

# SPECTRUM

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**“Then a  
Miracle  
Occurs”**

Pastor or  
Prostitute?  
The Battle over  
Mary  
Magdalene

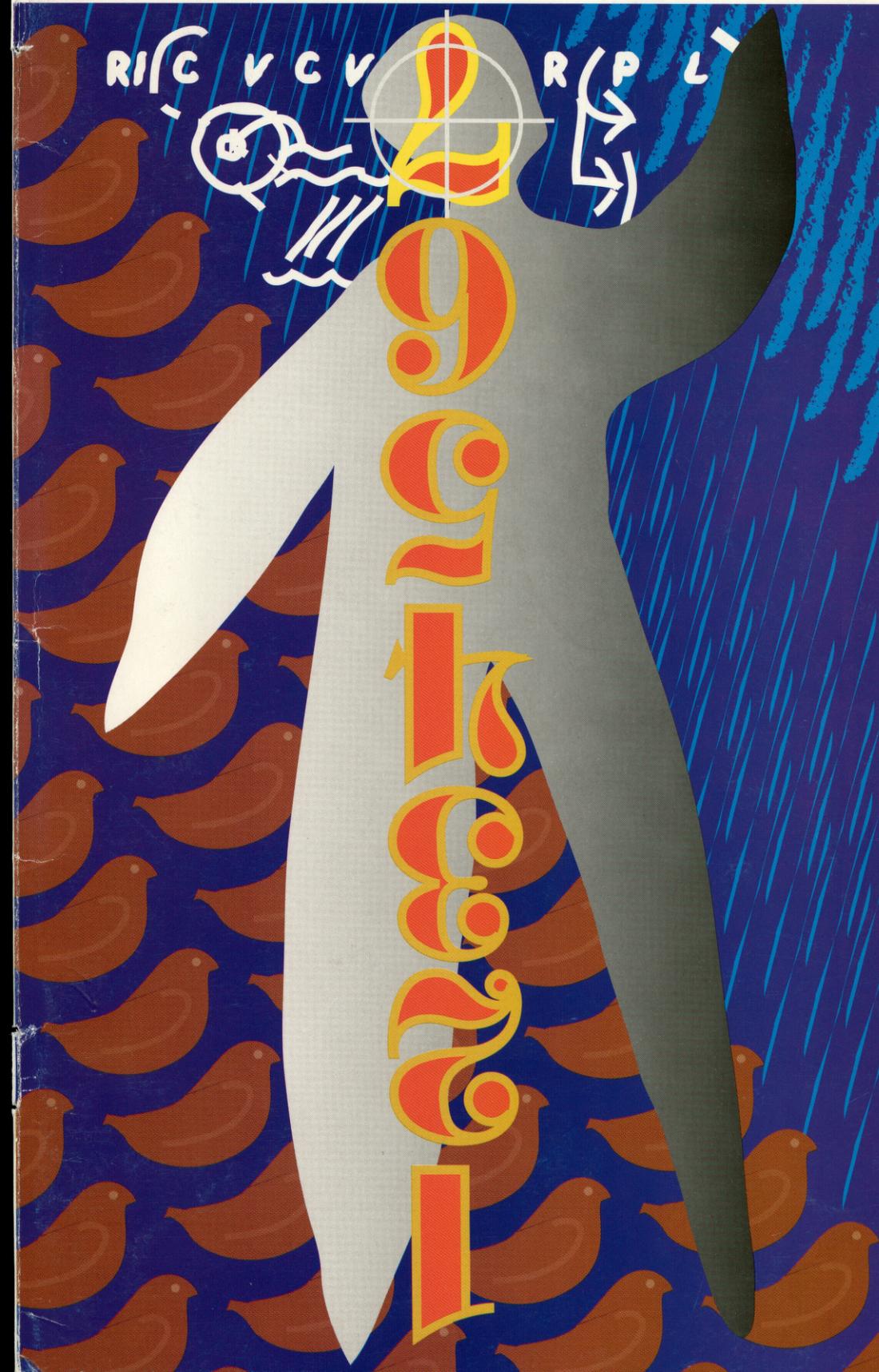
*Why Jesus Died*

Box Score  
Theology

**Sabbath  
and Sports**

The Adventist  
Apocalypse  
at Carnegie Hall

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# SPECTRUM

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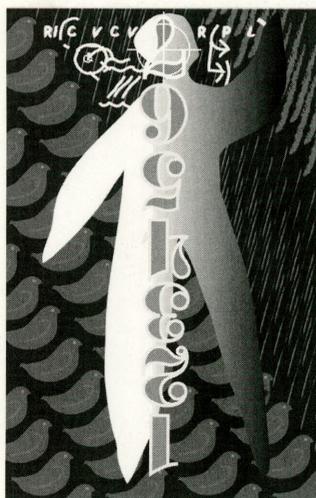
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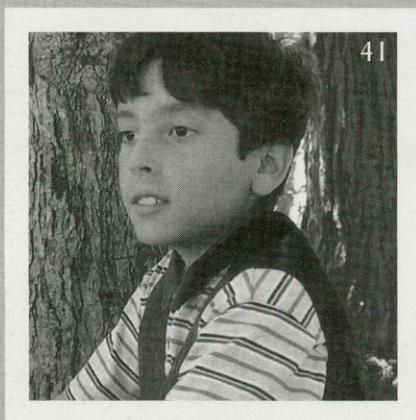
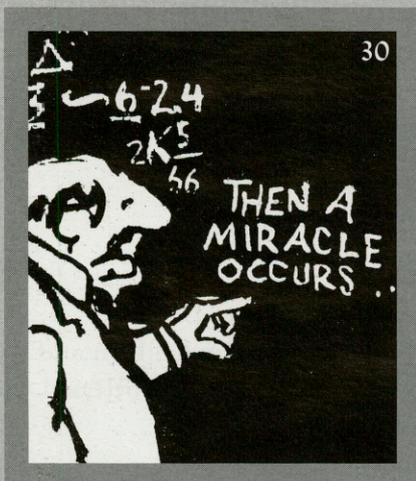
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The cover graphic has gone through the creative process from conceptualization through sketches and rendering on an electronic device, then transferred in digital form over hundreds of miles, reproduced exactly the same thousands of times, then distributed to subscribers. All of that, of course, can be explained by laws of nature and the sciences which identify, explore and describe those laws. Of course, the creation and production of the image required no contemporary supernatural act of God. However, it's all still a miracle to me.

## About the Artist

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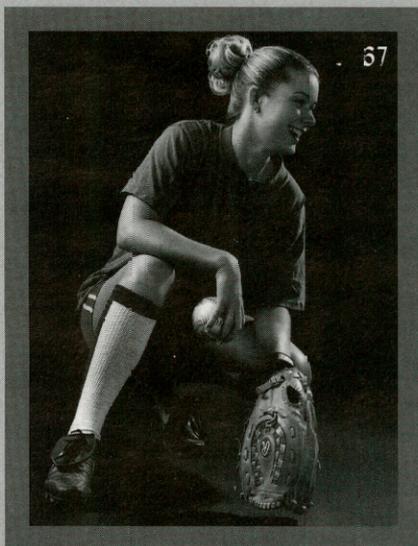
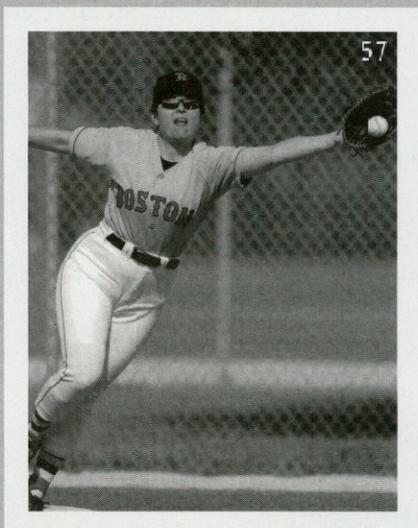
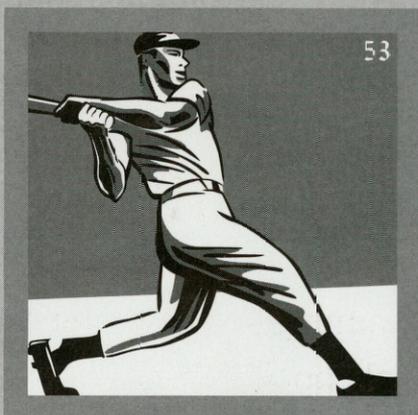
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# The Danger in Understanding

**T**he danger that we can give up on life by presuming to understand it jumped off the page of Wendell Berry's little book *Life is a Miracle* and played games with my mind.

"For quite a while it has been possible for a free and thoughtful person to see that to treat life as mechanical or predictable or understandable is to reduce it," Berry writes. "Now, almost suddenly, it is becoming clear that to reduce life to the scope of our understanding (whatever 'model' we use) is inevitably to enslave it, make property of it, and put it up for sale.

"This is to give up on life, to carry it beyond change and redemption, and to increase the proximity of despair" (7).

With that I was hooked and dove into his essay against modern superstition in which he argues vigorously with Edward O. Wilson's concept of "Consilience" and increasing knowledge. "The real question that is always to be addressed," Berry says, "is the one that arises from our state of ignorance: How does one act well—sensitively, compassionately, without irreparable damage—on the basis of partial knowledge?"

After all, we see only in part—through a glass darkly.

His answer—"Perhaps the most proper, and the most natural, response to our state of ignorance is not haste to increase the amount of available information, or even to increase knowledge, but rather a lively and convivial engagement with the issues of form, elegance, and kindness. These issues of 'sustainability' are both scientific and artistic."

Certainly, engaging these concepts could help us move away from conversations about who is right and who is wrong about certain concepts.

Perhaps we would spend more time discussing baseball, for instance, rather than battling over how long it took God to create the world. As

Reni Dupertuis elegantly shows us in his essay in this issue, baseball is a topic that can keep people talking even when they disagree.

Or perhaps marveling over the love that is at the heart of all miracles would lead our discussion of that concept into kinder territory. Tom Wilson has a lesson for us along that line with the story of his grandson Christopher. Miracles do engage us, draw us in. In their article, Brian Bull and Fritz Guy parse the humor as well as the knowledge surrounding miracles. David Larson suggests that miracles are in the eye of the beholder, and that means the more we learn about the universe the more astonished we can be and the more miracles we can experience.

Issues of form lie at the heart of the reviews that we carry this time on Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. For some, his literal interpretation of the gruesome nature of Christ's death is too much, for others it is an experience not to be missed. We trust reading reviews that adore as well as those that abhor will help you appreciate the cinematic form of storytelling.

With that I leave you to enjoy this issue, to experience with Terrie Dopp Aamodt the muscle-straining thrill of playing baseball, to consider Mary Magdalene's life in new ways with Kendra Haloviak. There is much here to sustain your spiritual life, even if we do not lead you to a definitive understanding of the religious realm in which we have our being.

Bonnie Dwyer

Editor

## NOTEWORTHY



### Saving the Children

By Bonnie Dwyer

The children in the Gisimba orphanage were starving. They had no water; kids were being killed and were dying from dysentery. It was 1994 and a massacre was under way in Rwanda. Foreigners were given a seventy-two-hour window to leave, but ADRA director Carl Wilkins had made the decision to stay and try to help.

"Probably the most incredible experience was [when] I had gone to the colonel [in Kigali].... He was out of town that day, but his assistant [was] eating down in the basement.... [He] said, '... you won't believe it—the prime minister's here.... Ask him.'"

Asking the prime minister seemed like the stupidest thing you could imagine, Wilkins told the PBS broadcast "Frontline" that featured his story on the anniversary of the genocide.

To ask the guy who was orchestrating the genocide seemed ludicrous, and yet Wilkins felt like he had no other option.

"Just go out in the hallway. He's in the next office. When he comes out, ask him," Wilkins was told.

"So I went out [into the hallway] ... and [a] door opens. Everybody snaps to attention, and here comes [the prime minister] and his little entourage. They're coming

down the hall, and I am, too."

"I put out my hand and I said, 'Mr. Prime Minister, I'm Carl Wilkins, the director of ADRA.'"

He stops and looks at me, and then he takes my hand and shakes it and said, 'Yes, I've heard about you and your work. How is it?'"

"I said, 'Well, honestly, sir, it's not very good right now. The orphans at Gisimba are surrounded and I think there's going to be a massacre, if there hasn't been already.'"

He turns around, talks to some of his aides or whatever [and he turns back to me and] he says, "'We're aware of the situation, and those orphans are going to be safe. I'll see to it.'"

