



Irwin Hall—Pacific Union College

Growing Up on Zion's Holy Mountain

"I would not be an Adventist today," says the author, but for Graham Maxwell and his reasonable approach to Scripture.

by Delmer Davis

BORN A FOURTH-GENERATION ADVENTIST ON both sides of the family line, I grew up the child of devoted Adventist parents who worked for an Adventist institution located in what may be the most Adventist setting in the whole world: Angwin, California. All of my education through the master's level was in one Adventist school: Pacific Union College, with its elementary school and academy. If Paul could boast of being a Jew among Jews, then I could boast about being an Adventist among Adventists.

As a child and teenager, I reveled in my surroundings. Young and old alike constantly reminded me that, living on that beautiful mountain top at Angwin, we were "just a little closer to heaven."

Delmer Davis, a graduate of Pacific Union College, received his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado. For nine years he served as dean of the school of graduate studies at Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and for two of those years served as vice-president for academic administration. He has taught in the English departments of Loma Linda University and Walla Walla College, and is currently professor of English at Andrews University.

Keeping Saints and Gentiles Separate

I can still vividly picture the trees, flowers, streams, lakes, hills, and yes, rocks, in ways I cannot image the settings for the other places I have lived. At night, the locations continue to haunt my dreams. Perched on top of a mountain, separated from the more earthly delights of the Napa Valley and the wine industry (now some vineyards have invaded the very edges of college property), Angwin was then popularly known as a "hill of saints." Even though this was a phrase of disparagement among the "gentiles" in the valley, to us on the mountain it seemed a self-evident reality; we were engaged in a holy work at a holy school on a holy mountain. Like Abraham of old, we could look down on the dwellers in the valley and imagine Sodom and Gomorrah awaiting destruction for evil-doing. The very act of driving up the hill, leaving the vineyards and orchards, and navigating the tight turns on the twisting, tree-lined road that approached the

campus was to make real the age-old allegories of rejecting the broad road leading to destruction and taking the narrow and difficult path to paradise. Blessed by nature, climate, and scenic beauty, we knew we lived on Zion.

Separation was the key factor in our religious life. We were almost totally Adventist in the elementary school, the academy, and the college. In those years, the community surrounding the college was almost totally Adventist as well (about 95 percent, I would guess). Most of us who lived there any length of time could point out the few houses in the community occupied

by non-Adventists. During my 24 years of living in and around Pacific Union College, my knowledge of these "gentiles" was limited to brief encounters on shopping trips and field trips off the hill: the drive-in eatery at St. Helena, the warm-springs swimming pool in Calistoga, and the movie theaters in Napa or Santa Rosa. I felt I knew all I needed to know about them from people who said they knew them: family, neighbors, Sabbath school teachers, school teachers—from my earliest years.

In elementary school, I learned from teachers that any real contact with these non-Adventists could result in my downfall. I never doubted this wisdom until I was into academy. Even then, the early teachings had so much force that I remained fearful and skittish on those secret trips to the movie theaters in the surrounding towns. The force of this separate upbringing continues to this day to plague my

contacts with non-Adventists, making me somewhat uncomfortable and remote in their presence.

I knew what sins could result in my downfall: smoking, drinking (caffeine as well as alcohol), going to shows, swearing, and committing adultery (any sexual misbehavior was categorized as adultery).

The educational system was quite successful with the first two—smoking usually meant immediate dismissal, as did drinking (even students caught drinking Cokes on elementary school field trips

were suspended). It was, of course, easier to hide the last two evils—swearing (in reality, for us, often just the use of vulgar language out of earshot of adults) and adultery, especially since the latter usually took the form of awkward and hasty linkages in dark and secretive places, including the back seats of cars or even the abundant bushes.

