

An Interview with Jack W. Provonsha



Photo: Bronwen F. Larson

By David R. Larson and Bronwen F. Larson

Hypnosis, abortion, the Church as a prophetic ministry, keeping human life human, the eschaton, an ethic of responsibility—Jack W. Provonsha has written on many subjects for *Spectrum*, beginning with its first volume. But it has been seven years since his byline last appeared. We were delighted that David R. Larson was able to arrange for an interview with Dr. Provonsha in February of this year. David and Bronwen Larson went to Provonsha's home in Arcata, on the coast of Northern California, and recorded the following conversation:

Good morning, Jack! How are you feeling today?
A little weak.

Is that typical for your situation in the mornings?
Yes, pretty much.

This is caused by?
Parkinson's Disease.

Did your awareness that you have Parkinson's Disease emerge suddenly or gradually?
It came on gradually and it still surprises me on occasion!

Now that you are living here in Arcata, California, near your eldest daughter and her family, are you able to continue with your daily routine?

Not much chance for a daily routine! That does not mean I am inactive, but each day is sufficiently different that the word "routine" does not quite capture it!

Thank you for letting us interview you for Spectrum. What are your recollections of its early days?

It grew out of the Forum organization. It provided a medium within which to discuss things that were going on, particularly with those involved in AAF.

Was it thought that Spectrum would be a scholarly journal, a popular magazine, or something else?

It was aimed at the scholarly community, particularly for those in graduate studies in universities, but it took a direction that was not wholly anticipated at the outset: a broadening of the journal's role. The term "scholarly" itself was rejected by the founders of *Spectrum*.

Why?

It was too narrow in scope. It was thought that we needed to have a journal that would be intellectually stimulating, but not so scholarly in a narrow way that it could be dismissed as trivial.

Over the years you often published articles in Spectrum, didn't you?

At first we did not have a lot of material and so I wrote some!

That's too modest! In any case, your publishing continued. Wasn't God Is With Us your first book?

Yes. But that book was not related to *Spectrum*. It was a Review and Herald Publishing Association venture.

Wasn't there some commotion surrounding its publication?

Some ultraconservatives thought that the book was expressive of naturalism and rationalism.

How was the matter resolved?

There was a committee meeting conducted by leaders of the General Conference at which my detractors and I faced each other across a table.

My! That's high drama, Jack! Where was the meeting held?

At the Portland Adventist Medical Center.

Did you feel a little bit like Martin Luther being taken to the emperor for questioning?

I asked for this meeting. I had already indicated to the Loma Linda University president that if this book was

not acceptable my teaching would not be acceptable because the book summarized what I was saying in the classroom.

If this meeting had not gone well, might you have found it necessary to serve elsewhere?

That's conceivable.

You were at one end of the table and your detractors were at the other. Were any others present?

Fifteen or so.

How many of them were theologians?

You are asking for an answer that presupposes a definition hard to provide!

How many of these other people were teachers and how many were administrators, in rough proportions?

Two-thirds were administrators. Elder Neal C. Wilson, who was the president of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church at that time, chaired the meeting.

What happened?

We spent nine hours exploring my position. At the end of this time the conclusion was that the persons who had been most unhappy with the book really did not understand it.

At what point did you feel that everything was going to turn out OK?

In the interim, and during the rest stops, expressions of friendship came my way that indicated all would turn out well in the end. At the conclusion of the meeting, Elder Neal Wilson went to the telephone and called Elder Robert Pierson, who was then the president of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to report that the group thought the book should be published.

Looking back from this vantage point, what strikes you as the primary misunderstanding of your position?

Language. People had not read the books I had been reading and therefore did not know how I was using the terms.



At the end of the meeting do you think there was 100 percent agreement, or did any of the detractors still have any reservations?

As the meeting broke up, even though the group had made its decision and Elder Wilson had reported it to Elder Pierson, one detractor murmured, "I still say this is naturalism."

What if someone had said to this person, "Well, what is wrong with naturalism?" What might he have said?

I am not sure what this individual would have said. I got in the last word!

That was your first book. After that you published several more. Did this much commotion surround any of them?

No.

You recently published a book titled A Remnant In Crisis. Its title sounds ominous.

One woman who looked at this book, a very thoughtful person, said that its cover scared the hell out of her!

How did you respond?

I just laughed with her.

Was the book meant to shake us up a little?

I don't think of it so much as laying down the gauntlet, as expressing the truth of the Advent movement, as I understand it.

The Adventist movement has a past. In your judgment, does it have a future?