"So what's that mean? Now are they going to go and kill them? What's it mean? But there were certain times in this thing where you just [have to say], 'I've done everything I could.... I chose to go home. I chose to trust. You recognize that it's not about you. You're not it. There's bigger things happening again. So I went home and they were safe, and that was just a couple of days later that they were all moved to a safer part of a bad town.'"

Wilkins concluded his interview by saying, "I'm thankful that people remember this ten years later, because there [are] people in Rwanda who will never forget it, and we need to have a connection. We need to live for each other."

### South Pacific Division Convenes Ellen White Summit

By Arthur Patrick

Ellen White continues to evoke hostile attack, intense study, and spirited support in the South Pacific Division, where a lively tradition of discussion about the prophet has evolved.

In 1999, the South Pacific Division (SPD) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church developed a five-page "A Strategy Document for a Better Appreciation of the Ministry and Writings of Ellen G. White," and more recently held a summit on the prophet.

The summit convened February 2–5, 2004, on the campus of Avondale College, drawing 104 participants from the division's vast territories. Guest presenters from the United States were historian Gary Land from Andrews University; New Testament specialist Jon Paulien from the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University; and James Nix, director of the White Estate at the General Conference headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Local presenters included a range of specialists in biblical studies, theology, history, medicine, and

church leadership. A series of narrations by a woman and several men under the title, "My Personal Journey with Ellen White," was a heart-warming feature of the three evening programs. The Church intends to augment these testimonies with those of others and publish them as a book.

Topics included inspiration; Fundamentalism, and its impact on Adventism; biblical perspectives on prophets and prophecy; and the responsibility of a faith community to test claims that individuals have the gift of prophecy. There was discussion of why Ellen White's writings are not considered in the same way as the biblical canon. The Dammon affair, in which Millerite preacher Israel Dammon was arrested while leading a noisy meeting soon after the Great Disappointment of 1844 was also discussed.

In addition, Don McMahon, a medical specialist from Melbourne, reported on his comparison between lifestyle principles found in Ellen White's writings and those of other nineteenth-century health reformers. McMahon's analyses offered a fresh way to assess Ellen White's health writings.

The summit built solidly upon the foundation of the International Prophetic Guidance workshop of 1982, probably the most important event of its kind in SDA history relative to Ellen White. It demonstrated the value of biblical studies, systematic theology, and historical studies for those who would understand well and apply faithfully Ellen White's writings.

A twelve-page sheaf of responses from summit attendees now informs the ongoing work of the SPD Biblical Research Committee

as it seeks to lead the Church to implement Ellen White's legacy in a modern setting.

For a report of the summit, see the February 21, 2004, edition of the *SPD Record* at <[www.record.net.au](http://www.record.net.au)>. The Web site also includes an editorial, four interviews, and many letters on this topic throughout issues published in February and March 2004.

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Arthur Patrick is a research fellow at Avondale College, Cooranbong, Australia.

## The Apocalypse at Carnegie Hall

By Stefanie Johnson

Virtuoso Virginia Gene Rittenhouse may have degrees from some of the most prestigious music conservatories in the world and a personality capable of defying dignitaries or border guards when necessary, but on Tuesday, March 2, she was visibly nervous.

"I worry that the music will not do the words justice," she told us. Perhaps anyone would sweat at the prospect of composing music for words from the book of Revelation, which include: "She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." Particularly, if, as in this case, the piece was premiering at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

To be honest, we musicians were nervous, too. Like a difficult and well-loved book, our sheet music was blanketed with penciled notations. At the dress rehearsal, only hours before, dynamics were still being added, notes stripped, and harmonies rearranged.

While she worried about doing the words justice, we, as usual, panicked about living up to her expectations. She wanted us to be

her Aaron, to find a way to speak this vision—no small task.

The verbal spectacle of Revelation as manifested in Rittenhouse's oratorio, *The Vision of the Apocalypse*, is an equally challenging melodic montage of blistering brass fanfares, atonal woodwind gauze, and driving syncopated rhythms. The orchestration is epic. The contrabassoon, usually relegated to oom-pah obscurity, anchors a rare exhibit of orchestral possibility sprinkled with alto flute, harp, and E flat clarinet. Four vocal soloists join two choirs, one on stage and one in the first balcony.

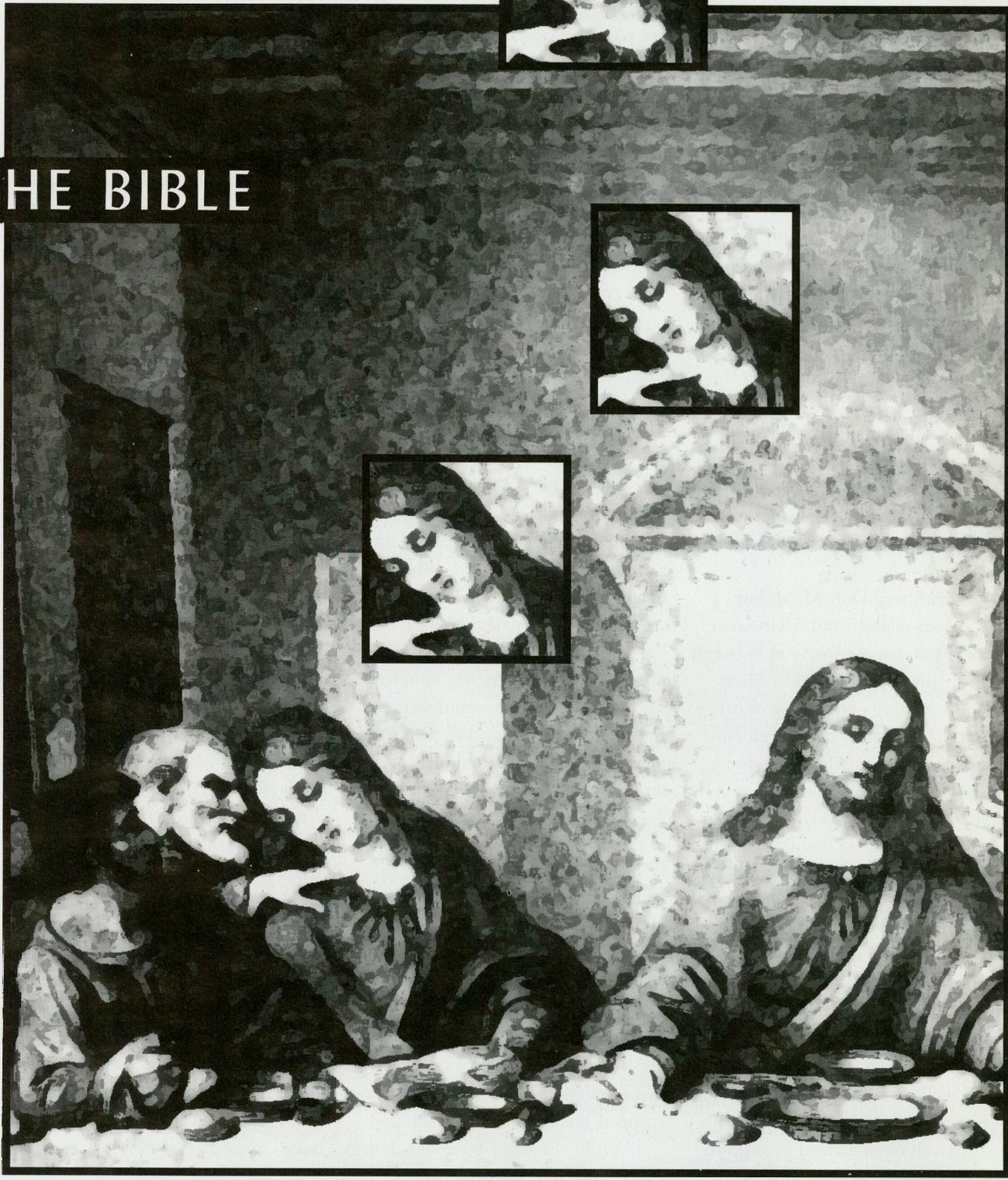
At 7:30, Conductor James Bingham lifted his baton, and Rittenhouse spoke: "I am Alpha and Omega—the Beginning and the End." The Three Angels' message forms the core of fourteen movements, including "Babylon Is Fallen," "Here is the Patience," "No Night There," and "Resurrection." At the last note of the final Amen, the audience erupted into a standing ovation.

With the applause thundering in our ears, the first clarinetist leaned forward and said, "There are many kinds of fear. Some I like, and some I don't. I liked that one." He spoke for many of us. We have been with Rittenhouse to Soweto during Apartheid, to Communist China, to AIDS orphanages, to church floors all over the world, and we know what it feels like to step out in sometimes uncomfortable uncertainty, only to discover that the music is never inadequate when it sings the gospel.

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Oboist Stefanie Johnson makes a living in the Center for Law and Public Policy at Columbia Union College.





# THE BIBLE

FROM 'THE LAST SUPPER' BY LEONARDO DA VINCI

# Pastor or Prostitute?

## The Battle over Mary Magdalene

By Kendra Haloviak

Recently Mary Magdalene has been the subject of various works in popular culture. Following the success of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, a *Los Angeles Times* best-seller, other works have come to the forefront, including a best-selling novel by historian Margaret George, *Mary Called Magdalene*, and a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year by Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*.

Last summer, I was astonished to see an entire display at Barnes and Noble dedicated to studies about this character from the time of Jesus. Most suggested that in the fight for control, second-century male leaders of the Christian movement turned her life of pious leadership into scandal, depicting Mary as the repentant sinner rather than as an equal in apostolic witness and ministry. Some of the works on display made Mary the goddess of Christianity, the holder of secret information, the founder of a type of Christianity forced underground.

Then I watched a piece that "60 Minutes" did on the laundries in Ireland set up for wayward girls and unmarried mothers. The film *The Magdalene Sisters* depicts this part of Christian history. Mary the sexual

deviant who repents of her many sins is a model for these young women as they experience the punishment for their sins—exploitation and abuse—while forced into the hard manual labor of the laundries.

The A & E (Arts and Entertainment) cable station presented an hour-long discussion of Mary of Magdala, called "The Hidden Apostle" that considered the controversy her life continues to cause. Saint or Sinner? Model of leadership or model of submissiveness? Pastor or prostitute?

Millions of people are reading these books about Mary and Jesus and thinking about these stories. What do we have to say on the subject? What does the battle over Mary Magdalene have to say about women in leadership.



## What Does the Bible Really Say About Mary Magdalene?

Most information about Mary comes from the cross-resurrection scenes at the conclusion of each Gospel. Mary Magdalene is only mentioned once in the Gospels prior to the cross-resurrection event (Luke 8). Nowhere is she called a prostitute. Luke 8:1–3 reads:

Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Some people assume Mary is the one in the chapter earlier, the “sinful woman from the city” who enters a meal scene at Simon's home and washes Jesus' feet with her tears. The woman there is the weeping repentant sinner, the woman asking for forgiveness for her sexual sins. However, there are no textual reasons for making this connection. Christian tradition, not Luke's way of telling the story, causes people to make this assumption.

Others collapse the Mary Magdalene character with that of Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus. This is also unfair to her character. Mary Magdalene never anointed Jesus. She tried to anoint him on resurrection morning, but his body was gone!

Mary Magdalene is introduced into the narrative in a unique way for a woman. She is Mary Magdalene,

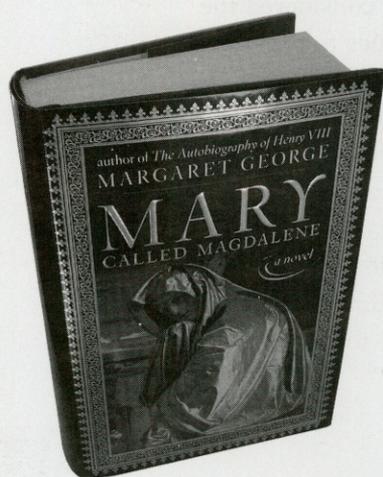
Mary of Magdala, described by her place of origin, much like a man would be, rather than by her father or husband or son or master. Was she from a wealthy home? Was she the widow of a well-to-do husband? We do not know. One thing is for certain: Mary of Magdala had some means that she was able to distribute as *she herself* saw fit—and she used it to support the ministry of Jesus.

