

# Four Ways Into the Next Millennium

The dean of Adventism's systematic theologians proposes four ways members can revitalize their church.

by Fritz Guy

INSTEAD OF TALKING ABOUT "ADVENTISM" IN general, or about the "church," I'm going to talk about *us*. How do North American Adventists need to change? Renewal, of course, is always a gift of grace. It is the work of the Spirit. But there are some things we can do to be ready for it. I suggest four ways *we* need to change.<sup>1</sup>

## Revitalize Our Theology

My first proposal is that we *revitalize our theology*. In order to do this, we need to recover the idea of "present truth"—truth that is not closed but open, not changeless but dynamic. A creed or a doctrinal statement is never the last word, but at most a progress report.

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To rethink our theology most constructively, we need to revise our approach to Scripture. We study it and dissect it, but we need to learn to *listen* to it, and we need to hear its different voices. We need to listen to it as a whole.

For Scripture is not a bag of individual pieces, but a mosaic. Scripture is not an encyclopedia of facts, but the compelling story of God's interaction with human existence—in the history of Israel, and then in the story of Jesus. Scripture is not a stockpile of hand grenades to hurl at our theological opponents, but a battery of floodlights to illuminate the meaning of our existence; not a recipe book, but a casebook.<sup>2</sup> To be Christian is to see the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah as the heart and center of all divine revelation—to grasp Scripture in the light of the Christ event.

In rethinking our theology, we need to get clear, once and for all, about the gospel. We need, in other words, a re-imagining of God—of who God is, and what God wants.<sup>3</sup> We need to see God, not as omnipotent Sovereign, but

as infinite Lover—not as a disinterested Judge pronouncing a sentence, but as a concerned and passionate Parent welcoming a child home. We need to see God’s power, not as coercion and control, but as attraction and persuasion. We need to see salvation, not as a reward, but as a gift. We need to see God’s will for us, not as obedience to divine authority, but as our fulfillment, our happiness.<sup>4</sup> For us, the Ten Commandments are not a demand, but a guide toward human flourishing. Sanctification and spiritual growth in Christ is not so much the process of pleasing God as it is living out our highest and best possibilities.

Once we are clear about the gospel, we need to determine what parts of our heritage will be particularly meaningful in the 21st century.

The Sabbath, for example, is not so much a religious duty as a spiritual experience, not so much holy “busyness” as stillness before God—not our surrender of time, but a gift that comes to us as unearned and unproduced as God’s love for us. Living in the Advent hope is not painting scenarios of last-day events, but having confidence in a future that will fulfill everything we now experience as truly good. The wholeness of human personhood leads to an experience that is “more than the sum of its parts,” and warrants both nurturing and enjoying our bodily, intellectual, and aesthetic experience. A sense of mission leads to a desire to contribute to the fulfillment of the Creator’s intention for all kinds of beings, especially human beings, created in God’s own image.

We also need to think about some new things. I will mention only three.<sup>5</sup> When we have recognized (by ordination) that the ministry of women is spiritually equal to that of men, we need to ask whether our practice of ordination—of specially identifying and designating some persons as “ministers” and “setting them apart”—is itself a distortion of the meaning of the gospel and of ministry in Christ’s name. We also need to ask whether

our concern for “wholeness” and for our whole world should not impel us into environmental activism. If, as Jack Provonsha used to say, the sky is God’s sky, the trees are God’s tress, and the rivers are God’s rivers, shouldn’t we truly care about them—about their health and preservation for the continuing glory of God? And we need to ask whether the gospel of God’s universal and unconditional love, which inspires our concern and respect for all of humanity, should not also inspire a hope for the salvation of every person in our lives. If God can, does, and will save *us*, is there anyone whose salvation we cannot hope for? Imagining—and hoping for—the salvation of everyone we know would radically change the ways we feel about them and relate to them.

## Renew Our Life in the Spirit

**W**e need to get serious about the discipline of *contemplative prayer*. Here is a place where our heritage is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, Adventists can recite many one-liners about spiritual formation: for example, “It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ”;<sup>6</sup> “When every other voice is hushed, and in quietness we wait before Him, the silence of the soul makes more distinct the voice of God.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, contemplation is not a very noticeable part of our existence. We Adventists are children of our American activist culture, where production, achievement, and accomplishment are our gods, and increased efficiency is our creed. We are much better at *doing*—proclaiming, building, establishing, administering, publishing, educating, caring for the sick—than we are at *being*. We tend to think of prayer as a means of doing, of getting what we want.

