

Conversations with the Other Side

By Alden Thompson

How does a devout, fourth-generation Adventist (the author of this piece) “safely” enter into conversations with “the other side”? Very cautiously, after a long delay, and with fear and trembling. That’s how, though no one can know until the kingdom if it was “safe.” So why do it? In my case, because of a deep passion for my church as the body of Christ. It is my family and we all belong. If there’s trouble within, let’s work it through. And if someone has left, by God’s grace, let’s find out why and try to fix the problem. Hence conversations. Three are shared here at the invitation of *Spectrum*.

Conversations with a Conservative Within Adventism: Samuel Koranteng-Pipim

Samuel Koranteng-Pipim is a devout, first-generation Adventist, with an engineering degree from a university in his first home, Ghana, West Africa, followed by theological studies and a Ph.D. from Andrews University. Currently the Michigan Conference employs him as director of public campus ministries. He has taken issue with my book, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (1991), not only contributing to *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (1992), the Adventist Theological Society response to *Inspiration*, but also publishing his own book,

Receiving the Word (1996), in which *Inspiration* is a major focus of attention.¹

From the first time I met Pipim in Kansas City, in 1991, at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion, I sensed an eager conversation partner. A mutual friend later told me that Pipim had read through *Inspiration* four times. And Pipim himself graciously sent me a copy of his initial fifty-three-page critique. He is a staunch defender of the “trustworthiness” of Scripture.²

Several years ago, when Pipim was on the Walla Walla College campus teaching an Andrews University extension course, we had an extended conversation. It gave me the opportunity to pose a question I had

long wanted to ask him in light of his declared emphasis on the “plain reading of Scripture”: “Why has it been so important for you to avoid, at least in some cases, what seems to me to be the plain reading of the text?”

He recently confirmed my memory of his answer with this quote: “A person’s view on Scripture may be related to certain circumstances in their lives and in their world. In Africa...folks are asking for Bible answers to their basic questions. They need certainty from the Word of God.”

I admire such pastoral concern, but I wish I could hear a clearer answer to basic questions posed by the “plain reading of Scripture,” such as: “Since Matthew 4 and Luke 4 differ in the order of Jesus’ temptations, which one is right?” Pipim’s vigorous way of articulating the issues can actually hinder the very dialogue he eagerly seeks.³

Still, Pipim wants conversations. And that’s good. I will long remember the vigorous dialogue in the noisy cafeteria at noon after the session in which Jo Ann Davidson, Norman Gulley, Fritz Guy, and I presented our papers at the 2003 Glacier View Faith Science Conference. Several of our “conservative” brothers cordially urged me to join them in the cafeteria for continuing conversations. And so it happened.

Pipim was there along with Randy Younker, John Baldwin, and Peter van Bemmelen. Fritz Guy and I joined them for a very lively conversation. I was incredibly grateful for every person around that table, and grateful that our church leaders had seen the importance of bringing us together. That which holds us together is much more precious than that which separates us.

And putting things in print can further our conversations. For that reason, Pipim’s writings may serve the Church well in the end by enabling us to see clearly another side to the inspiration debate. Undoubtedly, both he and I fervently hope that the other will see the “light.” But what really counts is our search for common ground, positions we can both hold with a clear conscience. I see some hopeful signs.⁴ But only God knows how successful we will be.

Conversations with Adventist-Turned-Evangelical Dale Ratzlaff

Dale Ratzlaff is a former Adventist now active with his own ministry to former Adventists, Life Assurance Ministries, Inc., and editor of *Proclamation*, a journal

“For Former Adventists, Inquiring Adventists, Sabbatarians, Concerned Evangelicals.” A fourth-generation Adventist and the product of Adventist schools from first grade through seminary, Ratzlaff served as an Adventist pastor and academy Bible teacher for thirteen years. He now represents a sizable number of former SDAs who identify with “evangelical” Christianity, a form of Christianity that emphasizes justification more than sanctification and that revels in God’s sovereignty and grace more than in human freedom. Ratzlaff himself, however, is quick to distance himself from key features of that evangelical stereotype.