This alone would not be entirely unusual, since frequently women supported local rabbis with food and domestic service. However, Mary of Magdala (and Luke tells us other women as well) *joined* the movement that was growing around Jesus. This would be considered scandalous by some in society. Not only did these women fund and support Jesus and his disciples, they themselves *became* disciples.

It would have been risky to join Jesus, to leave the only home she knew, yet she did join the movement. The Romans looked with suspicion upon anyone who gathered groups of people together. Wanting to eliminate any hint of insurrection quickly, the Romans would have eyed the growing movement around Jesus with skepticism. It was a risky movement. However, having received gifts of healing and wholeness, Mary and the other women became benefactors of that ministry, using their resources so that others could experience such wholeness.

It is also important to note that Luke 8:2–3 describes Mary of Magdala as one from whom seven demons had been cast out. This most likely refers to a physical or emotional illness or addiction of some sort (understood by people in her day as uncontrollable demons). Jesus had not only controlled them, he had cast them out of her! Perhaps this had happened during her first encounter with Jesus. Demon possession meant being unclean. So, whenever Jesus healed a person, casting out their demons, he restored them to a state of holiness, purity. Most likely through this encounter with Jesus, Mary of Magdala came to believe that he was the Messiah.

This passage is not suggesting that Mary needed to be healed seven times, as I grew up thinking, any more than the demoniac in the tombs across the sea of Galilee had to be healed of his legion of demons two thousand times. Nor is demon possession ever tied with prostitution. Sexual promiscuity and demon possession were not automatically linked. Again, the male demoniac in the tombs definitely had problems, but we do not think of sexual immorality as one of them.



Demon possession, exorcism, and Mary's struggle between loyalty to Jesus and her daughter, husband, and extended family are central themes in *Mary Called Magdalene*, a book by historical and biographical novelist Margaret George.

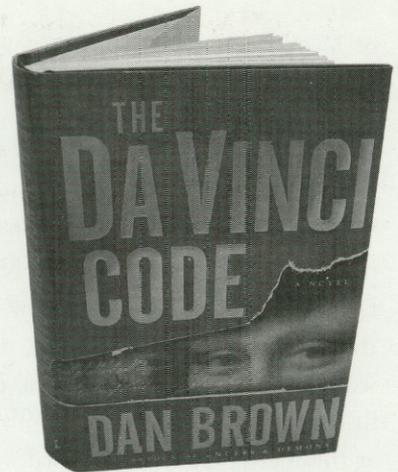
Mary had been healed of her demons and had chosen to follow Jesus as he ministered around Magdala, a fishing village on the edge of the sea of Galilee. Then she continued to follow him around the region of the Galilee, and later as he made his way toward Jerusalem.

She and other women healed embodied the message of faith and wealth so important to Luke's Gospel and to his sequel, the book of Acts, where Christians are to share their goods in common for the spreading of the gospel. It is also interesting that the "service" given by these women was the same work done by the deacons who served the early Christian communities in Acts (6:2). The sharing of the meal, work the women would have performed, became the symbol of the Kingdom of God. Luke suggests, why do Christians share meals? And their resources? And serve on another? Because that's what *Jesus'* ministry was about, a ministry embodied in Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women.

Thus, the early Christian churches we see in Acts found their basis in the ministry of women around Jesus in the Gospel accounts. Surrounding the tables of the Christian house churches was the new family of God, where the gifts of men and women were valued and affirmed, where the Holy Spirit came upon all people, and, as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza suggests, "Jesus called forth a discipleship of equals."<sup>1</sup>

All four Gospels mention Mary Magdalene as present

Mary Magdalene is the secret at the center of *The Da Vinci Code*, a whodunit that starts with murder in the Louvre and leads the fictitious modern French-American duo Sophie Neveu and Robert Langdon searching for clues throughout Western art history.



Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him" (16:1).

Given the climate and the condition of the body, and that this was several days after his death, this plan to go into the tomb/cave and care for Jesus underscores their intense devotion. They had cared for Jesus' body in life, and they would take care of it in death. Then, a young man sitting in the tomb told them that Jesus had been raised! The women were told to tell the other disciples this good news—this most amazing of good news. But, according to Mark's earliest ending, the women were afraid. They were full of terror and amazement, and they didn't tell anyone. Yet we know they told someone! Mark's Gospel itself is a witness to their telling this most amazing of experiences.

## The sharing of the meal, work the women would have performed, became the symbol of the Kingdom of God.

at the cross scene, and first to the tomb on Sunday morning. Mark, considered by most as the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, mentions her presence at the cross along with other women, all of whom had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.

They were there at Jesus' cross at great personal risk, as Rome was known to extend a criminal's sentence to include family members and friends. The women were "looking on from a distance," listed with Mary Magdalene first. Mark continues: "These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem" (15:41). Mark mentions that two of the women saw where Jesus' body was laid in Joseph's tomb (15:47). Then, Sunday morning, "Mary Magdalene,

Matthew's Gospel also first mentions Mary Magdalene at the cross: "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (27:55–56). The women stood witness at the cross, and they were the ones who provided and followed. They also witnessed where Jesus was buried (27:61). Matthew adds that the two Marys "were there, sitting opposite the tomb" (27:61).

Sunday morning the two Marys went to take care



of Jesus' body when they experienced an earthquake, and saw an angel, and the guards shaking with fear. The tomb was opened and empty! Matthew depicts these women as eyewitnesses to Jesus' death, burial, and his resurrection. They were told by the angel to "go quickly and tell his disciples, 'he has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him'" (28:7). Thrilled, they ran to the disciples, and, meeting Jesus along the way, they worshiped him. The two Marys were the first to witness the empty tomb and the first to worship at the feet of their risen Lord.

Luke, who had earlier (chapter 8) mentioned Mary Magdalene and the other women, describes a group of women from Galilee at the cross (23:49), but does not include their names until after the resurrection (24:10), when he says they were: "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women." Luke 23 concludes with the women seeing the body of

Jesus being laid in a tomb, preparing spices and ointments, and then resting on the Sabbath.

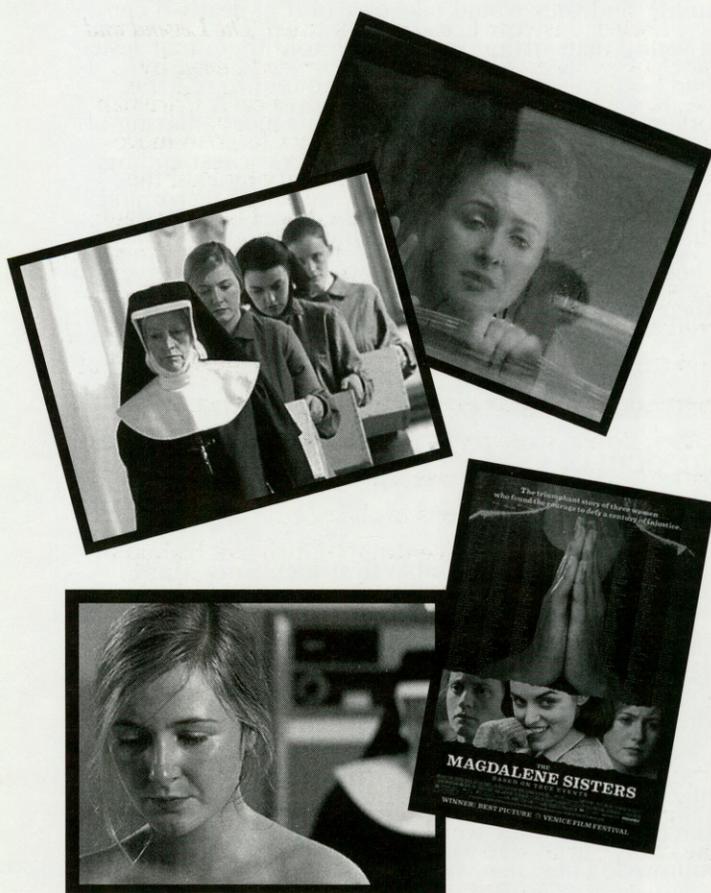
On Sunday morning, they were surprised to find an empty tomb, and two men in dazzling clothes. After being asked by the two to "remember" what Jesus had told them, the women "remembered his words" and told the other disciples. However, "these words seemed to them an idle tale [useless chatter], and they did not believe them" (24:11).

In the first century, the testimony of women was not considered reliable. Jewish historian Josephus declared: "from women let not evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex." In his commentary on Luke, William Lane states: "That the news had first been delivered by women was inconvenient and troublesome to the Church, for their testimony lacked value as evidence. The primitive community would not have invented this detail, which can be explained only on the ground that it was factual."<sup>2</sup> So in Luke's account, it wasn't until Jesus walked and talked with the two going to Emmaus and appeared to the larger group that the disciples as a community celebrated resurrection.

John's Gospel mentions Mary Magdalene's presence at the cross. She was there along with Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, and Mary the wife of Clopas (19:25–26). Four women were near Jesus as four Roman soldiers divided and cast lots for his clothing. Had these women provided Jesus the very clothes the soldiers divided and gambled for?

The way John tells of Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene went alone, before daybreak, to the tomb. When she saw the stone rolled away, she ran to tell Peter and the disciple Jesus loved that "they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2). While Peter and the other disciple went running to the tomb, then returned to their homes, Mary remained outside the tomb weeping. The word here suggests she was sobbing, wailing like the sadness described earlier before Lazarus's tomb (11:31).

After a conversation with two angels, Jesus himself was there asking her why she was weeping. She didn't recognize him until he spoke her name, "Mary!" Some commentators suggest that here is an embodiment of Jesus' earlier words about being the Good Shepherd and his sheep knowing his voice (10:3–4). Mary was part of the Good Shepherd's flock; she realized it was Jesus, she knew his voice, and then she responded "rabboni," or "my dear master."



Mary's ancient sexual history made her the namesake in Ireland for unwed mothers and the institutions created for them. The recent film *The Magdalene Sisters* tells the story of three modern-day Marys played by Dorothy Duffy, Nora-Jane Nonne and Anne Marie Duff.

## A Look at Christian Tradition(s)

In Eastern Christianity, Mary Magdalene is considered equal to the apostles, an “apostle of the apostles,” since she was the first to tell the good news of the empty tomb. After all, “apostle” means the one who has seen the Lord and been sent to witness to his resurrection. She is considered a leader and teacher. The fourteenth-century work *The Golden Legend* claims a tradition that, after fourteen years in Galilee, Mary Magdalene went to France, where she shared Christianity with the people in village after village.

However, in Western Christianity Mary is portrayed as the penitent sinner. In the sixth century (591), Pope Gregory declared that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the sinner in Luke 7 were all one person. In 1969, this position was reversed. But by the nineteenth century, Mary Magdalene’s mistaken identity was already considered the truth about this woman. Her name is synonymous with prostitution—thus the Magdalene Sisters as the name for the church-sponsored laundries in Ireland where unmarried mothers and wayward girls were placed by relatives.

The question quickly becomes, which Christian tradition?

Some of the books being read today suggest that Mary Magdalene was made into a prostitute to hide her major leadership role as an apostle. The first few centuries of Christianity were a lot messier than we sometimes think. Not only were the controversies over foods and circumcision threatening to divide Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians, other debates also took place. (For example, why is Mary, the first witness of the resurrection, left out of the resurrection account remembered by Paul in I Corinthians 15:5–8 and by Peter in Acts 13:16–31?)

One segment of Christianity, later labeled “Gnostic,” emphasized the ongoing revelatory work of the spirit to a select group of disciples. Many gospels were created by this group of Christians that were not included in the New Testament Scriptures. Two such gospels, the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip, suggest that Mary was Jesus’ closest disciple, one who received special truths directly from Jesus before his resurrection, and later through the Holy Spirit. According to these works, Peter was jealous of Mary and her prophetic authority.

Was there tension among the disciples, or later generations of disciples? Did they wrestle with whether or not women could be leaders of the Christian house churches?



The story of Christ cannot be told without Mary Magdalene. Monica Belluci portrayed her in *The Passion of the Christ* (above). At right she is comforted by Mary, the mother of Christ, played by Maia Morgenstern.



Earlier this year I read a book titled *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*, by Dennis MacDonald. The book explores early Christian traditions about a woman in the early Christian movement who was converted to Christianity by Paul the apostle. The story goes that on the eve of her marriage, Thecla heard Paul preach, converted, and desired to focus on spreading the message rather than take on household responsibilities. Twice she was condemned to death, and twice miraculously saved. She eventually joined Paul in preaching the gospel. Many Christian documents refer to her life and ministry as part of the earliest missionary movement. Her story was used to legitimate women taking leadership positions in churches.

