
Adventists don’t do baptism right.

What?

Well, what was the best day of your life? Your marriage? A particularly significant birthday? Maybe it was seeing your favourite performers for the very first time live on stage? For most of us, I suspect, if we were brutally honest our baptism wouldn’t even come to mind when listing our life’s highlights.

And yet, last weekend, my family had our best day ever. A day with incredible joy, depth of emotion, connection with others and celebration of new life in Christ. And it was a baptism. One of my colleagues who has been guided by the Holy Spirit to bring many, many people to Christ over the years, came to see me afterwards and his first words were, “that was the best baptism I’ve ever seen”. He isn’t alone. My wife and I have been overwhelmed by the number of people deeply moved by the ceremony telling us they have never been to a baptism like that—including a number of non-Adventists who attended.

It’s a question all parents need to consider: “how can I ensure my child or grandchild has a baptismal day that remains a highlight for the rest of their lives?”

This article lays out the thinking behind the “second best baptism ever”. I’ve had letters from families thanking me for these ideas as they made their baptism so much more meaningful than the run of the mill ceremony. I hope your family will be the next one that benefits.—James
Religious liberty initiative kicks off in PNG

The International Religious Liberty Association has arrived in the South Pacific, with a new chapter of the organisation officially launched in Papua New Guinea this past week.

EGW among 100 most significant Americans

A leading scholar on Ellen G White welcomed a decision by *Smithsonian* magazine to name the cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as one of the 100 most significant Americans of all time.

Read Adventist Record

The *Road to Bethlehem* outdoor drama series kicks off this coming Monday in *Nunawading* (Vic) and *Penguin* (Tas). In the latest issue of Adventist Record, we look back at the production’s incredible 20-year journey.

Dreaming of a green Christmas

Will your garbage bin be overflowing the week after Christmas? Will your family relationships take another 12 months to repair after all the stress and emotional outbursts? ADRA
More than 4800 baptised in El Salvador

It's the largest stadium in Central America and home of the El Salvador football team. But the 52,000 people who gathered in Estadio Cuscatlan on November 26 weren't there to watch football.

Magic with a k

“They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any of the deadly thing, it shall not hurt them” (Mark 16:18). It's a wonderful promise. Why then, in 2012, did Pentecostal “serpent-handling” pastor Mark Wolford die from a rattlesnake bite?

Australia’s Peter Mushenko has some helpful tips.

Watch/download InFocus

Making headlines:
• Churches worried about religious freedom in Victoria
• Links between obesity and cancer reinforced
• A timeless story told in sand

Christian leaders are calling on Victoria’s new ALP government to break its election promise. Religious freedom expert James Standish explains.

Gluten: good or evil?
Leading Aussie dietician Sue Radd explains the science behind the current rush of people choosing a gluten-free diet.
When God says no

For *Adventist Record* PR/Editorial assistant Vania Chew, one look into his eyes and it was love at first sight.

This week’s offering (December 6, 2014): Mission Extension Offering
Have you ever been to a bar or bat mitzvah? It's the ceremony during which the Jewish community recognises that a boy or girl has come of age. I'd known generally what the ceremony involved before one of my close friends invited me to his son, Zak's, bar mitzvah at a Reformed synagogue in Maryland.

Walking into the synagogue was very similar to walking into church—even to the point of catching the eyes and exchanging smiles with friends scattered throughout the congregation. I sat down next to one of my buddies from law firm days, and the service began. The rabbi kindly began the service with a description of the preparation that had gone into the service, the aspects we would experience during the service and the meaning of each aspect.

As he described the preparation, it became clear that Zak's preparation for this day had been rigorous. It involved learning Hebrew, preparing a sermon, and studying the faith with an unusual depth for a boy on the cusp of turning 13. When Zak got up, he first read a fairly long section of the Bible in Hebrew. Then he gave a sermon on the prohibition of bearing false witness. It wasn't trite patter, but rather a deep and complex examination of Abraham's lie to Pharaoh about his wife, Sarah.

Before the service was over, Zak had publicly proclaimed his intent to follow his forefathers in the Jewish faith. The way that he said it—with such obvious pride and confidence —was inspiring. The boy was now a man—a Jewish man—who intended to be a strong, confident, proud member of the community, a Jewish man who was very publicly and lovingly embraced by his community.

That evening after sundown, his parents threw a party. It was a fabulously joyous and elaborate affair—something like the combination of a wedding reception and a 21st birthday party. There was no doubt that this was a day Zak would never, ever forget. A day rich in meaning and symbolism. A day that would anchor him in the faith and secure his identity. And a day of great love and joy. It was a day that was, from beginning to end, all about Zak committing himself to his faith community.

I've thought of that bar mitzvah often, and asked myself what we could learn from it. After all, it was ceremonies like this that ensured Judaism survived 2000 years after the destruction of Jerusalem in often the most brutally hostile cultures. We shouldn't ignore what they have to teach us. I've particularly contrasted the bar mitzvah with the way we celebrate baptisms in our church, which tend to be sandwiched between preliminaries and the sermon. I think we can, and should, do much better.
I hope that should my own girls choose to be baptised, that their baptism will be the focal point of our church's worship service on the day—not just a prelude to the sermon. I hope that they will, like Zak, be invited to read Scripture to the church, and then deliver a sermon on their spiritual insights. I hope they will have an opportunity to affirm in their own words, in front of the entire congregation, what Jesus means to them and that they plan to remain in the faith all their life.

In short, I hope the entire community will focus everything they have on that day to let my children know just how important they are to the future of our faith. And then after sundown, I want to throw the biggest party they've ever had to celebrate their coming of age and their affirmation of faith.

And I don't just want it for my children. I want it for every person who takes the monumentally important, brave, joyous decision to give her or his life to Christ in baptism. No Adventist baptism should be a mediocre footnote in a foggy memory, when we as a community can ensure it is the biggest, most profound and memorable day in life. Baptism is a public act to reflect a private decision. Let's take a page from the book of the Jewish community and ensure our services and ceremony recognise the weight and import it deserves.

James Standish is communication director for the South Pacific Division.
Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

“We are delighted by the initiative of leaders to create the new PNG chapter of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA),” states Dr John Graz, secretary general of the IRLA who is in Papua New Guinea for religious freedom events. “The promotion of religious freedom through strong national chapters—and the key relationships, events, and policies they develop—is vital in the response to the growth of violent religious extremism and restriction of faith. We hope that this first chapter in the South Pacific will be the first of many in the region. PNG is leading the way!”

James Standish, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist Church in the South Pacific, agrees. “This is an important turning point. There are lots of complex questions facing the nations in our region. We need the organisational and intellectual infrastructure that comes from being linked into the global IRLA network to adequately address our challenges.”

The Honourable Delilah Gore, PNG minister for Community, Youth and Religion, represented the Prime Minister at a religious freedom symposium on the campus of Pacific Adventist University yesterday. She presented the new IRLA chapter with a K10,000 grant from the PNG Government. “We need to expand the religious liberty movement in PNG,” she says. “Even though PNG is a predominantly Christian nation, we have non-Christian religions coming here. A new chapter of the IRLA will help us peacefully and sustainably manage our growing religious diversity.”

Sir Gibbs Selika, Deputy Chief Justice of the PNG Supreme Court, will coordinate starting the new PNG IRLA chapter. “It is important that the new chapter is properly organised by being incorporated under PNG law,” he states.
“This new PNG IRLA chapter will provide us an opportunity to work with fellow chapters around the world—we can learn from each other, and together we will be strong.”

United for religious freedom: Sir Gibbs Salika (Deputy Chief Justice of PNG), Dr Scott Charlesworth (Theology senior lecturer at Pacific Adventist University), William Fey (Catholic bishop of Kimbe), Bienvenido Tejano (ambassador of the Republic of the Philippines), Dr Leigh Rice (president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Papua New Guinea Union Mission), Dr John Graz (IRLA general secretary), Dr Barry Oliver (president of the Adventist Church in the South Pacific), James Standish (Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director for the Adventist Church in the South Pacific), Rev Uvenama Rova (secretary general of the Uniting Church in PNG), Nellie Hamura-Oa (associate chaplain at the University of PNG), The Honorable James Marape (PNG Finance minister).

“The establishment of this new chapter is a fitting outcome of the symposium sponsored by Pacific Adventist University and the Adventist Church in PNG,” says Dr Leigh Rice, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in PNG. “It ensures this won’t just be an event, but rather will have sustained impact.”
EGW among 100 most significant Americans

Silver Spring, Maryland, United States

A leading scholar on Ellen G White welcomed a decision by Smithsonian magazine to name the cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as one of the 100 most significant Americans of all time.

The magazine places White in a group that includes the likes of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr, and Helen Keller in its Spring 2015 issue. The individuals were chosen with the use of an algorithm that measures data taken from Wikipedia pages and Google book scans.