My first exposure to his thinking came from his two books, *Sabbath in Crisis* (now remarkably refined in his 2003 edition, *Sabbath in Christ*) and *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-day Adventists*.⁵ Both books present the New Covenant as a Christian (Abrahamic) covenant that replaces the old (Sinai) covenant. His new book, *Sabbath in Christ* succinctly states that the Old Covenant meant “physical rest”; the new offers the “rest of grace.”⁶ Yet he maintains a strong emphasis on the moral aspects of both testaments, including those present in the Decalogue. The Sabbath simply does not apply to Christians because it is ritual, not moral. Commenting on the Sabbath miracle at Bethesda (John 5), Ratzlaff says: “Christ considered the Sabbath to be a ritual law that pointed forward to the rest He would bring and now it had little, if any, value.”⁷

For me, the New Covenant is not a replacement, but a renewal of the same covenant promise God has consistently offered his people all along. But that is a point on which Ratzlaff and I would disagree. The question is, why?

Answers may be surmised (at some risk, I have learned!) from Ratzlaff’s comments in a 1998 video that is highly critical of Seventh-day Adventists: “Seventh-day Adventism: The Spirit Behind the Church.”⁸ In the video, featuring, among others, six former Adventist pastors, Ratzlaff offers a sharp critique of the doctrine of the Investigative Judgment. But when the video criticizes Adventism for not supporting the traditional doctrine of hell, Ratzlaff is not on board.⁹ As an “evangelical” critique of Adventism, many of the video’s comments are not unexpected. Adventism’s strong freewill orientation means an ongoing vulnerability to perfectionism and legalism. But, troubled by the video’s misrepresentations,



I became more involved with it than I had planned. After a pastors' meeting in Alberta, I asked Dave Thomas, then pastor of the College Place (Village) Church and now dean of the Walla Walla College School of Theology, to join me in a dialogue response. He agreed. Produced, distributed, and televised by Blue Mountain Television, our video elicited a positive response from Adventists, though very few who saw our dialogue had seen the original video.¹⁰ It was my intention, however, to invite a number of thoughtful people to view both the original video and our response, and to critique both.

And that's what led to direct conversations with Ratzlaff, for when I dialed Ratzlaff's number to order six copies of the original anti-Adventist video and several other books from his list of anti-Adventist publications, Ratzlaff himself answered the phone. About halfway through our conversation, Ratzlaff startled me with this comment: "I take it you are moving away from mainstream Adventism." Actually, I was grateful he asked the question. Given all the pain and excitement generated over theology at Walla Walla College in recent years, we hardly needed a rumor like that!

Responding with some intensity, I assured him that I am more enthusiastic than ever about the possibilities facing Adventism. That's when the conversation got very interesting indeed—yet remained cordial. If there was one point that I wanted to make, it was that Adventism needs to do a better job of preaching Paul. Our dominant freewill theology has made it more difficult for us to affirm human sinfulness, God's sovereignty, and divine grace.

In a promised letter to Ratzlaff, I spelled out three major "hunches," the "real" reasons why Adventists have departed for evangelical communities:

1. **Assurance.** In guarding against carelessness, Adventism often comes up short on assurance.
2. **Relations with other Christians.** A particular kind of Adventist eschatology can make Adventists wary of other Christians. Then, when other Christians reveal both buoyancy and conscientious faithfulness, the match-up with sometimes grumpy Adventists can place Adventist truth claims at risk.
3. **Sabbath experienced as test rather than as gift.** If Sabbath is only a test, it can never be a gift and a joy, only a burdensome requirement.

Later, when the possibility arose of publishing a version of my letter to Ratzlaff in *Ministry*, I sent a first draft of my revised letter to Ratzlaff to make sure

that I was representing him accurately. He responded with several helpful insights, suggesting that "disillusionment" would be a better term than anger.

Commenting further, he asked how I would "react" if a church administrator said: "Your main problem is you are trying to be too honest." Again, how would I answer a church administrator who said: "Dale, we both know that the doctrine [1844/Investigative Judgment] is wrong but we can't do anything about it. Do what you can with a clear conscience and don't make any waves"?