During the second century, a Christian bishop in Asia Minor wrote a work called the *Acts of Paul* (some suggest it was initially called the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*), which included stories of Thecla’s ministry. The leader/author loved and admired Paul the apostle, so he gathered stories and legends from the oral traditions about Paul. In Asia Minor, where there was a high concentration of Christian women leaders, the church was seen as an alternative to the household.

Instead of women valued only in the role of wife and mother, young, single women and widows were deeply valued as they led out in the local house



churches. Instead of women taking care of their own children, they were able to spend time taking care of the church members. So, initially, the book *Acts of Paul* was greatly appreciated, reflecting the early Christian movement, its embrace of a new way of thinking about church and family, and leadership.

However, in later years the churches were cautioned against any social behavior that deviated from the norms of the Roman Empire. Social compliance, rather than innovations in ministry, became the emphasis. Tertullian, a Christian leader at the end of the second century, didn't appreciate Thecla's story

run offices and companies and hospital wards. Women who teach in classrooms and at home. Women who are principals and physical therapists and editors and writers. There are retired women who volunteer their time.

If we dissolve the diversity, if we make Mary a composite of all the women instead of letting them stand alone we limit the many witnesses and models of leadership in Scripture: wealthy widows, women preaching and teaching, mothers who joined the movement, healed women who helped others heal.

We need not be nervous about best-selling novels and blockbuster films about Mary Magdalene. These

## The Gospels contain multiple models of women.

being used to legitimate women teaching and baptizing, and fired the author of the book *Acts of Paul*, who had included her stories. It was during this time that the various roles for women in the Christian communities were reduced. Is it during this same time that Mary Magdalene, leader within the Christian movement, became Mary the Whore?

In her book, *The Newly Born Woman*, Catherine Clément states: "Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is that zone we must try to remember today."<sup>3</sup> Given the struggles within the Christian movement, especially the efforts to suppress the texts reflecting the leadership of women, it is a wonder that the Gospels maintain their witness of the "discipleship of equals" that surrounded Jesus. Mary Magdalene, the woman who was healed, the woman minister, the benefactor of the Jesus movement, witness to the resurrection, first apostle, apostle to the apostle.

### Women in the Gospel

The Gospels contain multiple models of women. Yes, there is the "sinful woman from the city" who anoints Jesus' feet. Her witness is an amazing witness, full of insight and assurance. Yes, there is the woman caught in adultery—a woman Jesus did not condemn, but invited into a new life. Yes, there are women who bring their sick children to Jesus. Such women give courage and hope to those of us fighting illness in our families. Yes, there is the woman who is embarrassed by her bleeding. She is a witness to healing, wholeness, restored purity.

But the Gospels also include the stories of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and other women who

are opportunities to reread the stories of Scripture with new questions, seeing new insights. Such questions help us get a better picture of the new community that formed around Jesus, and was described by him as the breaking in of the Kingdom of God!

The challenges of the books at Barnes and Noble invite us to go back to familiar stories with new questions and perspectives. What does the Bible really say about her? What might have been her role in the early Christian communities? What diverse roles were women and men embracing during this time of newness and insight?

Mary of Magdala, your witness lives on! Because women in leadership continue to change, choose, and commit themselves to the Kingdom of God!

### Notes and References

1. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ann. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 154.
2. Josephus, *Antiquities* 4:8:15/219, quoted in Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 228; William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 589.
3. Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), quoted in Fiorenza, *Memory of Her*, Introduction.

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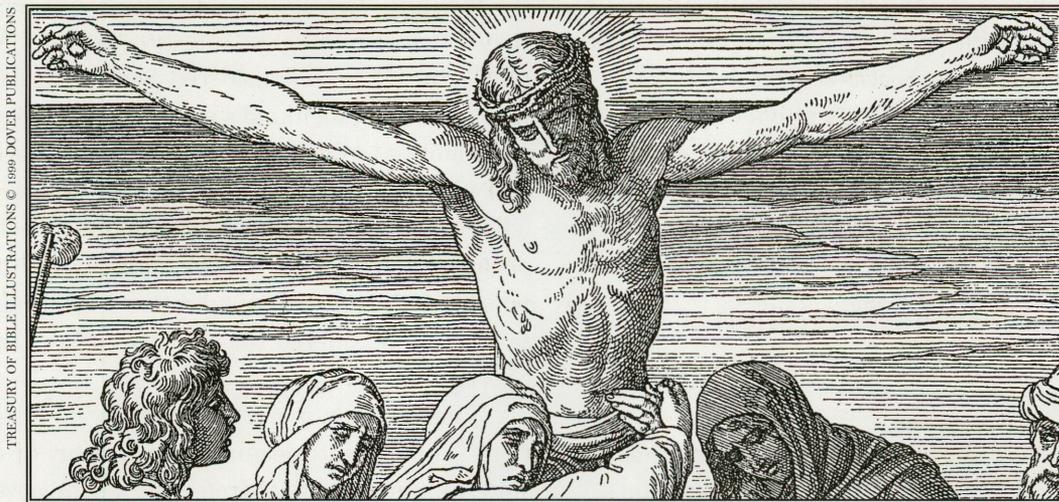
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# Why Jesus Died

## A Reflection on Romans 3:25–26

By Ivan T. Blazen

The Mel Gibson film, *The Passion of the Christ*, with its blood spattering, pain-wrenching, soul-jarring scenes acutely raises the question: What is the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death? Different answers can be given.



Perhaps it is a meaningless event, as reflected in the despairing exclamation of the Emmaus travelers, “We had hoped [but now our hopes are vain] that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). This view would not hold the field, for the resurrection of Jesus would overcome the apparent tragedy of Jesus' death and awaken reflection on the significance of his crucifixion.

Perhaps in all his suffering Jesus was experiencing not merely the wrath of

Rome on one the Romans considered a potential insurrectionist, but also the wrath of Almighty God exacted upon him so that the reality of God's punitive justice might be demonstrated, the claims of his broken law satisfied, his wrath appeased, and his forgiveness permitted.

Or perhaps his passion was not, in its core, an event external to God that changed him from wrath to peace, but an internal event in the life of God in which



he, in the person of his Son, absorbed and extinguished within himself the ultimate gravity and pain of sin.

By means of a study of Romans 3:25–26, a *locus classicus* on the meaning of Christ's death, I will seek to clarify some of the issues involved in interpreting the Cross. Hopefully this will encourage further reflection and discussion pro and con.

Here is the passage in its immediate setting according to the New Revised Standard Version, with a transliteration of key Greek terms.<sup>1</sup>

21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness [*dikaioyne*] of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 they are now justified [*dikaioymenoi*] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement [*hilasterion*] by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show [*endeixin*] his righteousness [*dikaioyne*], because [*dia*] in his divine forbearance [*anochē*] he had passed over [*pareisin*] the sins previously committed; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous [*dikaios*] and that he justifies [*dikaioynta*] the one who has faith in Jesus.

## Issues of Interpretation

### Setting the Stage

Romans 3:24–26,<sup>2</sup> as the theological center of the larger section 3:21–26, develops further the theme of God's saving righteousness first introduced in the programmatic verses 1:16–17 and reintroduced in 3:21 after a substantial excursus on human unrighteousness and the divine response of wrath and judgment (1:18–3:20).

The showing forth (*endeixis*) of God's righteousness in 3:25b–26, which is the purpose of the Cross, is connected with three major realities, denoted by the terms *justification*, *redemption*, and *sacrifice*, mentioned in 3:24–25a. What Paul is trying to say in explicating the meaning of the exhibition of God's righteousness is that humankind's being put right with God (justification) occurs through an act of liberation (redemption) from sin, which has taken place in Christ's sacrificial death (*hilasterion*). *Justification* (being put right with

God) is the key term, and it is Paul's answer to the unrighteousness of humankind described in 1:18–3:20. As a result of the revelation of his righteousness, God is shown to be righteous (just) and the one who puts right (justifies) the person of faith (3:26).

It needs to be pointed out that the terms *righteousness* and *righteous*, on the one hand, and *justification*, *justify*, and *just*, on the other, are all built upon the same Greek root, *dik*. Since the basic idea in Paul's usage has to do with "rightness," and because it would be helpful for English readers to understand that all these words are intimately related in meaning, it would be better to use the same English root for each of these terms and to translate "rightification" for justification, "rightify" instead of justify, and "righteous" instead of "just." This will be reflected in the course of this article.

### Righteousness and Sacrifice, Wrath and the Passing Over of Sin

"Justified by his blood" (Rom. 5:19) pithily summarizes the thought of 3:24–25a. According to these verses, that which effects the justification of sinful humans is the Cross of Christ considered as a sacrifice (*hilasterion*), through which mankind's sin and guilt are expurgated and liability to God's wrath is therefore obviated. The idea of propitiation, whereby the primary emphasis falls on the appeasement of God's wrath, is basically a pagan notion and is not in harmony with Romans 3:25, which, in a revolution of traditional religious thought, says that God offered the sacrifice rather than it being offered to him.

This problem is not found in the possible translations "expiation," (meaning wiping away or cleansing sin), "atoning sacrifice" (referring to the covering of sin), or "mercy seat" (denoting the place where human sin is overcome by divine mercy). It is appealing to understand the Cross of Christ in the sense of mercy seat in Romans 3:25, since the word *hilasterion* refers explicitly to the mercy seat in twenty-two references in the Greek Old Testament. In particular, note Leviticus 16, which narrates the ceremonies of the Day of Atonement, as well as in Hebrews 9:5, which describes the various features of the ark in the Most Holy Place (compare Exod. 25:17–22).

In any case, in Romans 3:25 *hilasterion* centers upon Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross with its annulment of sin's guilt. By God offering this sacrifice it is clear that God's love is not the effect but the cause of Christ's sacrifice.

The efficacy of this sacrifice is to be received by faith (3:25a) and its purpose is to show God's righteousness vis-à-vis the passing over of former sins in the patience of God (3:25b). As a result of the revelation of God's righteousness (*dikaioyne*) at the Cross, God is seen to be righteous (*dikaios*) and the one who "rightifies" (*dikaioynta*) the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26).

To understand the thought of 3:25b–26 it is necessary to go back to 1:16–17, where it is stated that the proclaimed gospel powerfully leads to salvation (1:16) because in it God's righteousness is being revealed to people of faith (1:17). Three factors indicate that this

love or mercy (Ps. 89:14; 36:5–6, 10). This equation of righteousness with salvation, mercy, and love in Isaiah and the Psalms gives a biblical precedent to what is already clear from the contextual connections of righteousness in Romans 1–3.

Noting the salvific character of God's righteousness in 3:21–22, which resumes what 1:17 says, is of crucial importance for the interpretation of the righteousness of God in 3:25–26. Here Paul is bringing to a climax his argument about the manifestation of God's saving righteousness begun again in 3:21. He says that the purpose of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was to

## God's love is not the effect but the cause of Christ's sacrifice.

righteousness is a salvific rather than retributive reality.

First, it is the fundamental element of the good news that leads to salvation (1:16). Second, its reception depends on faith (as also in 3:22), whereas righteousness as retributive justice results from sinful works. Third, the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel for persons of faith (1:17) stands over against, and is the answer to, the revelation of God's wrath from heaven against the unrighteousness of those who suppress the truth of God (1:18).

In like manner in 3:21, where Paul again takes up the theme of 1:17, the manifestation of God's righteousness (which is introduced by "But now" indicating a reversal of mankind's lostness) stands in contrast to the whole situation of sin, wrath, and judgment described in 1:18–3:20.

The salvific connotation of God's righteousness in Romans 1:17 comports with a significant class of usages in the Old Testament, where God's righteousness is synonymous with his salvation, deliverance, or vindication. Isaiah 46:13 states: "I bring near my deliverance [righteousness], it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry: I will put salvation in Zion." Verses of the same import are Isaiah 51:5; 54:8; 56:1; 59:16; 61:10.

The synonymy is apparent, for God is one who "announces vindication [righteousness], mighty to save" (63:1). Indeed, God is "a righteous God, and a Savior" (45:21). Here "Savior" explicates "righteous." Similar texts are found in Psalm 24:15; 31:1; 40:10; 45:21; 51:14; 71:15; 98:2; and 143:11. In certain texts, God's righteousness is coordinated with his steadfast

display (some versions translate "demonstrate") God's righteousness.

What is spoken of here is not an abstract proof but a dynamic revealing in history of God's saving action. This is in line with the verbs used in Romans 1:17 and 3:21 for the revelation or manifestation of God's salvation. If a proof is involved, it is found in the pudding of God's redemptive activity in doing what was needed to save mankind.

Can God's righteousness in 3:25–26 mean something different than it did in 1:17 and 3:21–22 (as well as in the cognate word *rightification* or justification in 3:24)? A traditional, evangelical interpretation answers Yes, and instead of translating *dikaioyne* by "righteousness," as in 1:17 and 3:21–22, renders the word as "justice," referring to God's retributive justice that needed demonstration "because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished" (NIV).

According to this view, divine justice in past ages seemed asleep, and God appeared to be morally indulgent. His holiness and justice seemed compromised by his apparent failure to mete out the requisite punishment for sin. A signal proof of his retribution was needed to clear his character so that he might overcome when he was judged (compare Rom. 3:4). In this conception, the fundamental problem to be solved by the Cross, which would clear the way for forgive-



ness, was the satisfaction of the wrath of God.<sup>3</sup>

I do not see this as a correct view for a number of reasons. First, there can be no question, if one is studying Romans 3:25 in the wider context of 1:18–3:20, that the problem of God’s wrath looms large. Christ as *hilasterion* (3:25) does bring an end to God’s just wrath for those who believe. However, the rock bottom problem of 1:18–3:20 is not wrath (the effect of sin) but sin (the cause of wrath). If wrath is to be averted sin must be dealt with. The sacrifice of Jesus, by which he bears our sins, is God’s answer to the sin problem (compare 8:3, where God sent Jesus “for us” that is, as a sin offering). Romans 5:9 says it well: “Having been justified now by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from wrath.”

Second, there is no justification for translating *dikaioyne* here as (retributive) justice out of accord with the occurrences of the term in Romans 1–3 for God’s saving righteousness, which contrasts with his wrath. It is clear: In Romans, God’s righteousness is that which saves from God’s wrath. God’s righteousness is his covenant faithfulness by which he puts into effect his promise to be with his people and to deliver them. That God acts in consistency with the fact that he is righteous, or just (3:26), means not that he punishes, but that he is faithful even when his people are not (3:3).

In the third place, the view, as in the New International Version, that the Greek word *pareisis* in 3:25 means “left unpunished” in the sense of passing over in neglect, which by no means is the only or fundamental meaning of the word (see below), is not in harmony with Paul’s argument in the early part of Romans. In 1:18–3:20, which begins with a forceful, thematic statement on the revelation of God’s wrath (1:18), the sordid picture of universal human sin is painted, and the wrath that rightly falls upon such sin is pictured as past (1:24, 26, 28 under the figure “God handed them over”), present (1:18, “is being revealed”), and future (2:2, 5, 8–9).

When the conclusion of the matter is reached in 3:19–20, a judgment scene is presented in which every mouth is shut and the whole world stands guilty before God and, by way of implication, under sentence of death. Also, in 5:14 death reigned like a king from Adam to Moses (compare 5:21). If the wages of sin is death (6:23), this wage has been paid continually since the beginning of time. On Pauline presuppositions, apart from God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, this death would have been eternal death (the “second

death” in the language of Rev. 20:6).

Thus, nothing in Romans prepares us for the idea that God has been, or has been perceived to be, lax toward sin. Quite the contrary, his wrath has been so evident that unless he intervenes redemptively mankind will be eternally lost. Like Romans 7:24, Romans 1:18–3:20 implicitly raises the pathetic cry, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

Furthermore, the Old Testament, which was the foundation of Paul’s education and argumentation, is replete with stories of God’s wrath and judgment, as for example, the story of the Flood. Also, in nearly six hundred uses of at least twenty different Old Testament words for wrath, God’s righteous anger against human unrighteousness is declared. It can be seen, then, that both in terms of the context in Romans and the content of biblical history, so familiar to Paul, God has justly revealed his righteous wrath.

Therefore, it seems that what was needed at the Cross, as Paul in Romans is quite specifically arguing *his* case, is not so much a proof that God really punishes, as if that had been a rather scandalous question mark, but a dynamic manifestation of his saving power for an entire world lost under sin and wrath. What was required was to see that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Fourth, even if God’s passing over of sin refers to the period before Christ, this does not automatically support the interpretation that God seemed to be unjust because he did not punish properly, and what was needed to safeguard his reputation was an evidence that he did.<sup>4</sup>

There are other possibilities. One is that God passed over sin in the sense that in his redemptive plan the time had not yet come for him to deal decisively with sin in terms of Christ’s sacrifice, which, in contrast to the insufficiency of the sacrificial cultus of the Old Testament, was alone the foundation of all forgiveness throughout all time. A second is that passing over human sin, instead of irrevocably blotting out the entire race, was a promise of mercy to come at the Cross of Christ. Besides, God’s patience was meant to lead to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

It seems clear that the passing over of sin in God’s patience in Romans 3:25 should be viewed not in a negative but a positive light. It refers not to God’s justice asleep but to God’s mercy alive. Passing over sin is not a problem that demands a solution, but part

of the solution to the existing problem of human sin and its result, divine wrath.

The fact is that although *paresis*, which occurs only here in the New Testament and never in the Greek Old Testament, could in classical times carry the meaning of “neglect,” the idea taken up in the NIV, it more fundamentally meant “letting go,” “dismissal,” or “remission” of a debt, as also is the case with the verbal equivalent, *pariemi*.<sup>5</sup> It is this latter meaning that is most suitable to the flow of Paul’s thought in Romans 1–3, where God’s wrath against sin is succeeded by God’s atoning sacrifice for sin.

**It seems clear that the total independence of God’s salvation from the legal system . . . renders suspect the imposition of legal or forensic concepts on the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice.**

In harmony with this, it is possible that *paresis*, far from meaning a neglect really to punish sin *before* the Cross, which made God seem indifferent to sin, may refer to a remission of sins *at* the Cross (*paresis* therefore being synonymous with *aphesis*, which means forgiveness). This is the interpretation favored by the King James Version, which translates “to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.”

According to this view, in which the preposition *dia* before *paresin*, rather than being retrospective and causal “because of,” (as in the NRSV), would be either prospective, “with a view to,” “for” (KJV) or instrumental, “through,” or “by,”<sup>6</sup> the Cross is the time when God, through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, provides forgiveness for mankind’s sins from the beginning of time. He does this in his patience, that is, mercy (patience or forbearance being used sometimes in biblical and extrabiblical writings in the sense of mercy; see, for example, Exod. 34:6).<sup>7</sup>

According to Romans 2:4, God’s forbearance (*anochē*) is connected not with a possible charge against God, but with “the riches of his kindness.” It is of interest to note that in Micah 7:18–20 the concept of passing over sin is equated with God’s forgiveness of sin, and all of this is part of the exhibition of God’s faithfulness, another way of speaking of God’s righteousness.

In the interpretation being offered here (whether “passing over” refers to the time before or at the Cross), when Romans 3:26 speaks of God being just or righteous and the justifier or “rightifier” of those who believe,

both of the *dikaiois* words in this text are to be seen as referring to God’s saving action. The meaning, then, is that in the Cross of Christ God is seen to be righteous, that is, faithful to his covenant promises (God’s faithfulness in Rom. 3:3 is paralleled by his righteousness *dikaioisynē* in 3:5), in that he provides the sacrifice that delivers from sin and wrath, and is the “rightifier” (justifier) of the believer, that is, the one who applies the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice to the one who has faith.

Thus, there is in this text no antithesis between justice and mercy, as traditionally thought. The statement rather than being antithetic is synthetic. It

completes the thought in 3:26b that God is righteous (= one who justifies, “rightifies,” saves). The additional thought tells who he puts right: people of faith.

The virtue of this interpretation is twofold. First, the righteousness words, each of which is connected with the concept of something being revealed or shown, are all seen to have the same basic meaning, a salvific one, rather than the noun in 3:25 and the adjective in 3:26 suddenly changing in their significance. Second, full justice is still done to the fact that Christ, as the *hilasterion* of God, demonstrates the unconditional love of God, expiates the rebellious sin of man, and obviates the deserved wrath of God. He does this, as other texts declare, by being made sin (a sin offering) for us (Rom. 8:13) and by himself bearing our sins in his body on the tree (1 Pet. 2:24).

A last and very significant support for the salvific rather than retributive connotation of God’s righteousness in Romans 3:25 is that the immediate context says it is “apart from the law” (3:21). But God’s righteousness as retributive justice, if that is the meaning in 3:25, cannot be “apart from the law”; it is the law in punitive operation. As Romans 4:15 declares: “The law brings wrath.”

It seems clear that the total independence of God’s salvation from the legal system, spoken of in Romans 3:21, renders suspect the imposition of legal or forensic concepts on the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice.



## Suffering as the Foil for Redemption

By Ivan T. Blazen

Although many negative evaluations of *The Passion of the Christ* have been made, what is positive in the film overshadows the negative.

I saw the depth of Jesus' suffering as the foil for the film's portrayal of the redemptive love of Christ for all. If we focus on Jesus' torment just for itself we would not have a correct view of him or what he was about.

However, the meaning of his suffering is not primarily his physical anguish and death, but that which is cradled in these realities. Jesus' extreme agony is the prelude to his repeated words in the film: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

As the dying Christ is nailed to the cross in Gibson's portrayal, he utters a prayer of forgiveness for the Romans pounding the nails. While on the Cross, he prays this prayer again, and this time its application has special relevance to Jews in the person of their high priest, for one of the malefactors hanging next to Jesus says to the high priest passing below, "He prayed for *you*."

Here at the Cross are concentrated all the world's misunderstanding and blindness, as well as the malignity and sin of everyone, and, in Christ's dying, they are borne, transcended, and resolved.

At the same time, Satan, the wispy figure present everywhere, is vanquished. Satan had contended in Gethsemane that Jesus could not bear the load of the world's sin, but just as Jesus stomps on the head of the snake that issues forth from Satan, so Jesus endures all the way. The film cites as its fundamental premise wording from Isaiah 53: "By his stripes we are healed." Because this is so, Jesus is Victor over the evil one.

Symbolically, the camera moves slowly upward while looking down upon the scene of the crucifixion, which is given a circular form. Suddenly, the camera does the same with a scene in which Satan is on his knees, howling in torment in the middle of a circular floor. Clearly the two circles are one, and the Cross is the place where humankind is forgiven and the power of evil defeated. This happens through the very means by which the evil one sought to defeat Jesus—suffering.

This, at rock bottom, is what I saw with my mind's eye, as my physical eyes teared up at what I perceived to be the film's essential truth.

If God's righteousness is apart from the law, this means that God acts with absolute freedom in dispensing his grace. He is not bound by legal categories.

He supercedes these categories, as implied in Philippians 3:8–9, where Paul says he wants to gain Christ and be found in him, not having his own righteousness that comes from the law, but a righteousness from God derived from faith in Christ. The freedom of God's salvific action is expressly stated in Romans 3:24, which declares that God justifies believers freely by his grace.

## Theological Conclusions

On the basis of the discussion above we may say that there is nothing outside of God that moves him to be gracious, not even the sacrifice of Jesus. In a fundamental departure from traditional ideas of sacrifice, Romans 3:25 pictures God as offering the sacrifice, not as being the recipient of it. God was in the sacrificial death of Jesus, reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). There is no separation between God and Jesus, as is implied in the idea that God is punisher and Christ the punished. God's saving righteousness is "apart from the law," but the Father is not apart from the Son in the work of salvation and experience of redemptive suffering.

This means that in the death of Jesus, God—the one against whom all sin ultimately is committed<sup>8</sup>—bears the burden and pain of sin within himself and offers us the pardon. This is not about God undergoing punishment, but about the pain of self-sacrificing love taking all that is wrong into itself. True, there was an old rugged cross on a hill far away, but fundamentally the Cross is *in* the heart of God, not outside it.

In every act of true forgiveness, whether divine or human, there is a cross, the injured party suffering, absorbing, and exhausting the injury within himself and extending to the injurer grace and life. In this way, the one injured substitutes for the injurer and acts sacrificially on his behalf.<sup>9</sup> In such an interpretation, applied to God, the concept of the substitutionary, sin-bearing sacrifice of Christ is maintained, but in a new key.

