

Adapted from Georgia O'Keeffe's
"Jack-n-the-Pulpit, No. IV"

To Live Knowingly With Passion

On the way to the jungles of the Amazon basin, biblical theology called.

by Herold Weiss

I DON'T RECALL THE EXACT CIRCUMSTANCES, BUT sometime in my early adolescence in Argentina I made a most solemn oath before God that I would never become a denominational worker of my church. The taking of such an oath can only make sense if one understands Adventist denominational culture. For Adventists in the 1940s, working for the church was the highest thing any mortal could aspire to in this world. This was not restricted to ordained ministers. Working for the church conferred some kind of special status on even the housekeeping staff of denominational offices. The church, of course, was poor. Those who worked for her would willingly sacrifice, and accept the "living wage" which the church could afford. The rewards for such a sacrifice, however were understood to be great both in this world and in the world

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to come. Working for the church made it easier to be a good Adventist, and being a good Adventist was no easy task. To live in the world to come required that one had been a good Adventist in this one, and that, basically, meant carrying the stigma of a peculiar minority. The most obvious differences with mainstream society in Argentina were the noncombatancy stance in a strongly chauvinistic society, and refusing to work on Saturdays within a six-day work week. Besides, non-smoking, non-drinking of alcoholic beverages, coffee, tea, or the traditional *mate*, non-use of jewelry, non-dancing, and non-attendance at any theater or professional sporting event were sure to make of one a non-participant in the life of this world. On these issues there was no debate.

Being a denominational worker not only made it easier to be a good Adventist, it also gave one a reinforced identity within the Adventist sub-culture. Here were those who had really dedicated themselves to the Lord and were employed full-time in the "finishing of the work." My father was a denominational

worker fully committed to the church, whose life of self-sacrifice was only matched by his personal integrity. Observing my father's life in denominational employment, however, made me vow never to become a "worker." Also, my parents exerted some pressure on me to follow the path taken by my two older brothers—medicine. But when it came time to decide on my life's work, I found myself drawn toward theology. In the pursuit of theological studies I left home and began the great adventure that brought me to the United States.

When I first embarked on my quest for tools for the study of the Bible, at Southern Missionary College, my object was to eventually become a missionary among some remote people in the jungles of Peru's Amazon basin. Surely there were districts there that had remained untouched by modernity, and I dreamed of escaping from "the world" and establishing there an earthly paradise, bringing in the Bible and ordering life according to its simplicity. My studies were to enable me to translate the Bible from the original languages to the native tongues of the "head shrinkers." To do that I would probably have to become a denominational worker, but I would be far away from the centers of denominational political power-plays and therefore able to work unaffected by them. I was sure that God would understand that I had not quite kept my youthful oath.

Among my fellow theology majors at Southern Missionary College, I was one of the few eager to learn Greek. Some of my colleagues could not quite understand why, and I never told them. When I moved to Washington, D.C., and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, my first objective was an M.A. in biblical languages. For it, I opted to write a thesis on textual criticism because I knew that, besides being "safe" scholarly work, it would be useful in translating the Bible. While I was doing this work, the South American Division

sent me a "call" to teach theology at the Adventist college in Chile, far from primitive Amazon tribes. This forced me to do a lot of rethinking. I was 22 at the time and not quite ready to give up my dream and tie my life to a denominational center. Should I give up on the Amazon jungles?

At Southern, in a course with Otto Christiansen, I had discovered the message of the Hebrew prophets. Righteousness was not tied only to the keeping of statutes and ordinances. At the SDA Theological Seminary, Edward Heppenstall opened a *new* way of thinking about God. He was not to be reduced to an apocalyptic Judge. Roland Loasby, for his part, made it obvious that doing exegesis on a Greek text could be a lot of fun. Prepositions and genitives offered choices rather than constraints. The easy answers I had memorized in the Bible Doctrine and Systematic Theology courses I had taken in Argentina became less comforting and the Amazon jungle little by little began to recede in my mind. I determined that if I was to be a professor at the college in Chile, I was going to prepare to become a good one. With that in mind, I went to Duke University, and told the South American Division that I would return, but they would just have to wait until I was ready. By this time my boyish vow to lose myself in the Amazon had been forgotten.