Recently he has been even more pointed: "Both my wife, Carolyn, and I continually thank God that we are out of Adventism and its associated bondage." He also said: "When I quit reading EGW, the Bible had new life and yes, new meaning."

I suspect more conversations ahead, for my own approach to the Investigative Judgment differs sharply from Ratzlaff's—my study of the growth and development of Ellen White's theology led me to the exciting discovery that the Investigative Judgment can be seen as an event in which a believer appears as witness on God's behalf rather than as an accused whose eternal¹⁷ destiny is at risk.¹¹

I also find the Sabbath to be a precious gift and the writings of Ellen White a great blessing, all of which is quite amazing to Ratzlaff.

But such is the stuff that leads to growth. I am hoping that further conversations with Ratzlaff and his colleagues could help us arrive at a truly biblical theology that reflects the diversity found in Scripture while preserving the unity of the body of Christ. I believe I can be absolutely honest with my Adventist heritage without compromising an iota of my own convictions—at the same time remaining on cordial terms with those who disagree with my position. Ratzlaff is hardly convinced of all that. Not yet.

Conversations with Adventist-Turned-Atheist-Turned-Methodist Henry Neufeld

Henry Neufeld, like Ratzlaff a former Adventist, was fully educated in the Adventist school system. He was a student of mine, graduating from Walla Walla College in 1979 with a degree in biblical languages, completing his M.A. in religion at Andrews University the following year. Neufeld states on his Web page that he is "currently engaged in two professions: teaching Bible and Biblical Languages, and custom software

development.” He is director of Pacesetters Bible School, which is “dedicated to community and continuing education in religion.”¹²

My conversations with Neufeld go back to the mid-1970s. Coming from a devout missionary family with self-supporting inclinations, he enrolled at Walla Walla College as a biblical languages major, avoiding a theology major for fear of being tainted. But grappling with

parents often give birth to predestinarian Calvinist children. When I asked the Methodists how many of them had family or friends who formerly had shared their freewill theology but had moved into an evangelical/reformed predestinarian theology, virtually everyone in the group raised their hand.

Those are the questions Neufeld and I explore with vigor and enthusiasm in person and by phone. We

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the issue of the age of the earth brought him to a mainstream experience and to what I felt was a positive experience with the Lord. At Andrews University, however, he had no support group. Contacts with Unitarian/Universalists left him unsatisfied. “Then,” as he told me recently, “God simply disappeared from my horizon.”

With an M.A. in religion from Andrews, but as a full-fledged atheist, he entered the U.S. Air Force, serving as a linguist for some ten years, including time in Desert Storm. Denying an old adage, Neufeld affirms that there are indeed atheists in foxholes—at least he knows of one.

His return to faith came in Pensacola, Florida. When Neufeld’s partner in the computer business became alarmed at Neufeld’s 24/7 work habits, he began suggesting various diversions. The only one that caught fire was religion. His return to faith involved a return to a thorough-going freewill theology. In his enthusiasm, he took the initiative to republish my book, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* And he has arranged for me to lead out in several weekend seminars—three thus far—for Methodist pastors and laity in Florida.

Neufeld is absolutely fearless in his use of critical scholarly tools, but is equally tenacious in his affirmation of the supernatural. He is as eager for conversations with those in the “reformed” tradition (evangelicals, Calvinists) as I am, for both of us are intrigued by the dynamics that lead some into faith as predestinarian Calvinists and others into faith as freewill Arminian-Wesleyan Methodists.

In that connection, I well remember my amazement at the response of one group of about forty-five Florida Methodists when I explored the question with them. Based on my own observations, I had concluded that predestinarian Calvinist parents often give birth to freewill Methodist children and freewill Methodist

have a great deal in common and he respects everything I hold precious, including my love for the Sabbath and my deep appreciation for the ministry of Ellen White. In fact, I have yet to see any anger or hostility in Neufeld toward Adventism. His parents, still devout Adventists, have had several unfortunate experiences with local Adventist churches. He discusses such things with me with evident pain, but without rancor. Neufeld candidly admits that when he left faith, his issue was with Christianity, not with Adventism.

