creative activity, and they are demonstrating their respect for their Holy Creator. This observance helps them to develop abilities to choose in everyday matters of life what is right and reject what is wrong, and helps them to make right decisions. “God’s Sabbath is not a withdrawal from the world and its operations (e.g., ‘My work is done, it’s all yours now; good luck!’); instead, it represents his taking his place at the helm.”

Creation is about the establishment of order. God sets boundaries, and living creatures of different species and different kinds are expected to keep them. The Sabbath preserves that Creation order and respects those boundaries.

Jesus Christ gives the best commentary on the first Creation account in Mark 2:27, 28; it contributes to our understanding of the Creation story and shows that our interpretation is correct. There Jesus confirms that the Sabbath was created as a special gift for all humanity. This crucial gift serves humans as a safeguard, helping them live in dependence upon God. Its original intent was joy and benefit.

Jesus states: “The Sabbath was made for man [notice an all-inclusive, universal language of Creation, i.e., the whole humanity is in view], not man for the Sabbath” (vs. 27, NIV) and further comments, “So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (vs. 28, NIV). Only when we worship the Lord of the Sabbath can we enjoy a fulfilling life of abundance. Trying to keep Sabbath without Christ leads to a misunderstanding of the true purpose, meaning, and intention of the Sabbath. Only Sabbath lived with Christ can bring genuine joy, peace, and satisfaction.

The religious leaders at the time of the first coming of Jesus failed to understand this vital concept, leading to a great tragedy: the killing of Jesus on Friday in order to keep the Sabbath holy (John 19:31–42). We need to live the Sabbath and not only keep it. We need to learn to celebrate it. To lie down in bed and do nothing but sleep is not a proper observance of the Sabbath, even though there would be no transgression of the law.

The seventh day is first of all about fellowship, fellowship with God and then fellowship with other human beings. The Sabbath has this irrefutable implicit social dimension. Even though the Sabbath was not given for entertainment, it’s not all about worship but also about spending meaningful time with others. The seventh day is about the very presence of God; it is about His holiness in action. It is possible to experience an empty time, to live time without a content, selfishly. Such time is not holy but a ruin, a loss.

The time of the seventh day is sacred. By our behavior we should
The Sabbath is thus also a wall against “workaholism”; it has an anti-stress dimension. Sabbath is a divine protection for our tendency to work without stopping. We need to learn to enjoy fellowship and not performance. Relationship is what matters, not achievements.

Sabbath is a deep lesson that we as humans need to be God-oriented and people-oriented beings and not thing-oriented or work-oriented. Sabbath helps us begin every week refreshed, to start anew.

is a deep lesson that we as humans need to be God-oriented and people-oriented beings and not thing-oriented or work-oriented. Sabbath helps us begin every week refreshed, to start anew.

There is a creation power in holiness. Those who observe the Sabbath participate in God’s holiness; they are strengthened and transformed so they can bring God’s presence into real life and perform creative work as well. This is the meaning of God’s blessing of the seventh day. By living Sabbath, believers are showing total devotion and respect to the holy Creator.

REFERENCES


5. Hasel, op. cit.


9. Sarna, op. cit., p. 21


15. Walton, op. cit.

16. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, III.4, p. 52.
Adventists encourage the reading of Scripture. The living and speaking God of Scripture has chosen to reveal Himself through ordinary human words, using His own gift of language to tell humankind about Himself. Thus, the Bible is treasured as the living Word of God, given through human writers in human language. These biblical words are translated into different languages around the world. While a number of Adventist scholars have given valuable input to various Bible translations, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not produced its own unique Bible translation or sanctioned only one Bible translation that is officially supported. Hence, Adventists welcome new translations and studies of the Bible, for these can help foster an interest in the Bible and help the reader become more familiar with the biblical message and the only true God, who wants to save us.

Some recent Bible translations, however, use new, inclusive language that is believed to be more politically correct than the biblical text. Some theologians deliberately change the words of Scripture to make them more gender neutral. Thus, some propose that Jesus Christ no longer be thought of as Son of the Father, but instead as “the Child of God.” Rather than addressing God as “almighty Father,” other scholars promote calling God in non-sex-specific words like “companion,” “friend,” “nurturer,” “Holy One,” “Sustainer,” etc. Or they avoid male imagery by using references of both masculine and feminine pairs such as “father-mother,” “he and she,” or simply address God as “parent” or even more general as “the depth or ground of being.”

These approaches reflect insights from historical-critical exegesis with particular input from feminist hermeneutics and liberation theology. Many of those liberal scholars seek to correct what they perceive as a sexist slant in much of the biblical material. They aim to replace the idea of God as our heavenly Father with a new feminist spirituality that is geared toward the specific needs of women who are marginalized and oppressed. Some feminist theologians even identify the maleness of God as a major problem for the liberation of women in the church and claim that Jesus cannot be the redeemer of women and cannot represent women adequately because He is male.

This poses some serious questions about the ideological presuppositions behind such an approach and its implications for theology. The debate over gender-neutral language is intricately connected to one’s understanding of the revelation-inspiration phenomenon and ultimately is a debate concerning the nature of God. To change the biblical references to God by calling God “father-mother” in effect challenges the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, since God is not a biunity or duality but a triune living God. When God is re-imaged in new language it also affects many other Christian teachings.

We should be aware that when we begin to tamper with the biblical text, it is no longer the biblical text that is the guiding norm for our theology. We as interpreters of God’s Word then subtly assume this authoritative role. When we begin to change the inspired text of Holy Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16), it is no longer the Bible that shapes our thinking about God, but it is rather our own ideas and presuppositions that begin to shape the content of Scripture and our theology. The Bible then no longer is the final norm for faith and practice.

Reading the biblical text carefully, we notice that in those few passages in Scripture where feminine analogies are used about God, they are used as a comparison in which one aspect is compared with another (cf., for instance Isa. 42:14; 49:15). God is neither male nor female. God is Spirit and transcends any sexual nature. In these analogies, various aspects of the divine nature are illustrated in human language. We must not abandon the human language of the Bible, however, because the divine message is not given to us except in this human form. Apart from this medium, there is no biblical message. Furthermore, we have to remember that the Bible uses the terminology of God as Father and Lord. This is the language in which God has chosen to reveal Himself. “Father” is not just a metaphor that human beings project upon God. It is a fixed term of address that God Himself uses through His own Son Jesus Christ. God is not simply like a father, he is the Father. Christ is not merely like a Lord, He is the Lord; and Jesus Christ is not like a son, he is the Son of God. If we do not abide by divine revelation as communi-
cated in divinely inspired Scripture, we will project our own image of God that shapes our faith into our own liking. But it will no longer correspond to the normative Word of the triune God as given in Scripture. Therefore Adventists do not feel free to correct God’s revealed and divinely inspired written Word at our own will because we have no mandate to modify the biblical text. Instead we are called to translate faithfully the words of God’s revelation so that they correspond to what God has originally revealed to us in human words. We believe that the Bible is not historically conditioned and thus relative. Instead, we affirm that God has historically constituted His written word by revealing Himself to us as Father and Lord. Therefore we are not at liberty to change and adapt God’s own witness to Himself in Scripture. Instead of revising the biblical language and thus also the meaning of the biblical witness, we must confess this witness in the language that is given to us in the Bible. Hence we are not free to change the Lord’s Prayer into “our mother who is in heaven.” Instead, we pray with Jesus who spoke: “Our Father which art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9, KJV).

To let the Bible unfold its meaning to the reader on its own terms (sola scriptura), more literal Bible translations are suited best because they help to make the reader familiar with the thought patterns and wording of the biblical writers. May we be faithful students of God’s Word. And may we be doers of the Word, imitating the words and deeds of Jesus, who is our prime example—for we do not know Jesus and God except through the Bible. Hence, the Bible is our only link with apostolic Christianity and the only sure means to guide us in our spiritual journey today.

“Just because the sun has risen every day of your life, there is no guarantee that it will therefore rise tomorrow. The belief that it will—that there are indeed dependable regularities of nature—is an act of faith, but one which is indispensable to the progress of science” (Paul Davies, The Mind of God).

“Belief and proof have little or nothing to do with each other. I believe many things I cannot prove. I believe in God, but never begin to prove his existence to one who wanted to argue the point. . . . When you love a thing, you already believe enough to put it to the proof of trial rather than the proof of brains. Shall I search heaven and earth for proof that my wife is a good and lovely woman? The signs of it are everywhere; the proofs of it nowhere” (George MacDonald).

“Because texts in cyberspace are so malleable and movable, we can easily lose the sense of a unitary author as the source of meaning. This shift in emphasis dovetails with the post-modernist or deconstructionist attack on objective meaning, on the legitimacy of comprehensive worldviews, and on the integrity of literary texts as expressing the determined intention of their authors” (Douglas Groothuis, The Soul in Cyberspace).

“Christian missionaries have always been aware of the need to engage culture. Yet only recently has it been suggested that the West has become a mission field. . . . This is the first time the church has had to mount a mission to a culture that was previously Christian” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Everyday Theology).