In truth, something about the remoteness of the environment and the emphasis on purity

in language and sex in the Angwin of the 1950s resulted in teenage outbursts of almost compulsive vulgarity and would-be lustful behavior. I well remember the extraordinary means taken by our seventh- and eighth-grade teacher to stamp out these criminal activities. That a problem existed is clear. Some of the more squeamish among us (the goody-goody girls) had told parents of the obsessive vulgar talk and suggestive horseplay and gestures routinely a part of our everyday covert, away-

In class, Dr. Maxwell was the epitome of the rational person—always in control of the situation, possessed of a ready wit and good humor, willing to joke about himself, but always aiming us towards the greater purpose of the class—never offended by any answer or question, and always willing to treat any comment seriously. I would not be an Adventist today had it not been for that religion course.

from-teacher school days. The teacher brought us in one by one to answer the investigative questions. Had we done this? Had we said that? Generously sprinkling his questions with admonitions from the Bible and Ellen White, the context for his interrogation quickly became possible loss of eternal life. He attempted to get us to confirm the rumors and name others to be questioned later. In retrospect, it seems more than coincidental that this mini-witch hunt took place during the McCarthy era in American politics. I really do not think that the teacher himself favored the investigation. He seemed a reluctant questioner, very young himself, no doubt forced into the unsavory role by his principal and some anxious parents.

Many of us *were* obsessed with vulgar language and sex, but our teachers' approach did not result in reform. The unsavory behaviors and obsessiveness went further underground. This kind of continual and unnatural interest in sex and vulgarity no doubt contributed to the "gentiles" in the "valley" believing (verified by friends less squeamish than I about contact with non-Adventists) that although those Adventists girls did not smoke or drink, they were wild and unrestrained in the back seats of those big 1950s cars with the fins.

Following the Rising Line Of Sanctification

Ours was, then, for the most part a religion of surfaces and appearances. Although our Bible teachers explained justification by faith in academy Bible classes, they did not separate it from a heavy emphasis on sanctification. Always in such classes, the teacher drew that inevitable visual aid, the diagonal line reaching toward the top of the blackboard, with justification represented by a mark at the bottom of the line, and sanctification shown as the line itself, reaching ever-

upward, eternally. We understood that justification was not enough and that all of us had been justified (we had, after all, been baptized, some of us as early as the fourth grade at ages 9 or 10). We now engaged in a constant battle against the big behavioral sins as we traveled that upward line that led off the chalkboard and into heaven.

Although we knew a lot about Christ and the Bible (there is no question in my mind that the memorization techniques of the time led to better "Bible Trivial Pursuit" players), we generally did not know Christ himself or God. I doubt that many of us had any sort of a real spiritual experience or commitment, beyond a deep sense of belonging to an embattled church headed for mass persecution.

We went to church faithfully, even to Sabbath school, but at lesson times we would duck out and walk the campus in gendered clumps, looking for fun, laughing, giggling, and hiding from adults. We had a total lack of seriousness about what the Sabbath stood for. Our Sabbaths, indeed, were ruled by *dos* and *don'ts*. The *dos* included going to Sabbath school and church in the morning, eating a special Sabbath meal at noon (usually vegetarian, though not especially healthful), followed by napping lightly or going on afternoon nature walks or hikes. At older ages, rides in cars became permissible, especially if said to be taken to particularly scenic spots—Lake Hennesy, the ocean, Pope Valley (not too scenic, but certainly out in nature in those years), Mt. Saint Helena, even Clear Lake. The *don'ts* were: don't play athletic games (baseball, basketball, football); don't swim (wading was permissible as long as we didn't have too much fun); don't buy anything in a store and don't get gas at a service station; don't listen to the radio or watch television (in academy, as an avid sports fan, I would sneak out to the car and turn on the car radio to catch the Saturday football scores); don't go to a movie theater (going to movies was a dreadful sin on any day

but much worse on Sabbath).

Rainy days might mean gathering around the piano to sing hymns, or playing acceptable Bible or nature games (Ruth Wheeler's "Bird," "Flower," and "Animal" games were especially popular in our family). In many homes, reading on Sabbath was carefully monitored, but those of us devoted to this pastime (perhaps a higher percentage than would be the case today) managed to subvert such restrictions by reading fiction (also often forbidden on any day) covertly in our rooms, with faked sleep always handy as a cover, should we be interrupted.