While in residence at Duke, I struggled to maintain in tension my traditional Adventist beliefs and the insights made irrefutable by graduate study. In the 1950s, the hermeneutical program of Rudolph Bultmann, a New Testament professor in German, was finally making an impact on the American theological scene. Whether one agreed with Bultmann's solution to the problem of New Testament interpretation, there was no way of bypassing his diagnosis of the situation. During my student days at the SDA Theological Seminary, the church's proscription of "higher

criticism" had been faithfully followed by professors. Source criticism of the Pentateuch was thought of as a deviant form of "so-called" scholarship. When I arrived at Duke, I knew Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and textual criticism, but it did not take me long to realize that, being unacquainted with Form criticism, I was a babe lost in the woods.

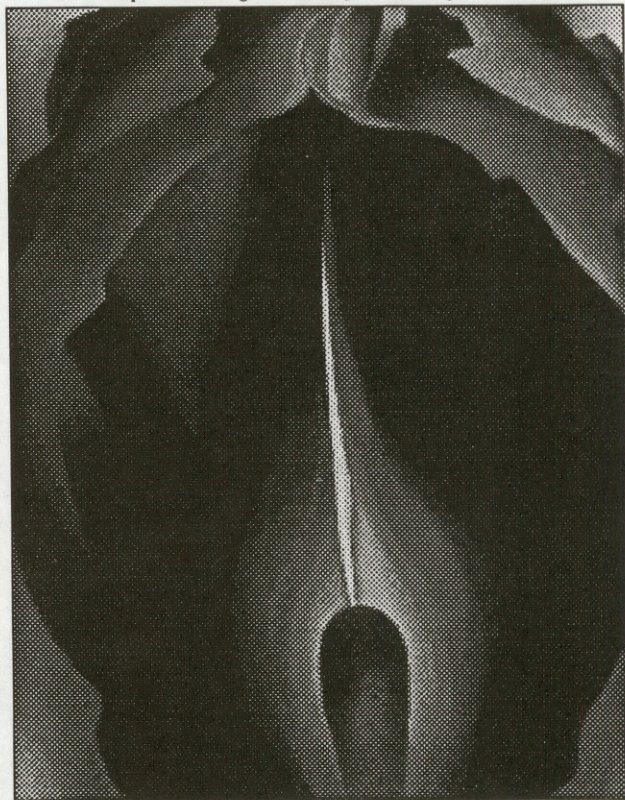
Bultmann had made crystal clear that the problem was not that of translating the Bible from Hebrew to the Amazonian Auca, or even English for that matter. The question was whether the gospel was inexorably tied to the three-story universe or cosmology that informed both the Hellenistic religious vocabulary and the Jewish apocalyptic matrix in which the gospel first found expression. Confronted with the closed-system cosmology of the first century, people who live in the open-system cosmology of the 20th century never really have a chance of hearing the gospel. Preaching the gospel does not just mean translating it from one language to another. It

requires its transferral from one cosmology to another. Biblical faith may remain basically the same and centrally important, but its meaningful expression among those culturally involved in the 20th century needs to be radically re-examined. This was a task to which now I felt drawn. I had discovered that theology does not consist of finding out what had been supernaturally revealed, but of the human efforts to make faith in God intelligible and significant—yes, "relevant."

The cognitive dissonance that I had begun feeling in my studies between my Adventist background and the academic study of the Bible became more uncomfortable while I ministered to a congregation of recent Hispanic immigrants in New York City. Being a pastor working for my people was not the problem. Preaching the gospel to good people facing rather harsh economic and social realities was not a problem. In fact, preaching to them was somewhat easy, since they had not yet become participants in a culture that operated in an open-system cosmology. However, it was becoming quite apparent that the church needed to adjust to the new cosmological realities in its midst. With members of the church living within different cosmologies, adjustments would not come easily.