For this, we have the extraordinary resource

of Sabbath time—time that is intended for being;<sup>8</sup> time to experience and enjoy our uniqueness and our relatedness to all of reality, to realize how much we are loved, how much our lives are blessed.

We need, also, to become worshipping as well as witnessing and working Adventists. The recent attraction of some Adventists toward Anglican,<sup>9</sup> Presbyterian,<sup>10</sup> and charismatic<sup>11</sup> styles of worship may be evidence of a spiritual inadequacy in the typical Adventist services. The issue here is not classical versus rock music, or organs versus guitars; the issue is observation versus participation, entertainment versus engagement. Whether a particular congregation enhances liturgy, preaching, or experience in worship, we all need to encounter, and respond to, the presence of God.

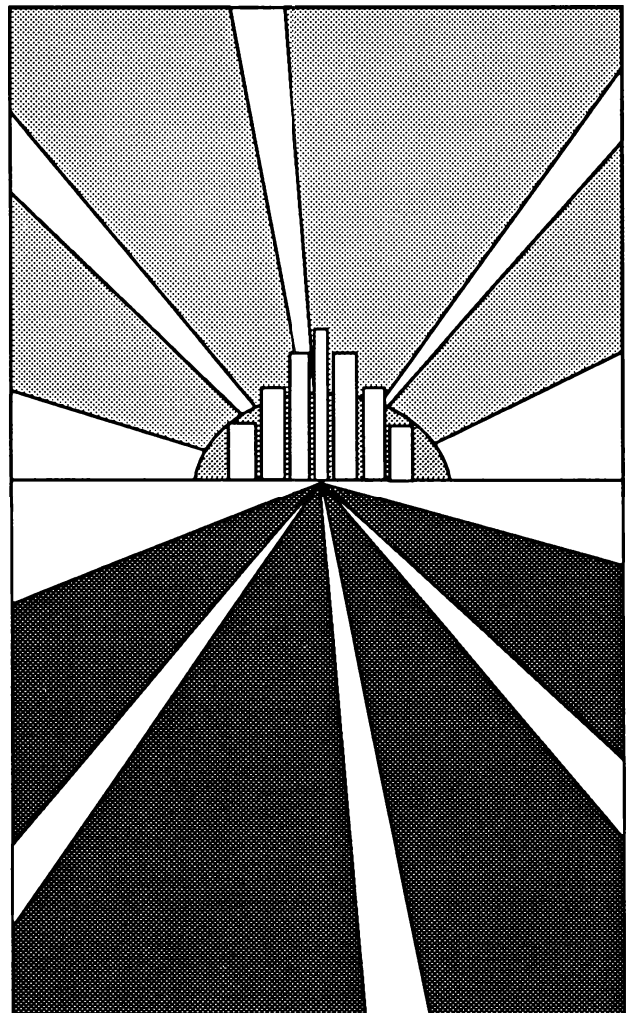
We need to get serious about the discipline of simplicity. We need to reject preoccupation with consumer goods and entertainment. We need to use our personal resources more generously and compassionately. Unfortunately, we are not immune to the lure of affluence that is the chief god of our culture. The American national pastime is not baseball, but conspicuous consumption.<sup>12</sup> Right next to consumerism ranks entertainment. Neil Postman was right: we are engaged in “amusing ourselves to death.”<sup>13</sup> We treat a presidential election in exactly the same way we treated the Simpson trial—as if it were an entertaining sporting event. We aren’t much interested in the various issues involved; what we want to know is who’s ahead, who’s winning.

## Revision Our Role in the World

**W**e need to build bridges rather than walls. We need to see our role not as being a holy elite—a group of people whose lives are good enough to justify God to the universe, so that Jesus can come and take us to heaven—but as helping, healing members of

our communities. We need to shift our emphasis from separation to participation, from fear of contamination to a desire to be helpful, from withdrawal to involvement. We need to see our life in the world not as danger to our virtue but as opportunity to serve, not as a dreary pilgrimage but as an enjoyment of grace.

Our spiritual dangers come not from other Christians, other religions, or outright atheists, but from our own self-centeredness, whether it is expressed in arrogance or fearfulness. Martin Luther spoke of human sinfulness as the condition of being *incurvatus in se*, turned in on oneself. This is a condition that can hardly be avoided if a community thinks of its mission as achieving holiness, if it lives in fear of “the world.” We claim, among other things, to have a mission to “every nation, kindred,



tongue, and people.”<sup>14</sup> We need to remember that “the claims we make, make claims on us.”<sup>15</sup> “Every tongue” ought to include not only the languages like Mandarin and Swahili, but also the languages of science, secularism, and pop culture. “Every people” surely ought to include not only Europeans and Latin Americans, but also homeless people, handicapped people, and homosexual people.