“The Bible pushes us into life rather than pulling us out of it. This is the arena in which God desires to work, redeeming us in all the ordinariness of our lives. Christianity is not pie in the sky by and by; it is an earthy fistful of life in the here and now” (David W. Henderson, Culture Shift: Communicating God’s Truth to Our Changing World).
how would you describe yourself? Take a few moments. Write down five words that would best describe you. What would they be? “Outgoing?” “Harsh?” “Compassionate?” “Kind?” “Witty?” “Faithful?” “Critical?” What words would others use to describe you? Would the word holy be among them?

Most of us never think of calling ourselves holy. Only saints and preachers are holy (even that is debatable), not ordinary people like you and me. For many, holy means stern people wearing dark colors and high black stockings, walking with rigid strides. People who would use the word holy to describe themselves live hard lives with hidden troubles, carrying black Bibles around (or little red books) to remind them of what they shouldn’t be doing. They live in the land of No—saying NO to everything that has color, joy, spontaneity, humor, variety, creativity.

Scripture gives a mixed picture. On the one hand, people are called holy (saints), and on the other hand, the same people are commanded to stop living sinful lives. How can that be? How can you be holy if there is sin in your life?

Most troubling is the assertion that “without holiness, none will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14, NIV). Then there’s God’s call for us to be holy: “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16, NIV). According to the context (1 Peter 1:13-21), holy includes at least five realities: (1) holy defines a way of both being and behaving; (2) holy is a way of being and behaving that is defined by the character of God [who God is and what God does]; (3) holy is a way of being and behaving that all Christians are expected to manifest; (4) holy is a way of being and behaving that is markedly different from that of the unbelieving world around; and (5) holy is a way of being and behavior that is rooted in and flows out of God’s redeeming grace and forgiveness manifested in Christ’s shed blood.

The most interesting thing about these words in 1 Peter is how the exhortation to be holy is a person-to-person call. God makes it personal: “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (NASB). It is not, “Be holy because I said to be holy.” Rather, it is “Be holy because I am holy, and if you love Me, you will want to be like Me.” This is a person-to-person call placed by the Lord God to each one of us. The Lord is calling you to be holy. He beckons you to come out from all conduct that is inappropriate and be separated to Him, to depart from everything that isn’t like Him and devote yourself fully to Him.” The conduct of believers is determined by the person of God and the nature of God. A holy God requires holiness in His followers.

God is by nature holy (Rev. 4:8; Isa. 6:3). He alone is holy (Rev. 15:4). It has to do with who He is—His character and being. To be a child of God, it is necessary to bear a family resemblance.

Being holy or behaving holy is a matter of love. Peter asserts how being or behaving holy cannot be separated either from God’s mercy and forgiveness or from the spilled blood of Christ. “Love is the well from which practical holiness springs; love for God, then love for men. This love is the humble response to God’s great love for us. If we truly love Him, attaining to His likeness will be our heart’s desire. And like Him we will be, if we are holy.”

As Ellen White writes. “Holiness is . . . an entire surrender of the will to God; it is living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; it is doing the will of our heavenly Father; it is trusting God in trial, in darkness as well as in the light; it is walking by faith and not by sight; it is relying on God with unquestioning confidence, and resting in His love.” Who would ever imagine that holiness is resting in God’s love?

There is more: “No man receives holiness as a birthright, or as a gift from any other human being. Holiness is the gift of God through Christ. Those who receive the Saviour become sons of God. They are His spiritual children, born again, renewed in righteousness and true holiness. Their minds are changed. With clearer vision they behold another world. They are adopted into God’s family, and they become conformed to His likeness, changed by His Spirit from glory to glory. From Cherishing supreme love for self, they come to cherish supreme love for God and for Christ. . . . Accepting Christ as a personal Saviour, and following His example of self-denial—this is the secret of holiness.”

Only God is holy. Yet He graciously extends His holiness to us through His Son Jesus Christ. The secret of holiness is accepting Christ as our personal Savior. It means receiving God’s character as a gift implanted within. It is a gift that will
forever change who we are, how we think, what we value, and what we do and say (Col. 1:21, 22; Gal. 6:14). We rest in His love. Our humble response to His love is to be like Him in the world.

The reality is that those who comprehend the holiness of God are immediately filled with dread and horror over personal sin (Isa. 6:3-6). It is a fact that “the most holy person is most in touch with his own depravity, and consequently, with the great mercy and kindness of God.”14 “The more closely they contemplate the life and character of Jesus, the more deeply will they feel their own sinfulness, and the less will they be disposed to claim holiness of heart or to boast of their sanctification.”15 “Only God is holy. Man has not holiness apart from what belongs to God, extended to him in Christ.”16 Holiness begins with a sense of who God is and an appreciation of His grace. Appreciating salvation is where holiness begins. Starting anywhere else leads to legalism or fanaticism, hypocrisy or discouragement.

God would have us hear His person-to-person call to be like Him in the world. And He would remind us of His gracious provision through Christ: “‘be holy, for I am holy, and if you love Me, you will want to be like Me.”