Of course. But it may be a different Adventism than many of us are now stuck with.

Is the Adventism you know today the same Adventism you knew as a youngster?

No, it is not.

Your family has been with the Adventist movement for how many generations?

Depending upon which side of the family we look at, the answer is different; but I myself am a fourth-generation Adventist.

When you think back on the Adventism you knew in your youth and the Adventism you know now, what are the primary differences?

There are many ways to answer that question, but one of the differences between the Adventism of my youth and the Adventism of today is the level

of education at present among Adventists, particularly among professional Adventists.

On the whole, has more education been helpful or harmful for Seventh-day Adventists?

Necessary. And with it comes a number of changes.

Are these changes with respect to beliefs or practices or both?

They are changes in worldviews. It's a different world now. The intellectual presuppositions are different.

In what ways?

Such matters as understanding more completely the large universe of which we are a part, as made possible by the Hubble Telescope, for example.

How have such things impacted the way Adventists understand themselves?

There is a difference in the task and in the approach in fulfilling that task. Adventism is different today primarily because of the discovery of how vast and wonderful the universe is, and also how vast and wonderful are the numbers of people within it.

As you think about Adventism in the twenty-first century, do you anticipate further changes?

Yes, I do. These changes are inevitable. There is no way that any generation can flourish by simply repeating what previous generations said.

Are there some changes that you anticipate with good feelings, thinking they will be positive?

Yes, but one thing does concern me: our sense of mission.

That worries you?

Yes, it does. Our sense of vocation, mission, is slipping through our fingers.

What might be done to revitalize an Adventist sense of mission?

Huston Smith's most recent book, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in the Age of Disbelief*, represents a highly sophisticated philosophical and theological response to a widespread sense of loss of purpose, on the part of Adventists even. One of the things that occurred in this process of change is that Adventists learned they really have no corner on the market. By that I mean it was a monstrous arrogance to claim to have the whole truth, and yet we seemed to have assumed that this was the Adventist message, namely that we have the truth. In those days

the word “truth” was understood as something that was clearly attainable, even attainable at a certain address at which the Adventist Church was located.

And now we think of truth in what way?

We now think of “truth” in terms of a process, not an attainment.

As we go into the future, will the writings of Ellen White be of help to us, or a hindrance?

First of all, the impact of Ellen White is inevitable. There is no escaping the influence of her writings on Adventists. If we misuse Ellen White and her writings, we run the risk of losing the essence of what we have to say.

If someone asked you today, “Do you think I should be a Seventh-day Adventist?” how would you answer that question?

First I would have to ask, “What do you mean by being an Adventist?” and go from there.

Are there some types of Adventism you could recommend and others that you could not?

That is correct.

As we think about your careers, many of us think that A. Graham Maxwell often speaks of the truth about God and that you often speak of the truth about human nature, and yet the two overlap quite considerably. Would that be one way of thinking about the essence of what Adventism has to say?

Yes. Nevertheless, Dr. Maxwell and I see things differently in one regard, and the implications of this difference are far-reaching. The difference has to do with what Richard Rice has called the “openness of God.” I take very seriously the notion of human freedom as a basis for understanding human life and how God relates to it. My position on divine foreknowledge has implications that reach for miles down the road, and it is a position closer to that of Richard Rice than of Graham Maxwell. This position regarding the openness of God, which allows for genuine novelty to occur in the life of the universe, is a very crucial matter for how we understand God’s own nature.

This matter for you is not a trivial academic quibble, but one that goes to the heart of how we understand God’s own self?

It goes to the very nature of things. Even though all through the years Dr. Maxwell and I have maintained the greatest possible respect and affection for each

other, I still hold that this is a difference with great significance. It goes to the core of how we understand the very nature of God.

Is there more you would like to say about this?

We should be discovering that God has children who do not attend our church, or who may not attend any church. What matters most profoundly to God is our honesty in the presence of truth. God would prefer us to be honestly in error rather than to participate in something without honestly affirming it. It is an issue of integrity.

John Calvin said that everything we know pertains to God, on the one hand, and ourselves in our world, on the other.

Do we Adventists have anything to say about these issues?

We do. I think it is high time we accept the responsibility for our truth. This does not mean that we have a corner on the truth. It does mean, however, that we have something to offer.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

I am sorry that in the history of our church and in the history of individuals we have sometimes had to learn things the hard way. I am sorry that I can no longer write, something I really enjoy. I did not ask for this disease, but I will carry the load as best I can.

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