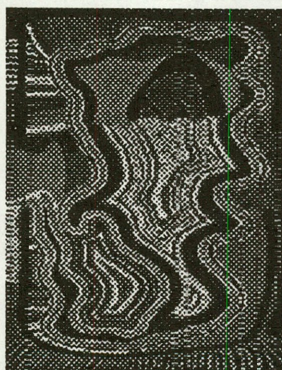
Adapted from Bai Bai's "Yimurr"

Why I Am A Seventh-day Adventist

A pilgrimage from an Adventist community to the frontiers of academe to the excitement of writing theology.

by Richard Rice

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE PROVERBIAL IN-FLIGHT encounters, the setting for countless witnessing stories. I was en route to Atlanta with some faculty colleagues from Loma Linda University. My seatmate was one of several delegates who were returning home from a national convention of Baptists in Los Angeles. I asked a few questions based on the press coverage of the convention I had seen. It turned out that she and her companions had supported the losing candidate in a hotly contested presidential election, so we exchanged observations about the intricacies of church politics.

Without warning, the woman confronted me with an unsettling question. "Why are you an Adventist," she demanded to know, "and not a member of some other church? Why aren't you, say, a Baptist like me?"

A native of the South and an independent businesswoman, she was articulate, self-assured, and, it was easy to see, used to having questions answered promptly. Although her inquiry seemed rather abrupt, given the course of our conversation, I sensed that nothing but a straightforward reply would do. For a long moment, several possibilities ran through my mind.

"I am a Seventh-day Adventist," I finally told her, "because I found Christ in the Adventist Church, and I have never had a good reason for leaving it."

She nodded slowly and said, "I guess that's the same reason I am a Baptist."

My loyalty to the Adventist community is deep, but it is not untested or untried. Here are the bases of my loyalty and some of the frustrations I have encountered in sustaining it.

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Growing Up Adventist

The true idea of Christian education is: That the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise. —Horace Bushnell

By one great aunt's account, I am a fourth- or fifth-generation Adventist. I'm not sure which. I only know that my ancestors were

looking for Christ's return long before I arrived. And they not only looked forward to it, they spent their lives preparing for it and helping the church finish the work. My grandparents on both sides left the United States for overseas mission work. In fact, church leaders encouraged my mother's parents to marry and leave college before they graduated. The end of time was near, the fields were white with harvest, and church policy prevented my grandfather from entering mission service as a single person. After their wedding, the couple went directly from the church to the railway station and caught a train to San Francisco. There they boarded a ship to the Far East, where they spent seven years helping to establish the Adventist work in Korea. My mother was born in Seoul in 1919.

My father's family served for a seven-year term in Portuguese West Africa. I grew up riveted by Granddaddy's accounts of boisterous pet monkeys, lions that roared till the ground shook, and poisonous snakes invading the children's quarters of their bungalow on the mission compound. The ebony elephants and carved ivory tusks that decorated the parlor of their Maryland home substantiated the exotic stories.

My personal roots in the Adventist community grew strong during a protracted family crisis. My parents' marriage disintegrated over a period of six years or so, and as things became more and more difficult at home I began to look elsewhere for emotional stability and personal support. I found it in the close-knit and caring community of our church and the church school my sister and I attended. Caring teachers, church leaders, and even childhood friends were always there for us. They seemed to understand our situation and respond to our needs for companionship without prying for explanations or offering advice.

These troubling experiences had some lasting effects on my religious outlook. Our family's problems made me sensitive to life's larger questions at a rather early age, and the church's teachings provided me with helpful answers to these questions. Moreover, the profound reassurance I drew from my religious community and its beliefs validated my convictions on something much deeper than an intellectual level. So, I began to identify the things about religion that really mattered, and my confidence in them became firmly established.

At the age of 10 I requested baptism. And three years later I enjoyed the most intensely religious phase of my life. Over a period of several months, God became a vivid personal presence in my life. He occupied my first thoughts in the morning and my last thoughts of the evening. I spent hours in prayer and personal Bible study. Those months were the high-water mark of my religious life. Ever since, I have regarded them as the time when I became thoroughly "converted." My later decisions to study theology in college and prepare for a career in ministry were in large measure a natural consequence of that experience.

Confirming My Faith Through Study

I find myself a believer and have not come upon any good reason for not believing. I was baptized and brought up in the faith, and so the faith that is my inheritance has also become the faith of my own deliberate choice, a real, personal faith.

—Karl Rahner

With the exception of ninth and 10th grades, I attended Adventist schools all the way through seminary. Religion classes were a regular part of the curriculum, and of course they formed my academic concentration at La Sierra College. I was the type of student who generally enjoyed school, and with few exceptions I found things to appre-

ciate in all my classes and teachers. However, with my natural tendency to look at religious questions from a philosophical perspective, I found the classes Fritz Guy taught during my first two years of college in the Gospels and in theology especially stimulating. (He took a study leave after my sophomore year to complete his doctorate in theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School.)

Guy insisted on raising tough questions and probed issues from several different viewpoints. He not only encouraged but demanded intellectual rigor from his students. Under his direction, supposedly settled points of doctrine became topics for vigorous discussion. Some of my fellow students in the ministerial program tired of his constant urging to think things through, but I found the regimen exhilarating. Here was an invitation to do our own thinking about our religious convictions and a demonstration that the endeavor could be exciting. There is no question that Fritz Guy's classes turned me on to theology. Looking back, I think it was only a matter of time until I followed in his footsteps—from pursuing graduate study at Chicago to teaching theology at La Sierra.

Our love for the church is much like our love for our parents. We love our parents not because they are perfect, not because we agree with all their decisions or our opinions always coincide. We love our church as we love our parents because we owe it our existence.

During my junior year in college, the conference president and his wife moved into the house they had built across the street from ours. It turned out that my study habits made a good impression on him. The window of my room overlooked our front yard. Each morning at breakfast, through the kitchen window of the adjoining house, John Osborn, the conference president, saw me bent over my desk studying. We became good friends. One Friday afternoon, I was washing my 15-year-old Pontiac in cut-off Levi's when Elder Osborn interrupted his yard work and crossed the street. He confirmed that by now I was a senior in college, and asked if I would like to come to work in Southeastern California after I graduated. I readily said yes. He told me I could consider it done, and the paperwork would follow.

According to policy at that time, a ministerial student who had a call was sent by his sponsoring conference to Berrien Springs, Michigan. There he would attend the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University for two years straight to earn a bachelor of divinity. After that, his conference would give him his first pastoral assignment. During the next four years, two at the seminary and two as a ministerial intern, the attraction of graduate study solidified into definite plans. I applied to several institutions and accepted an invitation to enroll in my first choice—the theology department at the University of Chicago Divinity School. My motive for going to a place like Chicago was a desire to study somewhere with first-rate thinkers who faced head-on the most serious challenges confronting Christian faith in the modern world.

My employing conference granted me a leave of absence for further study. My wife, Gail, accepted a position with the College of Nursing faculty of the University of Illinois, and we moved into an apartment in Hyde Park close enough for me to walk to school. Our daughter Alison arrived in the fall of our fourth year in Chicago. The following spring, I gradu-

ated with a Ph.D. in philosophical theology. We returned to southern California. This time I joined the religion department on the La Sierra Campus of Loma Linda University, where my wife and I have both taught during the past 20 years. My son Jonathan was born in 1976.

It is time to interrupt these recollections in order to draw the moral for our discussion here. As I look at them all, the various periods of my religious life seem to flow together and form a comprehensive whole. I am not aware of sharp changes or turbulent passages from one phase to another. The religious experiences of my childhood, my commitment to ministry, my graduate study in philosophical theology, my work teaching religion at a church-operated university—they are all of a piece. Graduate school led me to look at a lot of things differently, but on the whole it turned out to be a faith-confirming experience. I discovered that the claims of Christianity—the central ones, certainly—could survive the most searching rational scrutiny. Religious commitment continued to make sense amid the harsh realities of the 20th century.

The Adventist Church as I knew it was a community of dedicated, caring people who shared a strong sense of mission. The religious life was one that included strong emotional experiences, the careful observance of God's requirements, and also encouraged careful thinking. I felt that I participated in the Adventist experience on all levels. I lived by its standards, accepted its doctrines, served in its institutions.

Exploring Can Be Risky

In 1979 the church historians on our faculty, Paul Landa and Jonathan Butler, organized a summer conference on history and theology at Loma Linda University for Adventist teachers. They asked Fritz Guy and me to present papers dealing with the topic as it relates to our understanding of God. Our papers dealt, respectively, with the doctrine of providence and God's experience of the world—or, as Fritz nicely put it, with God's effect on the world and the world's effect on God. I developed the idea that God experiences events in the creaturely world as they happen rather than all at once in one timeless, eternal moment. In other words, his experience is dynamic rather than static. I found plenty of biblical material to support the idea, and I also drew on the insights of process philosophy, which I had studied at Chicago. Pressed for a title, I came up with "The Openness of God," recalling perhaps E. L. Mascall's book, *The Openness of Being,* which I had read several years earlier.

The paper led to a stimulating discussion and several people encouraged me to develop the ideas further. By the end of the summer I had a manuscript about a hundred pages long. I sent it to a couple of religious publishing companies with negative results. It was under review by another when a friend on the editorial staff of Southern Publishing Association, an Adventist publishing house in Tennessee, asked to look at it. Within a few weeks, he informed me that the editorial staff of Southern Publishing Association had voted to accept it for publication. He also indicated that Southern would be combined with the church's largest publishing house in the near future, the Review and Herald Publishing Association, so they needed a decision right away. He said that contracts in place with Southern at the time of the merger would be honored, and he felt that the editorial staff of the Review and Herald might have some problems with my manuscript.

I accepted Southern's invitation, signed a contract, and during the months that followed, as the manuscript proceeded toward publication, I enjoyed the typical give and take between writers and editors. I saw a prepublication copy of *The Openness of God* at a

professional meeting in Dallas in December 1980. Copies reached Adventist bookstores early in 1981. The book generated a lot of discussion, at least in southern California. I spoke to a number of church groups in the months that followed. From previous experience in the classroom, I knew that many people would find some of the ideas controversial. Since the prophecies of the Bible are very important to Adventists, there were many questions about the concept that God does not know the future in all its detail. Still, there seemed to be a good spirit among those who asked questions and discussed the ideas with me. A number of people welcomed the revisionary view of God with enthusiasm.

Nothing prepared me for the letter Richard Coffen, associate book editor at the Review and Herald, sent me in July of 1981. *The Openness of God* had created such serious problems for the publishing house, it stated, that board members felt something had to be done. Although it disappointed him personally, their decision was to withdraw the book from publication. Furthermore, undistributed copies would in all likelihood "be destroyed." Evidently, the basic problem was the fact that a book containing controversial views bore the Review and Herald's imprint. Coffen's letter also indicated that I would soon receive official notification of the decision from the manager of the publishing house.

Stunned and bewildered, I called a few friends over the next couple of days to share the news and seek advice. Evidently, they called other friends, and in a short time, the fate of the book became a *cause célèbre*. Surprised as I was by the decision of the publishing house, I was equally surprised by the widespread reaction to it. I never presented my view of God's relation to the world as the only way people should look at the issue. I was not out to change the course of history, or on a crusade to reshape the thinking of the church. I saw myself as simply sharing ideas that benefited me, in the hope that others would find them helpful, too—or at least interesting enough to generate serious conversation.

Evidently, opposition to the book's publication was nothing like the opposition to its prospective withdrawal. What most excited people, I am sure, was not the content of the book, but the prospect of having it go up in flames. Officials at the Review and Herald must have been inundated with calls and letters, because the decision was reversed within a few weeks. I was informed that *The Openness of God* would continue to be available as "a regular stock item."

Looking back on the incident, I see that nerves were raw on both sides. Adventists had been through a lot in the previous couple of years. For one thing, disclosures about Ellen White's dependence on literary sources had raised difficult questions about the church's understanding of her prophetic inspiration.

Adapted from Muntja's "Yikarra, West of Kiwirrkurra"

For another, Desmond Ford had voiced serious reservations about some central points of Adventist doctrine. There followed a tense meeting of Ford with church officials and theologians from around the world at Glacier View, Colorado. As a result, Ford was dismissed from denominational employment and later had his ordination "reversed." (He continues today in independent Christian ministry.)

I was aware of these developments when my book was published, but I thought its potential for controversy paled in comparison. I still think it did, but the book's publication was evidently the last straw for some in the church who were tired of controversial ideas. At the same time, news that a book would be withdrawn from publication and probably destroyed was apparently the last straw for those who were tired of seeing discussion squelched. On a personal level, it was both heartwarming and embarrassing for me to learn that friends, colleagues, and people I had never met were up in arms over the decision, protesting the book's withdrawal in strong and often emotional language. It was also frustrating to find people often more interested in the controversy surrounding the book than in the ideas it contained.

Reflecting On the Role of the Theologian

The Openness of God episode was a disappointment, but not a catastrophe, either religiously or professionally. It taught me something about denominational politics and the theologian's situation in the church. Theologians are susceptible to two temptations. One is to feel that they are the thought leaders of the church and should be recognized as such. Their years of study, personal dedication and hard work, they think, entitle them to enjoy considerable influence on church members and administrators; their counsel should be sought on matters of faith and life. The other temptation is to think that their status as academics—most are college or university teachers—provides immunity from ecclesiastical criticism. The purpose of theological writings is to explore ideas, not to tell people what they ought to believe. If people disagree with something a theologian says, that is no reason to become upset. Everyone is entitled to personal opinions.

Obviously, theologians can't have it both ways. We can't claim to speak for the church in matters of central importance to its faith and life, and expect the church to take careful notice of us, then take cover within the ivy walls of academic freedom when it doesn't like what we say. In reality, I'm afraid, theologians don't have it either way. Nobody pays attention to them until they say something controversial. I considered *The Openness of God* as exploratory rather than definitive in nature. It suggested a new way to look at some perplexing theological questions. I saw it as an attempt to stimulate thought and generate conversation. Others seemed to construe it as an erroneous statement of denominational views. I felt that my work as an academic had been misunderstood. They evidently felt that I had compromised my position as a guardian of truth.

I think many Adventist theologians are not sure whether they should play the role of prophet or scholar. As Desmond Ford discovered, an Adventist theologian who publicly questions established denominational positions in hopes of changing the church's thinking is not likely to find his or her colleagues rushing forward to offer their support, even if they sympathize with the position taken or believe that someone is at least entitled to express it. Instead, they are likely to wonder how an intelligent person could so miscalculate the political consequences of such an action.

My experience with *The Openness of God* forced me to look at a side of the church I had not seen before, not up close and personal anyway. Of course, I knew scholars could get into difficulty with church administrators. For example, five of my most stimulating teachers at the seminary left the faculty during or shortly after my years there. But life involves a lot of risks we never expect to materialize, so I never thought anything like that would happen to me. I guess I thought they were unlucky. Call it wishful thinking, or youthful naiveté. But when your love for the church is the one thing about your relationship to it that you are most aware of, it just doesn't seem possible that the object of such affection could ever question your loyalty. So, when it does happen, the effect can be stunning.

My experience with *The Openness of God* was certainly a critical incident in my experience as a theologian, but I don't regard it as a major crisis or a turning point in my life. Over the years there are other things that have more severely tested my loyalty to the church. One is the treatment a number of Adventist teachers and scholars have received. Profound personal commitment and years of effective service apparently count for nothing if a question arises about someone's doctrinal orthodoxy. And the question doesn't have to come from someone with theological credentials. As a colleague of mind once remarked, a person whose opinions on any other topic would be dismissed out of hand suddenly becomes an expert when discussing a religion teacher's views. Consequently, many Adventist scholars have been hounded from their classrooms by a barrage of unjustified criticism. It is not only unjustified; it is frequently unfocused and anonymous. As I discovered, the precise content of the criticism is often unspecified, and its sources are usually unidentified. "People wonder," "Questions have been asked," "I'm just not sure about"—these are the sorts of remarks that one receives.

Once questions have been raised, of course, that fact alone becomes a basis for suspicion, on the principle that where there's smoke, there's fire. A person thus becomes "controversial" by virtue of the mere fact that someone says he or she is controversial. It's a label that needs no further justification because it is self-validating. A few scholars have been forced from their academic positions, others have simply given up the struggle, and a number hang in there but find themselves marginalized or quarantined in various ways. They are ignored and measures are taken to limit their influence. Students are directed away from their classes. They receive no invitations to teach or lecture at other colleges. They hear about attempts to prevent their writings from reaching publication. They are not asked to contribute to denominational projects for which they are clearly qualified. And so it goes.

A particularly painful aspect of this phenomenon is the fact that a lot of this is caused by other religion scholars within the church. Whether they are currying political favor with church administrators or genuinely convinced that their position is correct and opposing views are wrong, a number of scholars have engaged in tactics of the sort just described in the effort to thwart the efforts of others to serve the church. This has been the greatest source of frustration for me during my years as an Adventist theologian.