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Gary B. Swanson

In the first segment of *The Triangle*, a three-part made-for-TV mini-series about the so-called Bermuda Triangle, a character asks an engineer with four postgraduate degrees, “Why does it always seem the more education a person has, the more unwilling they are to accept new ideas?”

Notwithstanding the poor grammar—and at the risk of sounding anti-intellectual—he has a point. In a later exchange, after a discussion has ensued about the causes of unexplained phenomena, the same character observes, “Everyone uses supernatural like it’s a dirty word!”

What he is talking about is the conflict that has arisen between those of faith and those who have elected themselves as spokespersons for science.

But science, as we know it, has not always been at odds with religion. In fact, in the Western tradition, science got its start from the Christian search for a greater understanding of God.

“Science took root and flourished in the soil of Christian thought,” says scholar Alvin Plantinga. “It was nourished by the Christian idea that both we and our world were created by the same personal God, the same living God, the same conscious being with intellect, understanding, and reason. And not only were we created by God, we were created in His image. And a most important part of the divine image in us is our ability to resemble God in having knowledge, knowledge of our world around us, knowledge of ourselves, knowledge, even, of God Himself.”17

Out of this kind of thinking arose the genesis of what we today call science. It was originally a tool that was intended to bring us closer to our Creator. Ellen White referred to what she called “the harmony of science and Bible religion.”

“Nature is full of lessons of the love of God,” she wrote. “Rightly understood, these lessons lead to the Creator. They point from nature to
forever change who we are, how we think, what we value, and what we do and say (Col. 1:21, 22; Gal. 6:14). We rest in His love. Our humble response to His love is to be like Him in the world.

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“Nature is full of lessons of the love of God,” she wrote. “Rightly understood, these lessons lead to the Creator. They point from nature to
nature’s God, teaching those simple, holy truths which cleanse the mind, bringing it into close touch with God. These lessons emphasize the truth that science and religion cannot be divorced.”

Yet, those who claim to represent science today have indeed sued for separation from faith. They have, in fact, even sought to prevent those of faith from expressing themselves in the open discourse of learning. This is much like demanding a divorce—and a gag order.

The Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a consortium of scientists and environmentalists, for example, are protesting the National Park Service’s persistence in offering for sale a creationism book in the visitors’ center there. This organization bills itself as “assisting federal and state public employees . . . to work as ‘anonymous activists’ so that agencies must be subjected today. And with every bit as much enmity and intolerance as the Inquisition of old, those who represent science are seeking to root out what they consider to be heresy.

Yet, on closer examination, science is not truly antagonistic to faith. And scientists are not as unanimous in their disavowal of the supernatural as some would have us believe. To be sure, the majority, those to whom the media seem to be listening most intently, may have denied belief in the existence of God, but this position is by no means undisputed.

Research by Rice University sociologist of religion Elaine Howard Ecklund reported in 2005 that 41 percent of biologists and 27 percent of political scientists declare disbelief in God. Though, of course, the remaining majority would include agnostics and an array of belief in the transcendent, atheism is clearly not universal in science.

The film version of Carl Sagan’s science fiction novel Contact explores the relationship between faith and science. Central character Dr. Ellie Arrington, a lead researcher in a SETI-like project and ardent believer in the religion that science has become, is transported somewhere in the cosmos, where she communicates extensively with other beings in a world that has been constructed to simulate Earth so she will be made to feel comfortable. When she returns to Earth, however, according to the scientific instrumentation, she has been gone only a matter of seconds, not nearly enough time to account for her experience as she describes it. So now she finds herself before a kind of inquisition, in which she is trying to defend her personal experience, even though it flies in the face of what has shown up in the scientific instrumentation.

The panel before which Dr. Arrington is interrogated ultimately rejects her “Damascus road” experience because there is no empirical evidence for it other than her word, but the film leaves wide open the idea of the transcendent.

At the end of the day, the gulf between faith and reason isn’t between religion and science. True scientists will admit that their basis for belief can no more be proved than that of believers in the transcendent. It is just that the majority of the most influential self-appointed spokesmen for science in today’s culture believe in naturalism: the idea that all phenomena can be explained by natural (as opposed to supernatural) causes. The word believe is used here because they cannot prove naturalism scientifically. They have faith that it is true.

Alvin Plantinga reminds us that “naturalism and evolution together really undermine science . . . because their combination makes it impossible to see how there could arise human beings like us who have a real capacity to understand the world around us in a deep and profound way. Naturalism and evolution together make that impossible to understand.”

True science isn’t God’s enemy. He initiated it as a means if revealing Himself to us. To the true scientist, “supernatural” isn’t a dirty word. The divorce has never been consummated.

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