I am not sure that I will ever raise the issue of Sabbath with Neufeld.¹³ I will leave that question with him and with the Lord. Interestingly enough, as I look into my own soul, I discover that even though Neufeld is a kindred spirit who very much appreciates my writing, the absence of common bonding with the Sabbath is a sadness. In that sense, even though Pipim is deeply troubled by what I write and has gone into print to say so, the fact that Pipim and I still hold that common Sabbath ground is a source of deep meaning for me.

But all of these conversations, although sometimes painful and awkward, have enriched my own understanding of human experience and Scripture and have sharpened my own convictions about what Adventists need to be and do to be faithful to our calling. I am reminded of an Ellen White quotation that has become one of my favorites. It constitutes the two opening paragraphs of the chapter “In Contact with Others,” in *Ministry of Healing*:

Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our



ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing.

So frail, so ignorant, so liable to misconception is human nature, that each should be careful in the estimate he places upon another. We little know the bearing of our acts upon the experience of others. What we do or say may seem to us of little moment, when, could our eyes be opened, we should see that upon it depended the most important results for good or for evil.¹⁴

A Crucial Postscript

But now let's go underground, so to speak, and address the fear of dialogue that haunts many devout Christians, Adventists perhaps more than many. Biblical warnings against compromise and deception ring in our ears. Conversations? If the "wicked" die because you failed to warn them, the Lord told Ezekiel, "their blood I will require at your hand." And Jesus warned of signs and wonders in the last days which could, if possible, "deceive the very elect."¹⁵

For Adventists, Ellen White quotations as genuine as the biblical passages themselves reinforce our separatist stance. But the separation necessary for a movement's survival in its early years may turn deadly with the passage of time. I am convinced Ellen White discovered that to be the case. And my study of her developing experience has enabled this very conservative and conscientious Adventist to adopt a positive attitude toward those on the "other side."

Ellen White, for example, urges the fiery anti-Catholic, A. T. Jones, to "treat every man as honest"; she counsels another brother to "always manifest kindness, respect, noble love and generosity toward even wicked men"; and she warns that emphasizing Adventist distinctives could erect "a formidable barrier between you and those you wish to reach?"¹⁶ She continues gently,

Speak to them, as you have opportunity, upon points of doctrine on which you can agree. Dwell on the necessity of practical godliness. Give them

evidence that you are a Christian, desiring peace, and that you love their souls. Let them see that you are conscientious. Thus you will gain their confidence; and there will be time enough for doctrines. Let the heart be won, the soil prepared, and then sow the seed, presenting in love the truth as it is in Jesus.¹⁷

That gentle cooperative tone contrasts sharply with the confrontational perspective evident some twenty-five years earlier when Ellen White argues in favor of the name Seventh-day Adventist:

The name Seventh-day Adventist is a standing rebuke to the Protestant world. Here is the line of distinction between the worshipers of God and those who worship the beast and receive his mark....The name Seventh-day Adventist carries the true features of our faith in front, and will convict the inquiring mind. Like an arrow from the Lord's quiver, it will wound the transgressor of God's law, and will lead to repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁸

Given her striking shift in perspective, Ellen White can say to A. T. Jones:

The Lord wants His people to follow other methods than that of condemning wrong, even though the condemnation be just. He wants us to do something more than to hurl at our adversaries charges that only drive them further from the truth. The work which Christ came to do in our world was not to erect barriers and constantly thrust upon the people the fact that they were wrong.¹⁹

That sounds to me like an invitation to conversations, both inside and out. And if, by God's grace, we can hear Jesus' second command, treating others the way we would want to be treated if we were in their place, God will know that we have also heard the first great command. Then he can pour out his special blessing on the Church. I crave that blessing.

Notes and References

1. Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1991); Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien

Springs, Mich.: Adventist Theological Society, 1992); Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Berean Books, 1996).

2. In his *Issues* essay, "An Analysis and Evaluation of Alden Thompson's Casebook/Codebook Approach to the Bible" (*Issues*, 31-67), Pipim says: "Bible-believing scholars...accept every historical detail—chronology, numbers, events and people—as a matter of faith and practice" (51).

3. Pipim and I have discussed this issue at length. In a recent

Judgment Can Be Good News," *Westwind* (winter, 1982), 4-7, 11; follow-up issue of *Adventist Review*, July 1, 1982. The (unpublished) forerunner of the Sinai-Golgotha series was presented in May, 1980, at the West Coast Religion Teachers' Conference under the title, "The Authority of Ellen White in Adventism. See also "The Scary Lady of Adventism Learns to Have Fun," *Insight*, Oct. 2, 1993, 2-4. For a more scholarly presentation, see "From Burdensome Asceticism to Joyous Simplicity: The Interplay of Theology and Experience in the Life of Ellen White," paper pre-

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letter he wrote: "One of the tragedies in North American Adventism is the unwillingness of scholars to dialogue." But dialogue requires room for diversity and I've told Pipim that his approach seems to work against that necessary diversity. On his part, he identifies three reasons for the scholarly reluctance to dialogue. Two of them are related to scholarly credibility: uncertainty and the fear of being proven wrong. His third reason, dishonesty, is the crucial one, and is related (in my view) to issues of allowable diversity. Here I quote Pipim: "The scholars are not honest enough to clearly state that they hold views that are incompatible with the official position of the church; they would rather do so after they retire from denominational employment."

4. See my review of Pipim's *Receiving the Word*: "En Route to a 'Plain Reading' of Scripture," in *Spectrum* 26:4 (January 1998):50-52.

5. All published by Life Assurance Ministries (P.O. Box 11587, Glendale, Ariz. 85318 [www.ratzlaf.com]). *Sabbath in Crisis* carries copyright dates of 1989, 1990, and 1995. In 2003, it was replaced by *Sabbath in Christ*. *Cultic Doctrine* appeared in 1996.

6. See chart in *Sabbath in Christ*, 348.

7. *Ibid*, 152.

8. "Seventh-day Adventism: The Spirit Behind the Church," Jeremiah Films, P.O. Box 1710, Hemet, Calif. 92546, 1998 [800-828-2290; www.jeremiahfilms.com].

9. Ratzlaff also does not want to be put in the same camp with predestinarians and with those stressing God's sovereignty at the cost of human freedom. Because the video made no such qualifications, I had erroneously jumped to conclusions.

10. "Seventh-day Adventism: The Spirit Behind the Church: A Personal Response," by Alden Thompson and Dave Thomas (March, 2001), a one-hour video produced for and shown by Blue Mountain Television, P.O. Box 205, College Place, Wash. 99324; [509-529-0321; email: manager@bluemttv.com].

11. See "From Sinai to Golgotha," five-part series in *Adventist Review*, Dec. 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, 1981; additional article in *Westwind*, Walla Walla College alumni journal, "Even the Investigative

presented at the Pacific Northwest Regional Meeting of AAR/SBL, Eugene, Oreg., May 5, 2002. All papers are available on the Web at www.aldenthompson.com.

12. <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/HNeufeld1/> See also energion.com. <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/HNeufeld1/>

13. That issue has now been raised. When Henry read the first draft of this piece, he referred me to one of his Web sites [energion.com] in which he addresses the question: "Are Seventh-day Adventists Christians?" Two quotes are worth noting: "I envy SDAs the boundaries of the Sabbath rest." And with reference to his SDA parents: "To my parents, the Sabbath is not a duty, it's a joy."

14. *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1909), 483.

15. Ezek. 3:16-21, 33:1-9; Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22 (NRSV).

16. *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1900), 4:331, 6:122; *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1915); *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 200.

17. *Gospel Workers*, 119-20; *Evangelism*, 200.

18. *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:223-24; reprinted in *Spiritual Gifts* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1864), 4b:54-55.

19. *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:121.

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