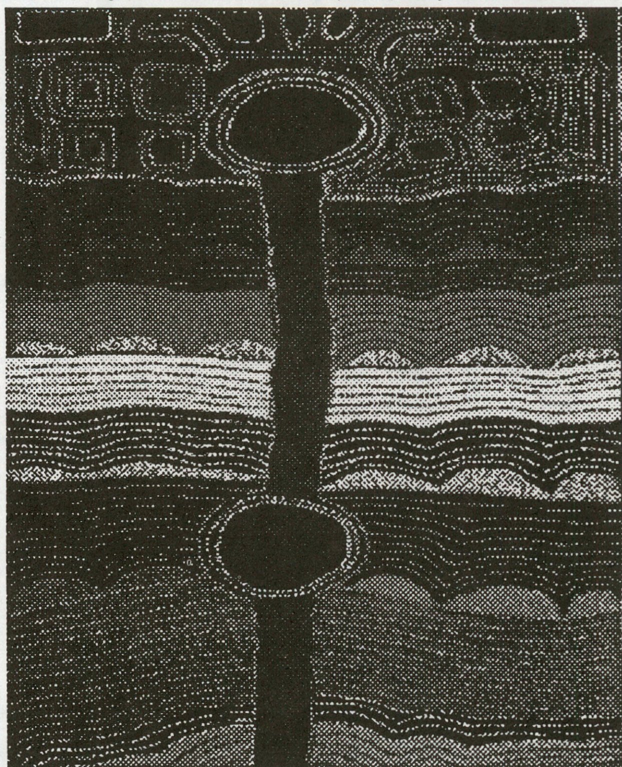
Affirming the Adventist Church

The critical incident involving *The Openness of God* forced me to do a lot of thinking about the Seventh-day Adventist Church and my relation to it. I don't think I can identify a specific effect it had on my thinking, but it contributed to a long process through which my concept of the church has evolved. On one level I am optimistic, indeed enthusi-

astic, about the church and its prospects. On another level, I am perplexed by the problems that face the church and the shortcomings that afflict it.

Through personal experience and theological reflection I have acquired a profound appreciation for the social or corporate nature of Christianity. Like most conservative Christians, Seventh-day Adventists attach great importance to maintaining a close relationship with Jesus Christ. As a youngster, I heard teachers and pastors repeatedly stress the need to make religion a matter of personal commitment. I sat through countless "calls" urging people to consider their decision for the Lord "with every head bowed and every eye closed." It was natural to think of Christianity as a private arrangement between the individual and God. But the vitality I encountered in the Adventist community, the sense of common mission and mutual concern its members displayed, points to the overlooked but important social dimension in Christian experience.

Adapted from David Hall's "Wati Kutjarra" ("Journey of Two Men")



The New Testament makes it clear that from the beginning Christianity is social in nature. It is not just life in relation to God, but life in community in relation to God. Salvation is something that happens among us as well as within us. Consequently, what Christians are together, through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, is more fundamental and more important than what they are individually. This means that we cannot be Christians—not in the New Testament sense—without church; that is, without actively participating in the Christian community and being part of the body of Christ.

The comprehensive nature of Christianity means that the Christian community is not only a believing community, but also a worshipping, serving community. Liturgy and practice are as important as teaching. Christians not only preach about Christ, but celebrate and manifest the life that Christ embodied. With this concept of Christianity, it is clear that people cannot be Christians on their own. It also rules out a sort of freelance Christianity: people maintaining a loose connection with one or more Christian groups, but avoiding personal involvement in any particular community.

This communal concept of Christianity is basic to my commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist church. I cannot envision a version of genuine Christianity which does not take concrete ecclesiastical form. To be a Christian is to be part of a community made up of real flesh-and-blood human beings.

As I envision it, the Christian church is both a transcendent ideal and a concrete reality that symbolizes and strives toward this ideal. Specific Christian groups point to something which they never perfectly embody. The ideal is a community of believers who love and trust one another without reservation. The primary manifestation of this ideal is a concrete group of believers who meet together regularly for worship, service, and mutual encouragement.

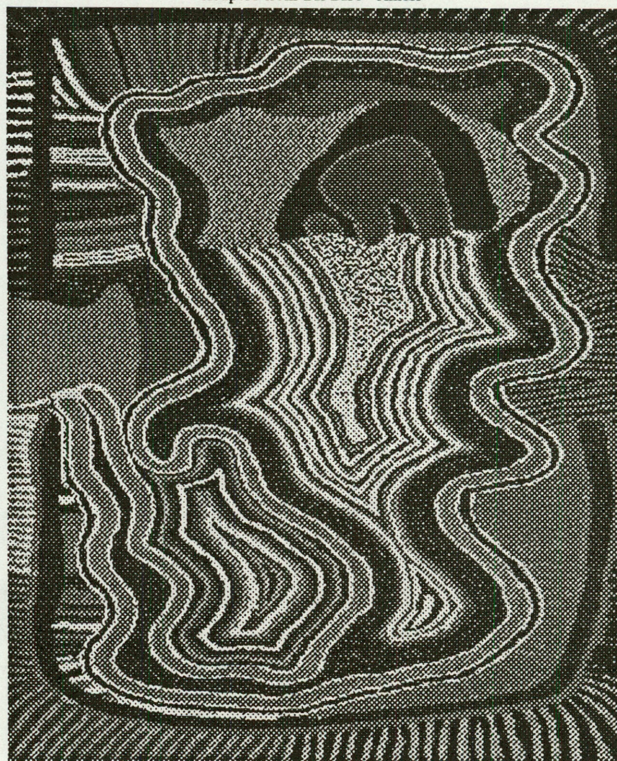
A particular group of people constitutes the church insofar as its members encounter the presence of God in their gatherings, and receive divine power to fulfill their mission in the world. The New Testament clearly indicates that salvation has this corporate dimension of uniting people in attitude and service.

While "church" therefore has the fundamental quality of an experience, or an event, it needs organization or structure for several reasons. One is to provide regular opportunities for this event to occur. Another is to coordinate and support the witness of the church in the world and thus fulfill the church's task of communicating the gospel in word and deed. From the ideal of a community perfectly united in Christ, there flows the necessity for a concrete group of believers who worship and serve God together, on to the need for a formal organization or structure designed to assist members of the church in realizing its objectives.

While some sort of formal structure is indispensable to the church, concrete organizations always have their pitfalls. Just as a concrete group of believers never perfectly embodies Christian community, no ecclesiastical institution ever perfectly serves its constituents, whether it is a local church board or a multinational organization with institutions around the world. Sin affects all aspects of the human situation—social as well as individual and, alas, religious as well as secular. I am indebted to Reinhold Niebuhr for my understanding of the inevitability and pervasiveness of sin, and for its distinctive institutional manifestations. His classic work *The Nature and Destiny of Man* was the principal text in two of my courses at the University of Chicago. And I was also impressed by his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society.* The machinations of city politics during Richard J. Daley's mayoral tenure along with the unfolding Watergate scandal in the nation's capital brilliantly illustrated Niebuhr's thesis during my years as a graduate student, and my observations of educational and church organizations since consistently corroborate it.

For all their resources, Niebuhr maintains, moral as well as intellectual, human beings have an incorrigible tendency to self-interest. Our own needs are always more vivid and more important to us than the needs of others. And whenever we sense a threat to our security, we instinctively act to protect ourselves, whether or not it promotes fairness and justice. There is, however, a crucial difference between the moral resources of individuals and those of groups. In moments of high moral insight, individual persons sometimes see the needs of others as equal to their own, but this is impossible for groups to do. According to Niebuhr, groups lack the moral and rational resources of individuals, and superior size makes their claims of importance more plausible. In view of the lofty purposes they serve, religious groups are especially tenacious in defending themselves, and their aspirations provide an eloquent rationale for self-

Adapted from Bai Bai's "Yimurr"



interest.

Niebuhr's convincing portrayal of collective pride explains why it is difficult for institutions, and for religious institutions in particular, to accept changes in policy, practice, or belief. So, it comes as no surprise that Adventist administrators do not welcome new theological ideas or proposed revisions in denominational policy. From their vantage point institutional survival is the supreme value, the overriding consideration in every situation. In addition, they are naturally inclined to view the success of their own careers as essential to that of the institution. These convictions virtually guarantee that they will follow the course that is politically expedient. This is not to say that Adventist administrators are worse than others. In general, I believe the opposite is true. The ones I have come to know are dedicated, spiritual people. It is simply to acknowledge the facts of human experience as they apply to our group, as well as to every other.

People are often disappointed with religion, because it so frequently fails to fulfill their ideals and aspirations. The Adventist Church has disappointed me over the years. Adventism has seemed reluctant to pursue justice in several important areas. As the Merikay Silver case demonstrates, church administrators resisted paying men and women equally. The church has resisted including certain ethnic groups within its leadership. It persists in excluding women from its ordained ministry. The remuneration for church employees involved in educational ministry is unjustifiably inferior to that paid to those in pastoral ministry.

Certainly the Adventist Church has its share of problems, but, in spite of its shortcomings, reading Niebuhr has helped me to avoid becoming hopelessly disillusioned with my church. Understanding collective pride can prevent us from entertaining exaggerated expectations of any organization. Because I do not anticipate the church perfectly embodying the ideals to which it points, I am not surprised that it sometimes fails to do so. At the same time, because I view the church as a valuable reminder of those ideals and an essential aspect of the experience of salvation, I affirm its lasting importance.

We need to avoid an either-or, all-good-or-all-bad assessment of religious organizations. On a recent news program, a psychologist discussing the effects of divorce suggested that besides good marriages and bad marriages, there are "good-enough marriages"—marriages that have their problems, but are nevertheless worth nurturing and preserving. In a similar way, I believe, it is helpful to acknowledge that a church can be immensely valuable even though it comes short of the ideals it proclaims.

Rethinking Why We Think About Our Faith

God must forgive us our theology, perhaps our theology most of all. —Heinz Zahrnt

My perspective on the Adventist Church also includes a healthy respect for Christian doctrine and the task of Christian theology. The purpose of theology is to help the church do its thinking. It is therefore an enterprise fraught with liabilities, because while thinking is important to the church, it is one of the most difficult challenges the church faces. Real thinking is hard under any circumstances, but it is particularly difficult in connection with religion. For one thing, serious reflection seems to be at odds with some of the church's other responsibilities. By many accounts, certainly most Adventist accounts, the central task of the church is evangelism—communicating the good news of salvation and welcoming members into the body of Christ. Central to evangelism, of course, is proclamation. Basic

to effective proclamation is unwavering confidence in the truth of one's message. And this is where the problem arises. Careful reflection does not always produce unwavering confidence. It often leads to questions that are not easy to answer, and there are times when it poses challenges and raises serious doubts. Real thinking can make people awfully uncomfortable.

There are several ways to respond to this problem. Of course, the starkest possibilities are either to stop thinking or stop believing, and each option has its takers. Some people decide that if thinking about religion unsettles their confidence they are better off not thinking. They intend to remain faithful to the church at any cost, and if this means never asking a difficult question, so be it. Other people are impatient with religion. They conclude from the fact that religion seldom yields easy answers to their questions that it doesn't deserve their respect. The complexity of religious issues and the prevalence of divergent opinions on religious matters provide this second group with an excuse for rejecting religion out of hand. A third group is, in principle, in favor of examining the church's beliefs, but this group knows in advance exactly where the process should lead. Intellectual activity must always support beginning assumptions, provide sophisticated reassurance.

But theology rests on the assumption that the contents of Christian faith deserve and ultimately benefit from careful examination. Admittedly, in the short run, serious examination may have negative effects. Traditional explanations may appear inadequate; time-honored positions become less secure. As a result, people looking for snappy answers to religious questions, quick fixes for spiritual problems, or windfall profits from minimal intellectual investment—to mix several metaphors—find theology irritating, because it seldom provides any of these things. People looking to theology for reassurance are often disappointed, because theology frequently raises as many questions as it answers.

The benefits of theology emerge over the long haul. The full wealth of conviction that understanding brings, to quote the book of Colossians, requires great patience. It builds confidence, but not at the price of devising easy answers to difficult questions. Theology calls the church to complete honesty in long-term, serious reflection. In the final analysis, I believe those who are willing to subject the church's beliefs to careful examination manifest great confidence in them.

Because theology is a human enterprise, its task is never complete and the efforts of theologians are subject to the shortcomings that afflict all human endeavors. Theologians are no more free from self-interest than other men and women, and their work is just as susceptible to bias as any other human undertaking. The appropriate response to these liabilities is not to despair of the task or to disparage those engaged in it, but to join in the quest for truth. Theologians are not a special class of people in the church, nor are they engaged in an activity that is somehow foreign to the church's activity. Theology is a task for the church as a whole.

Our basic motive for doing theology is love for the church. Our love for the church is much like our love for our parents. We love our parents, not because they are perfect, not because they have never made mistakes, not because we agree with all their decisions, not because our opinions always coincide. We love the church as we love our parents, because we share its basic values and deepest commitments.

We love our church because we owe it our existence, because it is the avenue through which God's richest blessings have come to us.