We can assist the vulnerable in our world. Active involvement in Amnesty International ought to come naturally to people who claim to have a world mission. Habitats for Humanity ought to benefit from the participation of Adventists who believe in caring for “the whole person.”

We can promote public health publicly. Roy Branson and the Washington Institute have shown what can happen when we get our act together to oppose government support of tobacco growers, the marketing of tobacco products to children and teenagers, and the general dishonesty of the whole tobacco industry.

We can cooperate with other religious organizations. The Adventist congregations in Greater Atlanta are joining with members of 29 other denominations in prayer, witness, and service during the 1996 Olympic Games.<sup>16</sup>

We can get involved with community-based groups that improve the appearance of highways and neighborhoods, raise money for medical care and research, or respond to the special needs of persons with AIDS. We can influence public opinion by engaging in public discourse—letters to editors, calls to talk shows, speeches at city council meetings. We can run for public office. We can contribute to scholarship and to the arts.

## Redefine the Function of Church Organization

We need to think of the church itself, not as an organizational structure, but as a community of faith, a spiritual family. The idea of “organized religion” is almost an oxymoron. Religion is necessarily (although not exclusively) internal, spiritual, and personal, while organizations are inevitably external, formal, and official. Religion is free, open, and spontaneous, while organizations are controlled, planned, and programmed. Religion is transcendent and related to God, while organizations are mundane and related to human functionaries.

Yet organization of some kind is essential to the survival of a religious vision. So we must expect tensions in the very existence of the church—tensions that are never completely overcome. But we can be aware of

them and live with them creatively, rather than in frustration and irritation.

Some Adventists have suggested eliminating the union conferences in our North American Division. This may or may not be a good idea, but there is a far more basic problem—the assumption that church officials know more about everything than anyone else (except, of course, higher church officials). Thus a conference is assumed to know more about God’s will for a congregation than the congregation itself does. And a union conference is assumed to know more than a local conference, and a General Conference division is assumed to know more than a union conference, and of course the General Conference itself is assumed to know more than one of its divisions.

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*Instead of seeing the church as an army and ourselves as soldiers, we need to see the church as an extended family of which we are the adult members.*

But the assumption that the wisdom and judgment of church officials is inevitably superior to the wisdom and judgment of anyone else is decisively disproved by all church history, including our own. Besides the traumatic developments I mentioned earlier, we have the continuing official defense of discrimination against women. We need to recognize the denomination, not as the infallible voice of God, but as a very human bureaucracy. The function of church organization is not control, but communication and coordination.

Instead of seeing the church as an *army* and ourselves as soldiers, we need to see the church as an extended family of which we are the adult members. As adults, we know that it doesn't do much good to complain about the imperfections of our parents. We accept their limitations even as we appreciate their strengths. But we also know that there are some things we can do, and that we need to get about doing them.<sup>17</sup>

We can urge broader representation in decision-making. We could insist that in all constituencies and on all executive committees there be increased representation of lay members, especially younger adults. We could argue that healthcare and educational institutions are denominational stakeholders, with the right to play formal roles in church decision-making, rather than simply being objects of such decision-making. We could guarantee these institutions significant representation on the executive committees of the related church organizations.<sup>18</sup>

Decision-making needs to spread out, away from organizational centers, for at least two reasons. In the first place, people will be more likely to support plans and decisions which they themselves have helped to make. In the second place, in many cases the plans will be more workable and the decisions will be better-informed.

We can recognize that initiative resides not

in the denomination as a whole but in local congregations. "Congregationalism" is the nightmare of many church officials, but their fear is too late. For better or for worse, the congregationalist horse is already out of the Adventist barn. Congregations are developing their own mission statements, and deciding who they will accept as their pastors. While church officials are refusing to ordain women in ministry, congregations are ordaining them.

For better or for worse, conferences are becoming weaker. On the one hand, congregations are exercising more independence, and on the other hand, the General Conference is increasing its power over the local conference.<sup>19</sup> Caught in this squeeze, conference officials have less and less influence, and less and less room to act. The one restraint on the increasing centralization of church authority is the vigor and initiative of local congregations.

Will Adventism survive in North America? Yes, of course. One of the virtues of organizations, including religious organizations, is their ability to exist after they are spiritually dead. Thus we might, ironically, achieve a sort of organizational survival of the body after the death of the soul.

Is Adventist spiritual renewal possible in North America?