And, let it be said, God's holiness, his absolute opposition to evil, is also maintained. When God, as it were, swallows the painful depths of human sin, undergoing what may be called the agony of forgiveness,<sup>10</sup> sin is seen for the wrong it really is—a strike against divine love—and it is judged and condemned (Rom. 8:3) in the very act of being extinguished.<sup>11</sup>

Romans 3:25–26 is not a theory of atonement in which a misunderstood God has to prove he punishes, but an announcement of the good news of God's abounding grace toward sinners. God himself, in the person of his son, bears and extinguishes our sins against him, and thus we can forever say: "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last."

## Notes and References

1. The NRSV is used throughout this paper unless otherwise indicated.

2. It is commonly thought in contemporary scholarship that these verses contain a Jewish Christian confession of faith that Paul adapted for his own purposes.

3. See, for example, James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 169–170; and John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 116. Furthermore, after claiming that "God himself gave himself to save us from his wrath" (*ibid.*, 115), Stott (115–16) quotes approvingly from C. E. B. Cranfield, who says that God, in willing to forgive righteously, "purposed to direct against his own very Self in the person of his Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved." *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, International Critical Commentary*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark: 1974, 1979), 1: 217. We have here the concept of divine self-propitiation.

4. Sometimes Acts 17:30–31 is invoked to support the view that God was open to the charge of disregarding rather than dealing in justice with human sin. The text says that God overlooked the times of human ignorance, but now commands everyone to repent because he has appointed a day when he will judge the world by Jesus Christ. I consider the idea that this text is parallel to Romans 3:25 to be incorrect. Acts 17:30 does not in any way suggest that God was open to a charge against his justice by overlooking human ignorance. I think he would be open to a charge if he dealt with ignorance as if it were knowledge.

This text, as well as the context within which it is set (*cf.* v. 23), contrasts the time of ignorance with the time of revelation. The gospel revelation of the reality of God as Creator was meant to overcome ignorance, and therefore is the basis for a call to repentance, that is, a turning to the true God. Repentance after revelation, rather than retribution upon Christ at the Cross, is the solution that this text presents for the times of ignorance. Furthermore, this call to repentance is set in relation to the judgment at the end of time.

This complex of ideas has nothing to do with the interpretation of Romans 3:25 that sees God at the Cross bringing retribution upon Christ to prove that he was not unjust in passing over

previous sin without punishment.

5. Compare Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, new ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 1337, 1340; Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols., (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–1993), 3:39; Werner Georg Kümmel, "Παρεσις and ενδειξις: A Contribution to the Understanding of the Pauline Doctrine of Justification," in vol. 3 of the *Journal for Theology and the Church*, ed. Robert W. Funk (Tübingen and New York: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] and Harper and Row, 1967), 3–4.

6. The prospective view of *dia* is illustrated by Romans 4:25 (Christ was put to death to deal with our sins and was raised to effect our justification). The instrumental understanding is exhibited in Revelation 12:11; 13:14; John 6:57; Romans 8:20. See William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Chicago and Cambridge: University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1957), 180, B II 4, and Kümmel, "Παρεσις," 10.

7. For references to the relevant texts, see Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 99–100; and Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, (Röm 1–5), Vol. VI/1 of *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Zurich and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger Verlag and Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 197.

8. Compare Psalms 51:3, "Against you and you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

9. In terms of human experience, which can sometimes be a good analogy for what happens on the divine level, Scott Peck, in part quoting Gale D. Webbe, (*The Night and Nothing*, 109), makes the following relevant comments: "The only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear into one's heart, it loses its power and goes no further.'..."

"The healing of evil ... can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required. The individual healer must allow his or her own soul to become the battleground. He or she must sacrificially *absorb* the evil." M. Scott Peck, *The People of the Lie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 269.

10. See H. R. Makintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet, 1951), 216.

11. Note *ibid.*, 198–206.

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# PASSION REVIEWS



## Compassion for *The Passion of the Christ*

By David A. Pendleton

**C**ontroversial, provocative, gut-wrenching, violent, emotionally charged, awe inspiring, and life transforming—all of these words are accurate, but none seem to do Mel Gibson's film *The Passion* justice. This is not just another movie with a historical theme. It is probably the most important film ever produced about the life of Jesus Christ.

There have been many movies made about Jesus, dating back to the very first films in black and white. Some years ago there was the *Last Temptation of Christ*. I remember writing a movie review on it for the student paper at La Sierra University. What struck me the most was how that movie depended upon its wild departures from Scripture in order to present a provocative story line. Hollywood welcomed it precisely because it was not a movie that sought to take seriously the biblical materials.

Recently there was an excellent video, often referred to simply as the *Jesus Film*, made for mass distribution. That presentation was very safe, very middle-of-the-road. It was consciously made to be as literal and noncontroversial as possible. It sought to present concisely the whole life of Jesus Christ in a balanced way.

*The Passion of the Christ* is very different. Produced and directed by box office megastar Gibson, this film is not only the labor of an expert filmmaker but also a gift from the heart of a believer. It is a product of the soul as much as of the mind.

The movie takes us every heartrending step of the way from Gethsemane to Golgotha. On this tearful journey we witness a hearing before the Sanhedrin, the ferocious flogging at the hands of the Romans, the presentation of Christ to the puppet government of King Herod, the return of Christ to Pilate's court, and the eventual politically expedient condemnation.

Thereafter, the remaining journey, this time with the cross, is seen much through the eyes of Christ's mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the disciple John.

### Flashbacks Flesh Out Life of Christ

Gibson is able to fill out the life of Christ through periodic flashbacks—to the rescue of Mary Magdalene from an almost certain stoning, the Last Supper, the Sermon on the Mount, various conversations with his disciples, and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Perhaps the most powerful flashback is to Christ's mother, Mary.

After Pilate condemns Christ to crucifixion, Mary tries to get close to her son one last time, but the crowd prevents her from doing so. Then John the disciple leads her through alleys winding in and around the Via Dolorosa, the path along which Christ bore the cross to Calvary outside the city gates. At one point their paths intersect. Mary the mother of Christ is panting hard and overcome by grief. She leans against a wall and pauses to catch her breath.

At that point Mary recollects Christ as a child. She recalls him running and playing and at one point falling and hurting his knee. She drops her cooking and runs to comfort her little son. "Mother is here," she says in the flashback, gathering the boy in her loving arms.

Then she is back in the present. At the intersection where she has paused she sees her son stumble and collapse under the burden of the rugged cross. With the same motherly passion she runs again to comfort her son. "Mother is here," you can almost hear her say. Yet the juxtaposition of the two scenes is so emotionally charged that your eyes well up with tears and you can hear nothing but the beating of your own heart.

## Cannot Be Dispassionate with *The Passion*

Christ reaches Calvary, prays forgiveness for those who have crucified him, and utters “it is accomplished” as he takes his final breath. A near-final scene is silent with Mary holding her now-still son in her arms as the film fades to black. As one would rightfully anticipate, the movie ends on a positive note: a momentary, muted shot of the tomb’s stone rolling away, the emptied death shroud, and the resurrected Christ.

To pretend to be objective would be dishonest. One cannot review this film as though it is any other film. The movies *Titanic* and *Gods and Generals* were also historically true. Those films were about real people who actually died. Yet it is impossible to critique this film in the same way. One cannot be wholly dispassionate, neutral, detached, or impartial watching and thinking about this film—at least if one is a Christian.

As believers, we see our Lord Jesus Christ so cruelly treated and killed. And our hearts respond. I wanted to reach out and help him, rescue him, “save” him. Yet one realizes that Christ willingly gave his life. His crucifixion was not something others did to him. It was something he permitted, something he allowed, something he willed.

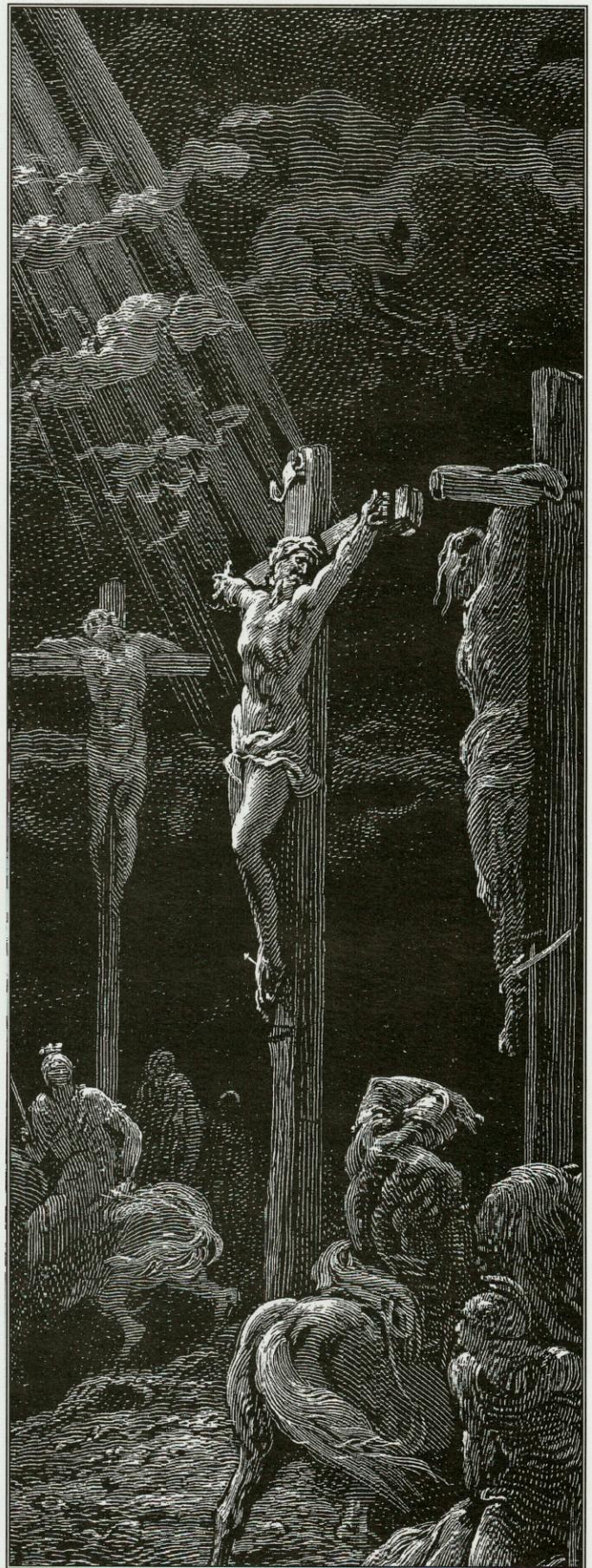
He could have snapped his fingers and a legion of angels would have come to his rescue. Yet he did not. He did not in order to save the world.

### Poignancy in the Eyes of Loved Ones

In various scenes Gibson affords viewers brief respites from the horror rained down upon Jesus through a close-up shot of Mary or Mary Magdalene or the disciple John. Through their tearful eyes one experiences the poignancy of the moment.

In one scene, where a Roman soldier gruesomely flogs Christ, the cameras cut away to Mary. There she is witnessing unspeakable cruelty inflicted on her son. She asks herself in Aramaic: “How, when, where will you allow yourself to be delivered from this?”

Seeing this on the big screen brought me to the point of sobbing. How sorry I was for all the complaints I have made. I have grumbled about stressful days at the office. I have sent petitions to God asking for this and for that, whining about minor things, grip-



GUSTAVE DORE / DOVER

ing for things that have happened to me. Like Bruce in the movie *Bruce Almighty*, I have uttered irreverent prayers asking God to use his power to make my life simpler, easier, and more convenient.

I am so sorry. I thank the Lord for giving me true perspective again on life—on what really matters. I left the movie theater asking: How can we complain about anything after what he did for us? How can we feel

since seen the movie a second time, yet the prophetic words continue to haunt me: "... and by His wounds, we are healed!"

I practice a profession where words are the tools of my trade. I write; I speak; I preach; and I debate. I am a former trial attorney and presently work as a legislator and pastor. But I was left utterly wordless and silent both times I saw the film. I was impacted beyond

## I left the movie theater asking: How can we complain about anything after what he did for us?

anxious, worried, overwhelmed by anything on this earth after the penalty meant for us, which Christ willingly took upon himself?

How often does a movie leave you asking those sorts of questions?

I have friends who say they already know the story and do not need exposure to the violence. I have friends who have as a rule avoided all movies, given what Hollywood customarily serves up for public consumption. I have friends not of a religious persuasion, and they may be avoiding it because it might be "manipulative."

I have Adventist friends who believe that moving pictures are wrong to watch, unless rented as videos. I have Adventist friends worried about seeing a movie produced by a Catholic, lest the subtle theological differences influence their thinking. I have Adventist friends who received an e-mail from Professor Samuel Bacchiocchi, and based upon that single e-mail refuse to see the film.

But I was so thankful to have seen this film. When I got home after seeing it the first time, I found myself so overwhelmed that I could not sleep. I was speechless for hours. I actually picked up an old worn copy of a biography of the life of Jesus Christ recommended by the librarian of the Library of Congress. It is entitled *Desire of Ages* by Ellen White. I read two chapters: "Gethsemane" and "Calvary."

There I found words articulating what I had just experienced in Gibson's movie! It was incredible—as though Gibson's screenwriters had read those very chapters in preparation for making the film. Perhaps not. But clearly both White and Gibson were inspired by the same Gospel account.

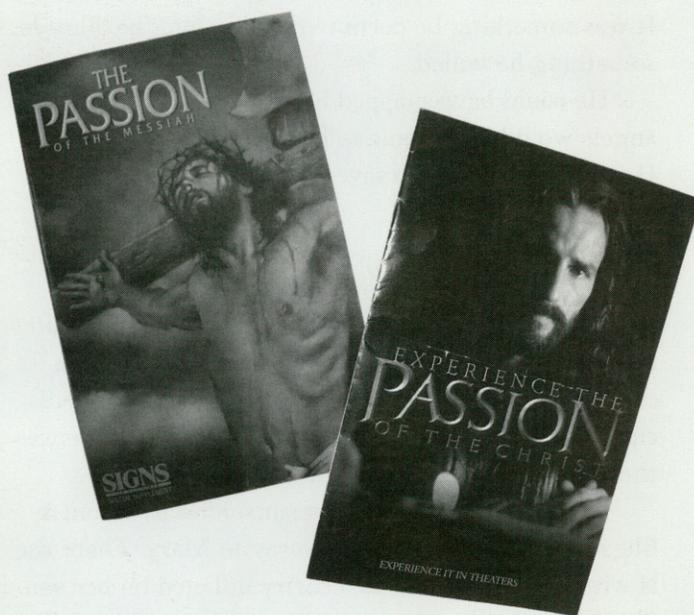
The next morning I turned to Isaiah 53. I have

the point where I could articulate what my mind and heart were trying to process.

I have to recommend *The Passion of the Christ*. This will probably be the most controversial film of the year. No movie review can do it justice. You have to experience it for yourself. You may love it—or you may hate it. But I promise that you will not be indifferent to this movie.

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Interest in *The Passion of the Christ* created opportunities for literature distribution. Many Baptist churches used the Brian Mavis brochure titled *Experience the Passion of the Christ* to hand out to movie goers. Pacific Press went into a second printing of its booklet *The Passion of the Messiah*, taken from the Ellen G. White book *Desire of Ages*.

# Atonement, Blood, and a Horrible Death

By Adrian Zytkoskee

People had already gathered by the time I arrived, even though a cold, heavy rain was coming down. A man who drove a Springs of Living Water church van arrived and began to pass out pamphlets. I took one and went into the theater.

I had purchased my ticket a week before. I saved a seat for my daughter as the theater filled rapidly. As I waited for the film to begin, I tried to imagine who else was attending and what kind of expectations they had brought with them.

I thought of the church I was raised in. My picture of Christ was always two dimensional, usually involving a white-robed Jesus surrounded by children in the sylvan surroundings of what we always called “the earth made new.” Sometimes there was a picture of Christ in the same white robe standing beside and supporting a contemporary surgeon in the midst of an operation. Sometimes Christ was knocking at the door of someone’s middle-class home, waiting to be invited in.

What about people from other churches, many calling themselves “Evangelicals,” who had come to this first showing? Did they come to be shattered by the enormity of their own sins, which made necessary the saving sacrifice of Christ? Were there charismatics who had heard Mel Gibson describe the role of the Holy Ghost in inspiring this film?

What about politically oriented Christians, possibly present in support of a Hollywood icon who had the courage to challenge the liberal, amoral Hollywood establishment? How many of Gibson’s own type of pre-Vatican II Catholics had come—people accustomed to contemplating a bleeding, half-naked figure who wore a crown of thorns and hung on a cross? Finally, I thought of stern-faced attendees who might be there, fearful of and vigilant against the anti-Semitism that has permeated so much of Christian history.

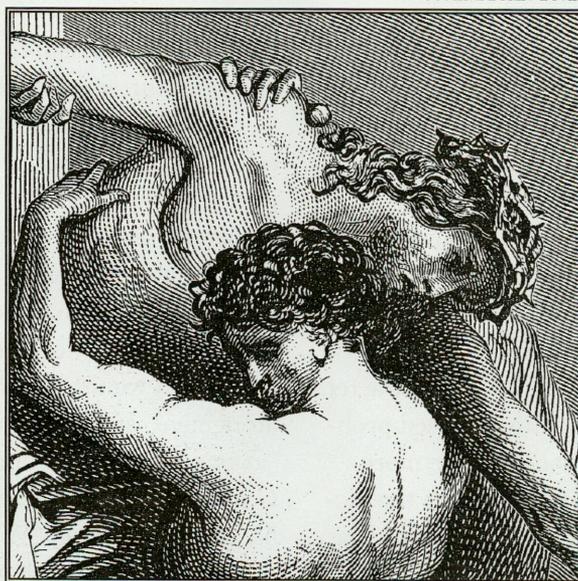
Then the movie began and I tried to pretend I was hearing and seeing the story of Jesus for the first time. One of the most important qualities of a truly good film is beauty, both in writing and cinematography. Gibson’s film uses only Aramaic and Latin, with English subtitles, so I have no basis for evaluating the script. However, from the beginning the colors, contrasts, and scene sets were beautiful, from the shadowy Garden of Gethsemane to the lantern-lit faces of the Sanhedrin leaders bargaining with Judas.

The acting was competent to good with the Christ, played by James Caviezel, seeming to have great possibilities but with a strangely limited role. Maia Morgenstern, who played Jesus’ mother, gave a quietly stand-out performance.

Unfortunately for Gibson, the film is made in such a way that only knowledgeable believers are likely to have the religious epiphany Gibson clearly hopes for. The Christ we saw was a bloody victim (emphasis on blood), beaten and dragged through the streets. We saw only the briefest of flashbacks to help

us understand who he was and why he was tortured and killed. We did not see much of Jesus the leader, the teacher, the healer.

What we did see was incomprehensible cruelty, unexplainable evil, and unimaginable violence. When Christ was scourged with ninety lashes we took ten minutes to see all ninety. I know that during this time my mind should have turned to the beautiful words in Isaiah that describe how Christ was scourged for my iniquities, but I was dwelling on the brutal whip holders and hoping for vengeance. I think it accurate to say that the film is more about evil than about good.



GUSTAVE DORE / DOVER



It is impossible to overstate the level of violence in this film. Although attempts will be made to justify that violence as showing what Christ suffered for each of us, any honest critic must note that violence and bloodshed have cinematic production values that have long been exploited.

As I watched the beautifully filmed but exceptionally violent scenes I thought about the almost symbiotic relation between violence and what many consider cinematic excellence. One of the most enduring images in movie history is the bullet-riddled bodies of Bonnie and Clyde. Many critics consider *Kill Bill*, Quentin

Think of the abstractions we cherish to keep from thinking about the central place of violent death in our system. Our theologians use words like *type* and *anti-type* to describe the sacrificial system described in the Old Testament. They understand the whole ceremonial system as prefiguring the life and death of Christ, which forever solved the "sin problem."

But as we see the awful events on the screen our minds are not automatically directed to a neat package where the types and antitypes are wrapped and tied in a forensic bow. Christ, the "lamb of God," scrubbed clean of real meaning begins to be real. In our mind's

### Gibson's film is uncomfortably old-fashioned in that it vividly reminds us of what stands at the center of the Christian faith.

Tarantino's "stylistically violent" film, to be among the best films of 2003.

What about the violence in this powerful depiction of the death of Christ? Is it actually an antiviolence message? I think not. Consider another current film, one I admire very much: Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River*. The violence there is almost random, and when given a purpose it accomplishes something it most wants to avoid. In other words, violence solves nothing.

This is a far cry from the "make my day" characters of Eastwood's past, whose violent actions solved problems once and for all. The bigger the gun, the more satisfying the solution. It is also a far cry from the violent crucifixion of Christ, which believers consider the most meaningful act in human history. Unfortunately, the film does little to help viewers see this meaning.

Then, suddenly, I realized that the crucifixion as an atoning blood sacrifice—an idea certainly in the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy—was at least implied in the imagery and context of the film. Given that understanding, I begin to see the real meaning and power of Gibson's film. Unlike many recent controversial films about Christ, Gibson's is not revisionist.

But it is controversial because it strips away the euphemisms around Christ's sacrifice that have made Christianity and our Judeo-Christian heritage welcome in polite society. At the same time, those euphemisms have prevented us from recognizing that violent death and the horrors that go with it stand at the center of our faith, and that death as a solution is the cornerstone of our theology.

eye we see the flashing knives of the ancient priests and hear the screams of the sacrificed animals.

If we listen more carefully, we hear the menacing echoes of human screams, dying young people killed to please angry gods. We wonder when Yahweh ceased to demand that fathers sacrifice their sons as a test of their loyalty and when he became the God who "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" so that we might be saved.

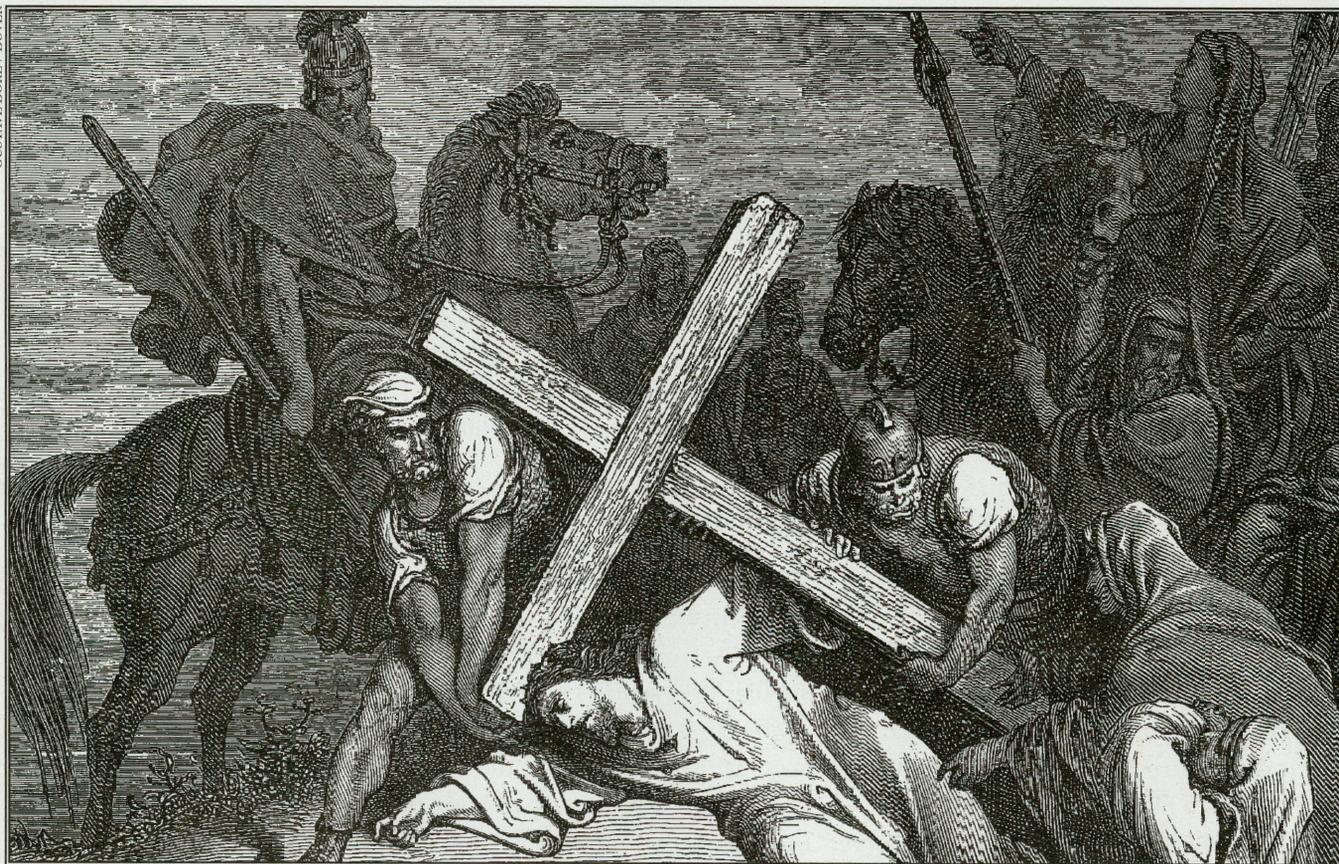
When we see *The Passion of the Christ* we see the atonement, and no amount of parsing the word into "at-one-ment" (meaning "reconciled and together with God") can hide the fact that it involves a bloody, horrible death. We sing, "Would you be free from the burden of sin, there is wonderful power in the blood," but we hide from the picture all that the metaphor implies. We instruct one another to "eat, this is my body" and "drink, this is my blood" and have little idea what we should think when we weigh these words.