In 1964, Richard Hammill, who, as academic dean at Southern Missionary College, had welcomed me to these shores, came to New York to recruit me for the Seminary faculty. I mentioned my commitments to Chile, but I was told that the church had other priorities. Of course, I was excited. Earle Hilgert was already the cornerstone of things to come at the seminary. After teaching theology in the Philippines, he had received his degree at the University of Basle, studying with, among others, Karl Barth. Sakae Kubo, originally from Hawaii, was then finishing his degree in New Testament at Chicago. Sakae and I were to be the new New Testament department. I was aware that seminary teachers may

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expect close scrutiny, but I felt secure in my faith, so I decided that a new day was dawning and it would be exciting to be part of it.

I had seen professors under fire. While at Southern College, Kathleen McMurphy opened my eyes to the world of literature. Having come from Argentina, where studying literature meant learning facts about literature, her classes delighted me. I discovered that literature meant ideas. Not too far into the semester we read Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. To my amazement, McMurphy soon found herself on the defensive, as some students launched a full scale witch-hunt attacking her for requiring us to read a novel. Had not Ellen White made clear the deleterious effects of such reading? The new academic dean, Denton Rebok, a pastor well known for his traditionalism, was drawn into the affair and took an impossible position trying to defend McMurphy while upholding the unquestionable authority of Mrs. White. At the time, I considered the whole episode rather comical, even if tragic. In the eyes of most, however, McMurphy lost the day.

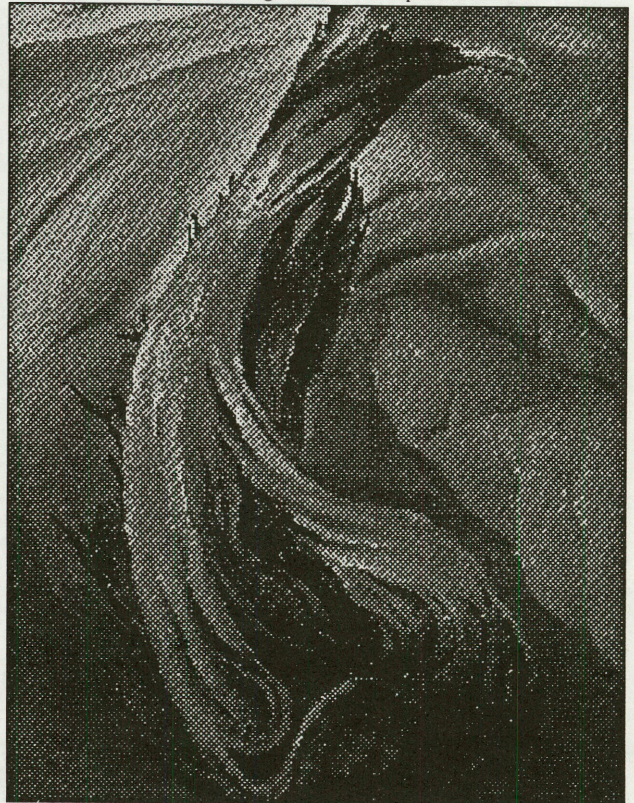
Later, while I attended the SDA Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., it had not been unusual for Professor Loasby, or Professor Heppenstall, to come to class straight from some General Conference committee where they had had to calm its fears about their orthodoxy. In those days the General Conference offices and the seminary occupied buildings next to each other on the same city block. Usually these encounters took place because some seminary student had gone to someone high up in the ecclesiastical hierarchy to accuse the professor of this or that heresy. Most of the time Loasby and Heppenstall took these episodes in stride. There were times, however, when they would come to class and share their feelings.

I thought that its new location in the orchards of Michigan and its incorporation within a university that wished to offer graduate

degrees, would allow the seminary to be a center where serious theological investigation could begin within the church. Besides, the church had recently conducted a successful dialogue with the Evangelicals and they had extended to Adventists the right hand of fellowship. *Questions on Doctrine* had been published and, if nothing else, at least the title gave hope for the possibility of theological questioning within the community of faith.

Earle Hilgert, Sakae Kubo, and I became a tightly knit teaching unit. For one thing, we team-taught the basic New Testament course for all students, and this required weekly strategy sessions. For another, we had a common vision, a common goal, and a common understanding of the best way to achieve it. Our aim was to show our students that the deep personal faith required of pastors and theologians was not incompatible with the serious study of the historical factors informing the life of the ancient communities of faith and the New Testament those communities

Adapted from Georgia O'Keeffe's "Stump in Red Hills"



produced and cherished.

Looking back at my years of teaching at the seminary I can say that in many ways they were full of joy. But my approach to the study of the Bible made some students raise a battle cry in defense of inspiration. I thought that biblical inspiration was a given. How to understand its workings, however, should be decided after a serious empirical study of the Bible had made evident what needed to be taken into account for a proper assessment of the case. A few students insisted that inspiration was *a priori*. In their view it demanded the submission of one's mind before any meaningful study of the Bible could be properly undertaken. Not to do so, in their view, was the height of human pride, the cardinal sin.

It was too frustrating to have to pass this litmus test every hour of every day. It was even worse that the faculty could not discuss the situation. Serious theological dialogue could only be undertaken with those who did not immediately assume the role of judges of orthodoxy. This began to poison the atmosphere and to gnaw at my soul. Trying to conduct graduate-level theological studies while continuously on the defensive turned into a chore unworthy of itself. My position became intolerable when I discovered that the university would not provide institutional support to its faculty. The university was supposed to guarantee an atmosphere where issues could be discussed. I thought that working slowly and carefully one could do one's work and see the results, like all teachers

do, 10 or 20 years into the future. I just wished to expand the horizon under which theology at the seminary could be done.

What I did not take fully into account was the theological insecurity of the denomination's leaders who had asked me to do theology. In their mind, professors are supposed to function in the classroom as mouthpieces of the "eternal verities." In my mind, my task was to guide the students into an understanding that would give the gospel power for our times. I was caught in the middle, because the majority of the students were themselves confused and not able to analyze the situation. The anti-intellectualism of the board of trustees prevented the university from claiming the high ground for itself. They wanted a faculty that would tell the students what to believe. I envisioned myself as the member of a faculty who wished to

function as a guide in the students' search for truth. In fact, that is the only thing I knew how to do.

Some students—I would like to think most of the better ones—loved what some other faculty members and I were doing. But many of the students felt threatened by our method and found comfort in their professors at their former alma maters and in their denominational sponsors. To make matters worse, discussions centered on issues that were not worthy of concerted effort, like the red herring known as biblical inspiration. The issue, in fact, was what kind of seminary we wished to become. But the faculty could not be brought to discuss it. As a result, Hilgert and Kubo moved out of the New

I have found that if two are to walk together the only thing they need to agree on is their destination. The route to follow, the mode of transportation, the rate of speed, where to stop and rest, and other details can be adjusted as circumstances arise. Otherwise, the journey turns out to be a boring trip.

Testament department and into other posts within the university. I resigned. Hilgert did the same a year or two later.

It may seem strange, but by this time keeping denominational employment had become a serious concern of mine. However, I knew that a theology professor cannot be assigned to sing the "eternal verities" just because they make some people glad. Denominational employment could not demand the price of one's integrity.

Reflecting on those times, it seems to me that one of the great advantages of becoming a serious student of the Bible is that when theological matters come up for debate, faith is never in jeopardy. "Higher criticism" may make one change one's mind about how to understand past historical events, but it can never put into question one's faith. Higher criticism certainly makes it impossible to play the obscurantist game of Bible harmonization, overlooking what doesn't fit one's preconceptions. The serious student of the whole Bible learns that the canon does not speak with one voice and that doctrinal agreement is not a biblical virtue. Faith and fellowship must have a foundation more solid than the happenstance of doctrinal agreements. I have known for some time that once one has found meaning in an open-system cosmology listening to those who operate within a closed-system produces quite a bit of cognitive dissonance. Some cognitive dissonance is the constant background noise of life, and adjustments can be made. What is impossible is to continue to live in a community in which a closed-system cosmology becomes The Truth. I have found that if two are to walk together the only thing they need to agree on is their destination. The route to follow, the mode of transportation, the rate of speed, where to stop and rest, and other details can be adjusted as circumstances arise. Otherwise, the journey turns out to be a boring trip.

The information that the brain, center of the

intellect, sends to the soul gets processed rather quickly. The messages that come from the lower abdomen, the center of emotions and passions, take much longer to assimilate, sometimes more than one generation. To be a Christian ruled only by the intellect is to live distortedly and disproportionately. The same is true of Christians ruled by their emotional needs. I have come to think that to live fully is to live knowingly and with passion. That requires patience for the soul to process the emotional side of life. For now, I can endure some cognitive dissonance if that allows me to enjoy the warmth of giving and receiving love within a community that I know and understand. I am sure it is a mistake to think that one can jump to a community where there is no cognitive dissonance at all. Melodies can become cacophonous in surprising ways. Socialization just does not happen that way.

The "Spring of '65" clearly failed. We thought that we could do for Adventism what Vatican II was doing for Catholicism. Vatican II undoubtedly was a big success. Today, the Roman Catholic church enjoys unparalleled vitality in the midst of a new universal religious dialogue. Those among us who see in it the workings of Satanic intrigues are blinded by their own fears and deny God's freedom. Gorbachev's visit to the Vatican was not quite Henry IV's trip to Cannosa, and John Paul II's visit to Denver was no more than a shepherd's visit to his flock. But rather than fearing Catholicism we should learn from it how to bring about the reforms we need. The failure of the Spring of '65 may have been due to the fact that unlike the Catholic communities of the 1960s, which lived their Catholicism in their rich liturgical life and were eager to join the reforms proposed by their theologians, the Adventist communities of the 1960s were Gnostic enclaves with too few minds ready to be shaken out of ideological constraints.

I am afraid Adventism in the 1960s turned

timid and reactionary after the initial openings of the late 1950s. It did not have a prophet like Pope John XXIII to spark a fire that would truly reform the church. It also lacked theologians with an alternative vision for the time. The then-president of the General Conference, preposterously living in the 19th century, spent his pen writing articles in the *Review* calling for the imminent second coming.

I cannot but feel sad over the opportunity that was missed. It has meant the total failure of the church to those who recognize themselves within an open-system cosmology, including many of her own college-educated youth. Ultimately, the open-system cosmology may give way to another whose name we do not know. No cosmology can last forever. However, the church in the 1960s reaffirmed a cosmology that had collapsed for a majority of those living in the second half of the 20th century. Installing it as The Truth in order to support a particular apocalyptic vision of things which was then considered essential and now, after Waco, is highly problematic and divisive, only serves to catalogue much of the preaching of the church as an ideology. The second half of the 20th century will go down in history as the slayer of ideologies. Like the East Germans in 1989, the youth of the church are voting with their feet.

Apocalypticism has failed because, while it preaches God's omnipotence, it effectively limits God's power. Can God *only* save Creation by destroying it? Theologically it does not make sense. Members of the church in the 1990s are no longer willing to pass through life in this world denying that it is God's creation. To do so is doubly tragic. Those who do it miss a great deal of joy, and those who are close to them are never affected by them, since they live somewhere else. The solution to the problems of life in

this world is not to become a missionary in the jungle. It is for us who remain in the church to work at the grassroots to transform our gatherings into the Body of Christ fully incarnated into human society.

If I have changed my mind on anything since my experience at the seminary, I think I can pinpoint it precisely. I had been bred since childhood, theologically speaking, with the morbid Protestant anthropology of humanity's total depravity. The theological foundation for apocalypticism is the myth of the Cosmic Fall which has rendered each one of us poor wretches incapable of anything good. Most significant of all, our reasoning has been distorted to the point that it is impossible to hear the Word of God. I don't doubt for a second that sin is a terrible, tragic element in human existence, and that idolatry and pride are the constant temptations of life. But to consider oneself a totally depraved sinner is to leave oneself open for the manipulations of religious authoritarians.

As Adventists, we must find our way out of the contradiction at the core of our tradition. On the one hand our apocalypticism demands an extremely negative assessment of ourselves, while on the other our Methodism presupposes great confidence in our ability and worth. Whereas I used to be among those who have an innate distrust of the capabilities of human reason, I have come to see that this view of the matter only plays into the hands of opportunists and fails to do justice to God's power and freedom. God has given us minds and we need to use them even when we surrender them to God.

My life with Adventists has taught me that being a denominational worker makes being a good Christian even harder. Maybe all along I should have been true to my childish oath, but, then, enlisting in the ranks did add passion to my living and knowing.