I do not wish to paint a picture too colored by restrictions and monitoring, however. Most of the "good crowd"—that is, the non-rebellious teenagers, the conformists such as I—found nothing particularly annoying about these conditions. Our somewhat innocent subversions spiced our otherwise monotonously routine lives. That we were no more certain of salvation than the big rebellious and notorious sinners around us in the academy, the ones who always caused trouble, seldom occurred to us. Uncertain as we were, most of us saw ourselves on that journey across the blackboard, the upward path towards sanctification.

Pacific Union College (1940s)



It wasn't that our elders didn't attempt to open our eyes to impending doom. In 1957-1958, after the Russians put a man in space, our academy Bible teacher and principal predicted that God would never allow human beings to get to the moon. Christ's coming would intervene. The Kennedy/Nixon campaign in 1960 was seen by nearly all Angwinites as a sign of the end. Because of Kennedy's Catholicism, most of the few Democrats on the hill voted Republican.

By and large, those of us raised in the church had little difficulty ignoring such warnings. We had heard predictions like these before. That none had come true undercut the urgency of reform. We would listen politely, but remain unmoved. So, we were not prepared for the Adventist version of hellfire that hit our academy my senior year. An Armenian immigrant pastor, well respected in the denomination, kept us on the edge of our seats all week with thrilling stories of fleeing from persecutors in Eastern Europe. In his final sermon, he vividly pictured hell and hellfire as the ending place for each of us unless we repented immediately—then and there. As good Seventh-day Adventists, we had heard almost nothing about hell as a reality during our growing-up years. Even though discussions of prophecy often referred to the lake of fire at the time of the end, hell was, after all, a Catholic or apostate Protestant idea. But this powerfully built and stirring preacher, with a voice full of emotion, made each of us realize that no matter how committed we had been to our surface goodness, hell could, indeed, lie ahead, so we streamed out into the aisles of McKibbin Hall chapel that Friday (even the most hardened of the "bad" students), fervently knelt, and gave our hearts to the Unforgetting Judge.

Of course, this commitment to the new life could not last long. Inevitably, a number of us felt tricked, and those who didn't could not long serve God out of fear. Two weeks after

the event, most of us resumed the same spiritually famished lives as before. The emotion-filled Week of Prayer remained an embarrassing memory, an anecdote for alumni reunions.

Given the lack of depth in our experience, it is no wonder to me now that the majority of my academy class of 1958 quickly fled the church. Very few stayed around for college. Many married young (sexual intercourse made moral and legal; this was before the Pill), divorced soon after, and married again and again.

Discussing a Rational Bible With Graham Maxwell

Probably because I was less adventurous and more completely comfortable with my surroundings than my classmates, I went on to college at Pacific Union College. Although I loved my family and fully enjoyed my fun-filled academy years, I have to credit my college years as the significant influence in my spiritual growth. Only in college did I begin to discover depth to my religion. My Bible teachers in academy were both well-intentioned and admirable people; indeed, one of them was exceptionally talented and creative and really did minister to a number of teenage boys through organized and imaginative group activities.

I like to think it was divine providence that led me to register for A. Graham Maxwell's course in biblical philosophy, one of the dreaded required core classes then a part of PUC's general-education package. Even though other teachers attempted to carry out his vision in the sections they taught, Dr. Maxwell had really invented the course. At the height of his influence among both the faculty and students, Graham Maxwell's following on the hill probably seemed almost dangerously loyal. But this following felt the need to discuss

openly and rationally the basic tenets of Christianity and Seventh-day Adventism.

The key word, of course, was *rationally*. To those of us who were would-be intellectuals during the late 1950s, a rational approach to Scripture had tremendous appeal. Maxwell's class had, as a basic premise, the idea that God speaks to people through their minds. In truth, in those buttoned-down times, many of us felt uncomfortable with emotions and distrusted them, particularly in religion. We might float along dreamily with the sentimental love songs of Patti Page, Perry Como, Frank Sinatra, or Pat Boone, or even Elvis Presley, but we thought that religion had no room for emotion. So, when Dr. Maxwell explained, the first day of his course, that discussions would center around each of the books of the Bible, that we would try to understand why the book was in the Bible, what its major purpose was, and what the book said about God and his eternal character, all of us knew we had embarked on a new and exciting adventure. The sort of open-ended analysis of Scripture Dr. Maxwell introduced suggested that we might even come up with new answers.

In class, Dr. Maxwell was the epitome of the rational person—always in control of the situation, possessed of a ready wit and good humor, willing to joke about himself, but always aiming us towards the greater purpose of the class—never offended by any answer or question, and always willing to treat any comment seriously. Not only the method, but the man himself moved me toward the understanding of concepts that, until then, had been but vague, dark clouds looming around my otherwise conventional Seventh-day Adventist landscape. Later, Pacific Union College religion teachers became uncomfortable with this approach and the title *Biblical Philosophy*; some challenged the idea that any religion course is truly philosophical. But what happened in Maxwell's classroom was philoso-

phy. Within the context of a dedicated Seventh-day Adventist teacher's perspective, an inquiry was being conducted every class period—an inquiry about truth and how we know what is truth. Perhaps the understandings attained in this “philosophical” format were limited, but I would not be a Seventh-day Adventist today had it not been for that religion course.

Inevitably, we never got through the Bible. We bogged down somewhere in the minor prophets—never even advancing to the New Testament, even though the course met all year, three days a week. But we dealt with some of the hard questions: Why all the killing and bloodshed in the Old Testament? What do these events say about God's character? Why are so many of the Old Testament heroes so faulty in character? Why does the Old Testament include these stories? Are Seventh-day Adventists more Old Testament in their beliefs than New Testament? For whose benefit is there an investigative judgment? We often “got off the subject” onto contemporary issues among Adventists (wedding rings, jewelry, shows—those ageless Adventist themes). But, of course, we were never really off the subject; Dr. Maxwell wanted us to address these issues

in the light of our reading of the Bible.

Rather than memorizing texts and regurgitating doctrines, Dr. Maxwell's tests required us to put on paper our own ideas, formulated through the class discussion. Most of us had little experience writing essay answers or writing at all (this was the golden age of workbooks in American Adventist education). No doubt our efforts seemed rather feeble to someone from a well-known writing family, and educated at least partially in the British system.

Dr. Maxwell and his method later fell from the highest esteem. His move to Loma Linda University (as well as the moves of several other influential PUC professors to other colleges and universities) is another story. It radically changed PUC, I believe, to a lesser institution, although one perfectly adapted to the 1960s. Maxwell and his rational approach could not sustain its popularity in an era of flower power and feeling, a time when expressions of emotion came easily, and loving seemed the solution to all problems.

Learning to Sing Along With the 1960s

A. Graham Maxwell (1943)



During the middle 1960s, I remained up in an intellectual and rational cocoon, working on a doctoral degree at a secular campus, out of touch with mainstream Adventist youth. In 1967, when I joined the teaching faculty on the La Sierra campus of Loma Linda University, I remember a Friday evening sing-in. Guitars played and testimonials flowed freely. Songs were sung that I had never heard; they seemed indistinguishable from the ones about peace and love I heard daily on the radio. (In my youth, guitars had been unacceptable at PUC on Sabbath.) Perhaps my greatest shock came in the college Sabbath school—a Hawaiian group sang and softly swayed to the accompaniment of a steel guitar. Now, of course, I know

that Dr. Maxwell's emphasis on rationality can only partially fill the Christian life; that for real spiritual fulfillment, emotion and love and doing unto others must blossom; that a balance among all the elements of spirituality provides the most rewarding Christian experience.

Now, when I return to Pacific Union College, driving up the hill, I begin to feel constriction in my stomach, a tightness in my neck, a feeling that someone is watching over me, checking my bad behavior. At the same time, memories nearly choke out the surrounding glories of physical nature. I am once again young, secluded in holiness, guarded

from temptations, wrapped in a protective doctrinal gauze, superior to those less fortunate, cut off from the world, self-satisfied, if, perhaps, spiritually empty.

Yet, how oddly attractive it seems to return to that oversimplified nest; to lose oneself in the religious routine of that earlier era in that very special place in which battles against evil and the religious answers seemed clear-cut and obvious . . . and at least one great teacher stood above fear and superficiality to demonstrate to us that faithfulness to the Bible and the God of the Bible meant asking question after question after question.