Yes, of course. We must never underestimate the possibilities of grace. But when grace comes, it will be evident in spiritual developments, more or less comparable to those I have proposed.

Is it possible to facilitate developments like these?

Yes, of course. They will be the result of initiatives at the grass-roots level. Rethinking our theology begins in dialogue, with people talking to each other face-to-face, by telephone, by letter, by e-mail; and this kind of conversation can lead to group discussions in

dozens of places. Publications like *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today* are obvious means of broadening the discussion, and it might even be possible for these two publications to get together to produce a monthly electronic magazine. Revisioning our role in the world depends on action by both individuals and

congregations. Redefining the function of our church organization begins with the grassroots and expands to involve conference constituencies and executive committees.

Will genuine spiritual renewal actually occur?

I live in hope. I am an Adventist.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The material that follows has been substantially enriched by conversations with a large number of friends and colleagues. In particular I am grateful for the contributions of Ivan Blazen, Gary Chartier, Merikay McLeod, and Margo Pitrone. I have also benefited from the comments of Brian Bull, William Hughes, Bernard Taylor, and Gerald Winslow on an earlier version for the ideas offered here.

2. See Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1991), pp. 98-109.

3. For this language I am indebted to Margo Pitrone.

4. Compare Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 3, p. 374: "Through the study of the Scriptures we obtain a correct knowledge of how to live so as to enjoy the greatest amount of unalloyed happiness."

5. Other subjects that could be listed here include the meaning of human sexuality in the light of the Adventist understanding of human wholeness, the nature of God's activity in nature and human existence, and the relation of Christianity to other world religions.

6. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1898), p. 83.

7. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 58; "Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him" (\_\_\_\_\_, *Steps to Christ* [New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1892], p. 93); "It is secret communion with God that sustains the soul life" (\_\_\_\_\_, *Education* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903], p. 258). These and many others were part of our Adventist psyches, our minds and hearts, long before Richard Foster told us about "the celebration of discipline" (*Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978]), or Gerald May explained the difference between willingness and willfulness (*Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982], pp. 1-21).

8. See Fritz Guy, "A Time for Being: Or, Why Karl

Marx Should Have Gone to Sabbath School," *Insight* 14:5 (February 1, 1983), pp. 11, 12.

9. See, for example, David and LaVonne Neff, in *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals are Attracted to the Liturgical Church*, Robert E. Webber, ed. (Waco, Texas: Word, 1985), pp. 149-161.

10. A Sabbath liturgy, based in part on the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, has been conducted regularly at the La Sierra University Church in Riverside, California, since January 1994.

11. Examples include a "celebration" style of worship in congregations in Arizona, California, Oregon, New York, and Washington.

12. In an election year it has been politically useful to complain about television's obsession with sex and violence. So we have a new law requiring a "v-chip" that will enable parents to screen out programs with objectionable content. But it is not politically useful—indeed, it would be regarded as fundamentally un-American—to complain about the consumerism that is the whole point of commercial television. So we will never see a politician arguing for a "c-chip" that will enable parents—and everyone else—to screen out commercials. For politicians know the source of the money that finances their re-election campaigns.

13. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).

14. Revelation 14:6 (KJV).

15. Sunny Merik, "The Claims We Make Make Claims on Us," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, forthcoming.

16. E-mail news release, Adventist News Network via SDANews, March 8, 1996.

17. We need to recognize our individual responsibility, both spiritually and theologically. Ellen White certainly recognized this. "Allow no one to be brains for you," she wrote, "allow no one to do your thinking, your investigating, and your praying" (Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* [Nashville: Southern, 1923], p. 307). The Society of Friends (the community of Quakers) recognizes that the will of the

group does not supersede the conscience of the individual.

Paul Tillich reflected on the polarity of individualization and participation, noting on the one hand that each individual person has a unique dignity, and on the other hand that personhood requires interaction with other persons and with a community (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951-63], vol. 1, pp. 174-178). But this polarity is, like all polarities, unstable, so that participation tends to become domination and subordination. Once this happens, it takes a major effort to re-establish the appropriate polarity—because, as Reinhold Niebuhr noted, people in power

tend not to give up power voluntarily. So it is easier and less messy just to let those in power retain their power. But our collective spiritual renewal requires that we accept—and demand—individual responsibility.

18. I am indebted to Gary Chartier for these suggestions.

19. See, for example, the new General Conference Working Policy, “GC B 09 Discontinuation of Conferences, Missions, Unions, and Unions of Churches by Dissolution and/or Expulsion,” *1995 Annual Council of General Conference Committee: General Actions* (Silver Spring, Md.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists).