

# An Investigated Faith

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GOD IS WITH US

By Jack W. Provonsha

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102

Both style and content mark *God Is With Us* as an excellent piece of work. The author says some very important things on such basic theological issues as the meaning of God, the nature of religious knowledge, the function of religious symbolism, the significance of God as Creator, the meaning of the Sabbath, the problem of evil and its solution, and the meaning of the Second Coming and events associated with it.

There are other books that cover somewhat the same ground, but few are written with such a clear grasp of the contemporary debate, on the one hand, and of the significant issues in the great controversy, on the other. The effort to get behind the mere statement of doctrine to its real significance makes this work unique — and successful. It is not the author's intention to deal exhaustively with every topic considered, but to share those insights he has gained from his own study and experience. In the preface he describes his book as "the confession of one man's faith. . . . But it is more than just a confession. It is also a rational investigation of that faith" (p. 5).

Basic to the author's approach is his conviction that "honest reason must ever be at work in the storehouse of belief, 'proving all things,' testing, modifying, . . . scrutinizing what is old and criticizing all new experience so that one can achieve through it all a faith to live by" (p. 7). Since man's "perception of truth . . . will always be relative and partial," because of the limitations of his experience, a "healthy openness is the only appropriate posture" in his search for truth. Furthermore, "all knowledge to some extent reflects the knower;" even "new ideas are never 'immaculately conceived.' They always have a past." Fortunately for man, "truth will arrive in time if one is honest," for "honest reason does not walk alone, in view of the fact that God is also in search of man" (pp. 25-27).

Because "human beings experience directly but a small segment of the total range of reality," and because God must make himself known within this narrow spectrum, religious symbolism takes on an especially important function. Symbols are, as it were, "windows on reality" that "point" beyond themselves to something else. It is far more important, then, to ask of a symbol, What does it mean? (to what does it point?), than to ask, What is it? Here Provonsha draws a distinction between arbitrary "signs" and those "symbols" that not only point but also share certain qualities with the reality to which they refer. It is in this setting that the Sabbath is considered. "In choosing time rather than an object in space, God selected a true symbol of Himself," for there is "something of God in the quality of time" (pp. 29, 30, 34).

Man can come to God in at least three ways — through nature, through God (where God in his mighty acts encounters man), and *through man* (for although man is but a

partial image of God, to a certain extent it is still God that is beheld in man). One truth learned by looking at man is that God is good. "It is the human capacity for integrity, kindness, and compassion that gives man access to these qualities in what is ultimately real. Some men might never know that God and His universe wear a friendly face if they had not seen the fact written on the face of some fellow human being." God has sometimes ("not often but sometimes") in view of special needs and circumstances chosen particular men through whom to work. They are chosen because they are for the moment the "best available avenues to God," and because "God loved the world and *all* the people in it, not merely the chosen few" (pp. 48, 56-57).

The "central assertion" regarding God is that he is Creator. This truth "ties everything together. Every part of the universe is in some way related to every other part through God, who is its unifying principle. There is no radical . . . separation between independent levels of reality." All things, including "those amazing continuities, the electromagnetic spectrum and the periodic table, are visions of God! Man may yet be in for many surprises in his exploration of the universe, but not in for discontinuities! What he finds will fit into what he has found — because God is *one*" (p. 62).

Further, being the Creator of all implies that God is a person. "He initiates events that do not depend on what went before. He creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. And to say this, is to imply that God is personal, since the free act is the highest expression of personality." The biblical message is "above all else about a God who is personal." Again, to say that "God is Creator" is to say that "He is good," for "to create is, by definition, to do something good. . . . To take Creation seriously means to discover in every material reality, whether personal or social, an object of legitimate concern" (pp. 64-65).

With God, as with nature, there is "growth, development, freedom," and, with all this, change, for there are two elements present in God: "His character, and His activity in relation to creaturely actions." Here is change in the changeless, for love (God's character) must be "acted out in the midst of change" and thus cannot be "rigid and insensitive in its application. The most loving act in one set of circumstances may not be the most loving act in quite a different one. To be loving, an action must always be appropriate to the needs of the moment" (pp. 74-75).

Miracles and other "supernatural" phenomena are dealt with in a similar way. The Bible shows God to be "*not outside* of nature as its invader, but within it as Creator and Upholder. Nature's laws, properly understood, are divine laws . . . the appearance of the unusual signals, not the suspension of law and order, but their operation at a new dimension" (pp. 84-85). Even the familiar distinction between sacred and profane must be understood in the context of the oneness of God. "If what God does reflects His sacred character and purpose, all of creation is sacred — even the professions. There are no intrinsically secular or profane callings; there are only secular or profane men in them" — provided, of course, "the callings are related to the Creation" (p. 93).

If God is "*one*, and good," how can one account for evil? The answer involves the recognition that "God establishes goodness by allowing the alternative to have its day and thus to unmask and destroy itself." This requires that God not "interfere beyond certain limits — even if it hurts. God's ultimate will must take priority over His immediate empathetic identification with the sufferer." This is why "most of the time God keeps His hands off" and why "the innocent suffers with the guilty." No one, however, need suffer alone. "On

the cross God pulled back the curtains and showed us what was always so. God is on the cross in the world's tragedy and in every little individual share of it" (pp. 111-113). Throughout, "God is *with* us." But what about the scriptural views of God that seem to be contradictory? It is suggested that some symbols may be "inadequately drawn" and may require the clarification of further information. If in fact "Jesus is the clearest open window on God that we possess, every other window is simply obscured by darker glass" (p. 104).

The essence of sin is distrust. Both Eve and Lucifer perceived their creatureliness as "inhibition or deprivation rather than the basis of meaningful existence." In this way they called the trustworthiness of God into question, reasoning that he did not have his creatures' best interest at heart. Of course, "one who cannot trust God is left to his own resources, which is roughly what the human story has been all about" (p. 116).

As sin started in distrust of God, so also "the first step in reconciliation" is the "reestablishment of trust on the part of the creature through a demonstration of the utter dependability of the Creator — that He has the creature's best interest at heart." The gospel ("good news") concerns the fact that man's sin did not alienate God — it alienated man. The problem is, how can a person accept such good news? Here God must help us, and he does so in part by letting us "in on the action. . . . Serving others is a legitimate way to cope with feelings of meaninglessness and self-disesteem." In addition there are "symbolic aids" to faith, such as the Sabbath, tithes and offerings, baptism, and the communion meal. The most important of these aids finds its model in the Old Testament Day of Atonement and with it the New Testament "cosmic conception of the process in which Jesus is both the slain animal — the Lamb of God — *and* the high priest" (pp. 128, 130-132).

Ultimately consummated is "the atonement — first in a presence and then finally in a place" (p. 135). Belief in the Second Coming of Christ has suffered, however — first because of its long delay and then because of "changed world view that has rendered a literal event incredible to many." Here it must be recalled that the Second Coming constitutes "not a description of the time-space limitations of the one who comes (*god*) but of those of the man to whom He comes. God who is already *with* us 'comes' for man's sake, so that man can experience that fact more fully. The Second Coming is another example of the Word being made flesh, of God's communication with man on man's terms, in man's language." Also, the Second Coming makes clear once again that "things of the body — matter, energy, space, time — are not meaningless to God." Man "is taken to a place appropriate to his space-time creatureliness." God is interested "in redeeming and renovating this time-space frame that men call history — not in destroying it" (pp. 138-144). Admittedly descriptions of heaven are not quite what modern man would think of, but these descriptions are of what men in other times and places dreamed, for "all descriptions of an unexperienced reality can only project what has been experienced" (p. 152).

Such an articulate and well-reasoned presentation of Adventist thinking provides a most desirable alternative to other approaches exerting influence today. Undoubtedly the book will stimulate many questions and much discussion (it already has), but this is one of its virtues. The author's posture is wholly positive; throughout, he leaves little doubt about his own admiration for and commitment to this wonderful God who is with us. "Having God with us," he declares, "makes everything new and different," including "our own understanding about truth and about God. Whenever God, not man's projected illusions, really appears among men, He is perceived as friendly, compassionate, and gracious" (p. 156).