“It is good to see an institution of Smithsonian’s caliber giving proper acknowledgement to Ellen White,” said William Fagal, associate director of the Ellen G White Estate, a depository of White's writings.

The cover of the Spring 2015 issue of the Smithsonian magazine that profiles its list of the 100 most significant Americans of all time.

The Smithsonian, the main publication of the Smithsonian Institute, the world's largest museum and research complex, does not rank the 100 people. Instead, it divides them into 10 categories of 10 people each, and White appears in the category “Religious Figures”. But the magazine did give White the distinction of being the most interesting religious figure in US history by, as it explained in a preface to the list, providing her with more space than the other 10 choices—a full-page article illustrated with a full-page drawing.

The non-bylined article focuses largely on the some 2000 visions and dreams that White said she experienced from the age of 17 in 1844 until she died 70 years later. It offers a detailed description from White and eyewitnesses about the visions, and it notes that skeptics later hypothesised that the visions might have been caused by epilepsy or mercury poisoning. The article also suggests that White herself connected the visions with a serious childhood head injury that she suffered when she was struck with a stone.

White, however, only said in her lifetime that the injury caused her to seek Jesus, not that it caused the visions themselves.
“The article downplays the supernatural basis for her contribution—not surprising for a publication of this type—but we welcome its recognition of her significance to religion, not just in America, but throughout the world,” Fagal said Sunday.

The article leaves the origin of the visions up in the air.

“Whatever the cause,” the article says, “she would have as many as 2000 seemingly divine experiences over the next few decades and they, along with her prolific writings (more than 100,000 pages by the time of her death), would help shape Seventh-day Adventism as it became an organised denomination in the 1860s.”

The article also mentions the Adventist belief that Jesus began the process of end-time judgment of people in 1844 and gives a nod to the movement’s emphasis on healthy living.

It incorrectly says the Adventist Church has “some 14 million followers”. Church membership currently stands at 18.1 million, according to figures presented at the church’s Annual Council business meeting this fall.

Seventh-day Adventists view White as a gifted writer and a special messenger appointed by God to draw the world’s attention to the Bible and help prepare people for Jesus’ second coming, according to a biography on the White Estate’s website.

White also is the most translated woman author in the history of literature, writing more than 5000 journal articles and 40 books on religion, education, nutrition, and Christian living, among other topics.

Among the other religious figures named on the Smithsonian list are two Mormon leaders, Joseph Smith Jr and Brigham Young; Church of Scientology founder L Ron Hubbard; Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy; and 16th- to 18th-century figures William Penn, Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, Jonathan Edwards, and Cotton Mather. An honorary editor’s mention is given to evangelist Billy Graham.

The formula used by the Smithsonian to compile its list was constructed by Steven Skiena, a professor of computer science at Stony Brook University, and Charles B Ward, an engineer at Google. The duo came up with an algorithm that uses Wikipedia’s 840,000 pages about individuals and data from 15 million books that Google has scanned to measure people’s accomplishments and how well they are remembered for them.

Using this method, the top five figures in world history are, in order of importance: Jesus, Napoleon, Muhammad, William Shakespeare and Abraham Lincoln.
More than 4800 baptised in El Salvador

San Salvador, El Salvador

It’s the largest stadium in Central America and home of the El Salvador football team.

On November 29, a crowd of 52,000 people gathered in Estadio Cuscatlan, but they weren’t there to watch football. They were there to learn more about God.

“We sponsored 93 evangelistic campaigns across the nation and the stadium meetings were the climax of these campaigns,” said Australian evangelist Pastor John Carter. “We brought in 93 pastors to lead out in the meetings and they were assisted by 100 local pastors.”

52,000 people attended the final night of the campaign at Estadio Cuscatlan.

[Photo courtesy: The Carter Report]

Pastor Cesar Cardenas, a Colombian-born Australian citizen, was Pastor Carter’s translator.

Former vice president of El Salvador, Ana Vilma de Escobar, attended the meetings along with other officials.

“These meetings are just what is needed at this time,” she told Pastor Carter.

Pastor John Carter with Ana Vilma de Escobar, former vice president of El
Salvador. [Photo courtesy: The Carter Report]

More than 4800 people were baptised over the course of the three-week campaigns.

“We were impressed by the spiritual hunger of the people,” said Pastor Carter. “Glory be to God.”
Magick with a k

In 2012 Pentecostal “serpent-handling” pastor Mark Wolford made world headlines when he died from a rattlesnake bite.¹ Snake-handlers cite Mark 16:17,18: “They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any of the deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.”

So why did Wolford die—did he lack faith? He probably didn’t lack faith as much as test God (see Luke 4:12). His death may also have been a case of magick gone wrong.

Prayer versus magick

The term “magick” (with a “k”) was first popularised by British occultist Aleister Crowley. He coined the term to distinguish an ancient religious philosophy from mere sleights of hand or stage magic.²

Anthropologists suggest prayer and magick³ are two universal practices found in almost every culture.⁴ Both are human responses to fear and anxiety yet represent diametrically opposite ways of interacting with the Divine.

Prayer is “devout petition to God”.⁵ It comes from the Hebrew tephillah and Greek deesis, meaning “asking, entreaty, entreaty”.⁶

Magick by contrast includes “techniques that presumably assure human control of supernatural agencies or the forces of nature”.⁷ The concept originally comes from the Persian magush, meaning “to have power”.⁸

In other words, prayer is entreaty to the Divine will; magick seeks to control the Divine to achieve a guaranteed outcome.⁹ Prayer involves relational conversation with God; magick uses formulaic “vain” repetition.¹⁰

Prayer recognises humans were made in the Divine image; magick repeats the mistake of Adam and Eve, thinking we are like gods who can make God in our own image (Genesis 3:5). While the Bible recognises miracles through prayer, it considers magick a capital offence (Deuteronomy 18:10,11).

Biblical examples of magickal thinking

In Numbers 20:9-12 Moses strikes a rock in anger to bring forth water. Moses’ great sin was to suggest he and Aaron,
not God, had the power to do this: “shall we bring water for you?” (italics added). As a result of their actions, God forbade Moses and Aaron to enter the Promised Land.

In Acts 19:13-16 we find the story of the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief-priest, who cast out demons in the name of Jesus, “whom Paul preaches”. The problem is these men didn’t know who Jesus actually was but used His name as some sort of “abracadabra” magick-word. The result is a bemused demon who beats them black-and-blue and sends them running naked from the house!

Law and magick

Magick has always been an integral part of ancient pagan worship so it shouldn’t surprise us that God sought to direct His people away from such practices through His law. In the first commandment He decrees that He is the one and only God.

Magick seeks to control the Divine through graven images. Contrary to popular belief, ancients probably didn’t think idols were actually gods but rather worked like voodoo dolls—to control the deity. The second commandment teaches we should make no graven images.

Another hallmark of magick involves invoking a divine name because to name something is to subdue it. The third commandment requires that we not take the Lord’s name in vain. God’s description, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14), may actually be an anti-magickal pun suggesting God has no personal name that can be subdued. Even today Jews are careful about saying God’s personal name “Yahweh” and modern Bible translations reflect this reverence by instead using the term “LORD” or “Lord”.

Finally, in the Sabbath commandment we see the ultimate expression of the supremacy of the Creator as against the merely created.

Modern “Christian” magick

We might be tempted to think magick only affected ancient pagans. However, as Adventist pioneer Ellen White rightly observed, “sorcery is practised in this age as verily as in the days of the old-time magicians”. While Christians get all worked up over fictional works like Harry Potter, many embrace magickal philosophies themselves.

Magickal thinking is still alive and well within Christianity today. Within “traditional” denominations consider the Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican idea of transubstantiation. During Mass a priest supposedly calls Jesus out of heaven and turns the communion wafer into the actual flesh of Christ. The phrase “hocus pocus” may even derive from this magickal act.

Similarly, within contemporary evangelical denominations, prosperity gospel proponents, late-night TV evangelists and mega-churches alike promise money and health—often at a fee. Brian Houston of Hillsong demonstrated it best with his modestly titled book You Need More Money. Really? In these cases humans do not merely “petition” God but effectively “command” Him through the performance of various actions or by claiming out-of-context Bible promises. God is viewed as a cosmic ATM, controlled by a ritual pin-code, a Deus ex machina, a machine-God.

Magickal Jesus?

So what about Jesus? The Jewish Talmud argues Jesus practised magick, however the opposite seems true.

Firstly, the nativity story with the three Magi (yes, as in magicians) possibly illustrates an anti-magickal theme, paralleling Moses’ own battle with Pharaoh’s magicians (Exodus 7:10–13,22). Matthew’s inclusion of this story for Jewish-Christian audiences suggests Jesus is the greater second Moses who subjugates magick even as an
infant.  

Secondly, while Jesus performed many miracles, having every right to use His own power as God, He said, “the Son can do nothing by Himself, he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19). In the Cross we see the greatest rejection of magickal thinking where Jesus refused to save even Himself, wholly submitting to the will of the Father (Luke 22:42).

**Faith of a mustard seed**

The life of Jesus illustrates the paradox of faith. It is only when we give up magickal thinking and totally submit to God, when we are so weak and pathetic, when we have nothing left to bargain with and no delusions about controlling Him, that God can realise His will in our lives.

Paul expressed this idea when he said, “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). The tiny faith of a mustard seed is when we realise “I am a nobody” (2 Corinthians 12:11). Then, and only then, can God work through us to move mountains!


2. Aleister Crowley, *Magick, Book 4*  
   (Berlin: Ordo Templi Orientis, 1913), p 127, 134.

3. For the remainder of this article, the term “magick” will be used where “magic” might otherwise be used, to denote a religious philosophy and not mere sleight of hand or stage trick.


6. Strong’s Concordance at [H8605], at [G4336].

7. “magio”, Urban Dictionary, Crowley similarly defined “magick” as “the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will”.


10. Jesus made this point Himself about the nature of pagan worship in Matthew 6:7.

11. As a side note, observe Moses may have struck the rock with the very same staff he had earlier used to combat Pharaoh’s own magicians.


13. Consider the first task of Adam was to name all the animals to fulfil God’s command to subdue the earth. And consider, by contrast, that God never named Adam—it is a title, not a personal name. We even see it in the example of Daniel and his three friends who were given new names by their Babylonian captors.

14. Further reflected in the tradition that Jews, except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, were forbidden from...
even attempting to say God’s personal name: “YHWH: The Name of God in the Old Testament”, Archaeological Study Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 89.


17. The Lutherans have a slightly different doctrine called sacramental union but it is similar to Catholic transubstantiation.

18. There remains debate within the Anglican Communion about the Real Presence in the Eucharist wafer but many, especially the Anglo-Catholic faction, do uphold a similar belief of consubstantiation.


25. Kriste Stendahl, Quis et Unde: An Analysis of Matthew 1-2


Stephen Ferguson is a lawyer and member of Livingston church, WA.
One look into his eyes and it was love at first sight.

“I think he likes you,” his owner laughed as the puppy licked my hand.

I was seven years old and I loved dogs. Unfortunately my parents didn’t feel the same way so I was only allowed to have goldfish.

It wasn’t long before their novelty wore off. You couldn’t pat them, you couldn’t play with them and you definitely couldn’t take them for walks! Goldfish were a poor substitute for what I really wanted—a dog of my very own.

As I said my bedtime prayers that night you can probably guess my request: “Dear God, please give me a puppy.”

I prayed fervently every day. I made a wish as I blew out the birthday candles. And I tried to bargain with my parents. I’d be good. I’d do this chore. I’d never need a present again!

But I didn’t get a puppy. And I wondered why God had said no. Was my prayer too selfish? Did I not have enough faith?

Years later I was again praying fervently every day. But this time it was for a person. A close friend had just learned her mother had cancer and wouldn’t survive much longer.

My friend prayed sincerely. She began fasting regularly. And she tried to bargain with God.

But she didn’t get a miracle. And she wondered why God had said no.

All she was left with was a wretched sense of heartbreak and abandonment—questioning why God seemed silent when she needed Him the most.

The Bible gives us various examples of prayers God said no to. Paul asked for a thorn in his flesh to be removed and his request was denied. Hezekiah’s request for healing was denied—and then granted—but granting his request proved disastrous for Israel.

Even Jesus experienced God’s no. One of the most powerful scenes in the Bible is the description of Christ in the
Garden of Gethsemane. Knowing He was about to take the world’s sins on His shoulders, Jesus prayed that this cup might be taken from Him. It’s worth noting He also prayed, “Not my will, but Yours.”

On the cross Jesus felt abandoned and alone. Who can forget His anguished cry: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?”

Yet in the midst of sorrow, pain and despair, the plan of salvation was fulfilled. All because God said no.

In this life we may never understand why our prayers aren’t answered as we’d hoped. But one day God will show us He could see the big picture.

For now, we need to trust Him—trust in His love for us, trust in His character and trust that He knows best.

And let’s strive to pray as Jesus prayed. Not our will but God’s.

Vania Chew is PR/Editorial assistant of Adventist Record.