Gibson's film is uncomfortably old-fashioned in that it vividly reminds us of what stands at the center of the Christian faith. In that spirit of uncompromising acceptance of our Christian heritage I will quote the sixteenth-century cry of Christopher Marlowe: "See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament.... One drop would save my soul—half a drop: ah, my Christ" (*The Tragical Victory of Dr. Faustus*).

If that inspires you, by all means go and see the film.

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Retired educator and administrator Adrian Zytoskee lives in Placerville, California.



## Troubling Images of Anti-Semitism and Misogyny

By Heather Isaacs

**T**he peculiar, unprecedented cinematic combination of Christian rhetoric, box-office success, and Mel Gibson's directorial signature in *The Passion of the Christ* leave me hoping that I will never again have to say the following:

1. "Did we just watch the same movie?"
2. "Am I still a Christian?"
3. "Satan is a woman?"
4. "What Bible did Mel Gibson read and who was his history teacher?"
5. "Somewhere in America, at this very moment, a child is watching the eleven-minute scourging of Jesus and being told that he had to die because of her sins."

Of course, as much as I would like to place the blame for this film on Mel Gibson alone the more difficult task is to hold responsible the noncritical reading of the New Testament that has dominated Christian

narratives about the death of Jesus Christ. However, in reviewing the movie itself and leaving the review of Christian Scripture to other discussions, I hold Gibson accountable for the abuse of his artistic license.

Artistic license is assumed whenever one tries to create an "historical" account. We can neither remember today nor interpret yesterday without the use of imagination and editing. Nevertheless, in attempting to tell the story of the last twelve hours of Jesus Christ, Gibson has used his artistic license irresponsibly, bringing new and stunning cinematic images to the problems of anti-Semitism and misogyny.

Early in the movie a conflicted Judas appears before an assembly of scheming Jewish leaders to arrange the betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.



Judas's body language conveys the discomfort of a pricked conscience, and his reluctance to take action left me worrying. I mean, in a movie where even Judas doesn't want to betray Jesus you have to wonder where the momentum behind his execution will come from.

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait long for the answer. Nearly everyone in this movie is reluctant to kill Jesus (including the foppish, feeble-minded Herod) except the Jews and the boorish Roman foot soldiers, who exhibit a sadism matched only by the mob's intensity. But Roman cruelty must ultimately be seen as subordinate to the power plays of the Jews, who are

The problematic theological statement suggested by her "mothering" is the age-old comparison of Eve and Mary, the "terrible mother" of the fallen and the "good mother" of the redeemed. Gibson whispers as much in the first scene of the film, in an encounter between Satan and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when a serpent slides out from beneath Satan's skirts and Jesus crushes it.

However, the demonic portrayal of the feminine is only part of the theme of motherhood that runs throughout the film. Female characters in general form an empathic circle of onlookers that seek political

### **This is a film, despite its theological misstatements and abuse of artistic license, that moves you in the womb.**

primarily portrayed as cunning, deceptive, manipulative, rabble-rousing types who hold the vice in which political pressure can be applied at will, thus playing Pontius Pilate like a puppet.

Some will disagree with me by arguing, "But there were good Jews, too—the Marys and John, for example. The movie doesn't hold all Jews responsible for killing Jesus—just the religious and political elite." A few Christians may go so far as to say, "The movie doesn't blame Jews for killing Jesus—it blames us! We killed Jesus with our unbelief and our sins."

Even if I were to concede either of these points, what are we to make of the demon Jewish children? In one of the most disturbing moments in the movie (and there were plenty) Jewish children taunt a psychologically tormented Judas. During the attack, their faces reveal that they are demonic creatures.

Hoping against hope that these diabolical transformations were a projection of Judas's troubled psyche and not, in fact, real live demons, I was horrified when in the following scene a larger group of children pursue Judas into the countryside like the hounds of hell. The figure of Satan emerges and the children vanish, almost supernaturally. The editing implies that Satan has control over her "children."

Mother Satan moves in real space and time throughout the movie. She drifts through the crowds, silently blessing the torture of Jesus while holding an infant/demon in her arms. Her presence is the unholy antithesis to Mary, Jesus' mother, to whom Mary Magdalene and John attend.

redress on behalf of Jesus, reach out to each other in their terror and grief, and stand vigil at the cross.

For me, the emotional core of the film was not in the brutalized body of Jesus, even though the violence committed against him repelled me deeply. Rather, watching the slow and violent death of Jesus through his mother's eyes as she struggles against her helplessness moved me profoundly and brought me to tears.

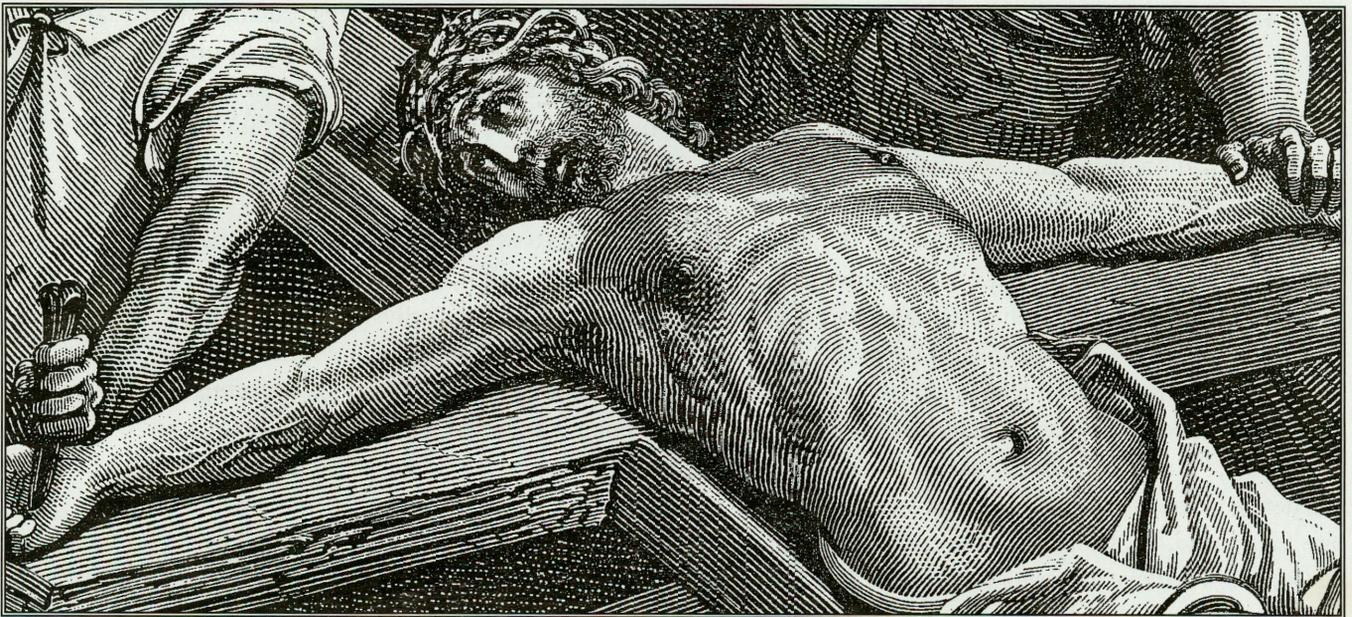
This is a film, despite its theological misstatements and abuse of artistic license, that moves you in the womb—if not yours, then Mary's as she staggers toward her son to tell him she is with him in the last hours of his life. In Hebrew, the word for "compassion" is derived from the word meaning "womb." To be moved in your womb is to feel the motherly compassion that is part she-bear and part mother hen.

The danger of the film, though, is believing that the suffering that evokes such a response, the suffering of Jesus, is unparalleled in history, unique to Christianity, and does not demand truth telling and justice in the systems that make such suffering possible.

Cradling the corpse of her son, Mary gazes directly into the camera and silently indicts the audience for Jesus' death. Whatever our answers to her, however personally we receive the death of Jesus, we also carry the burden of honesty in addressing the anti-Semitism and misogyny that lurk in the margins of this film and mirror the worst of Christian theology.

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Heather Isaacs is completing graduate studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary.



## An Offensive and Disgusting Film

By Ron Jolliffe

In the entire theater, I felt alone in finding Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, offensive and disgusting.

I entered the theater on the film's opening day, Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004, for the first matinee showing. The theater was almost full and respectfully quiet—like the inside of a cathedral. Some in the audience were wearing the sign of the cross on their foreheads, applied by priests with vertical and horizontal stokes of ashes made from the previous year's Palm Sunday fronds. When the film was over, I watched most viewers file out reverently, heads bowed as though meditating on eternity. A few sat sobbing; one held a handkerchief against both eyes.

Many aspects of the film are inviting. The camera angles, lighting, thematically connected flashbacks to earlier story elements, costuming, and sets are absorbing aspects of the film. There is a cute exchange between Jesus and his mother in a flashback to Jesus working as a carpenter about the unlikelihood of "tall tables" with chairs ever becoming popular. Although the musical score seems emotionally manipulative at times, it is beautifully done at other moments.

There are many aspects of the film that surprised me, but not happily. The film assumes that the viewer

knows the story well, for it has little by way of explanation about why the scenes filmed transpire. The film is basically four extended scenes of brutality: the arrest in Gethsemane, the trial, the Via Dolorosa, and the Crucifixion, followed by a lingering tableau of Michelangelo's *Pietà* as its crowning moment.

Covering approximately the last twelve hours of Jesus' life on the day of his crucifixion in Jerusalem, the film script is said to be based upon several sources, including "the diaries of St. Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824) as collected in the book, 'The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ', 'The Mystical City of God' by St. Mary of Agreda, and the New Testament books of John, Luke, Mark and Matthew."<sup>1</sup>

In part due to the respect of so many in the audience, I had to examine why I felt so strongly negative toward the film. Here are my reasons: It seems to me that the film (1) trivializes the transcendent, (2) vilifies non-"normal" persons, (3) thrills to its own voyeuristic sadomasochism, and (4) graphically depicts violence as redemptive.



## Trivialization of the Transcendent

This, of course, is not the first time that a filmmaker has attempted to depict the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. It has been filmed hundreds of times, but other films have never approached the brutality and savagery of this depiction. In spite of all the technology for editing film, I believe it continues to be the case that the transcendent, like the alien and paranormal, is more truly affective when implied rather than depicted.

The snake crawling out from under the tempter's robes seems cartoonish—as though the audience is expected to think, “This is not a real snake but a metaphor for evil derived from the Garden of Eden, so it is not going to bite Jesus' hand, but tempt Jesus not to go through with his ordeal.” The dove fluttering above Jesus' head means one is to realize that the Spirit has not abandoned Jesus.

The demonic characters seem more like they belong to a B-grade horror film or to juvenile humor made more on the basis of unfortunate physical deformity than upon any actually frightening presence—as though the viewer is now supposed to conjure up the feeling “Now the devils are tormenting Judas.” A demon of some sort with simian visage is depicted as tormenting Judas until Jesus, having been thrown over a wall by the soldiers shortly after his arrest, comes into its presence.

These things aren't really scary fodder, but more nearly Harry Potter. Contemporary American Christians have enough difficulty confusing the category “factual” for the category “faithful” without having these and other crass literalisms stand in for the meaning of grace.

The idea that a graphic depiction of the magnitude of the suffering of Christ will cause believers to understand salvation better misunderstands a point at the core of Christian theology: Christ's story is about transcendence, not literality. This critique is aimed at all attempts to treat transcendental things as concrete facts.

For example, Christian theology would not come closer to the meaning of the incarnation if it possessed a microscopic video of the virginal conception of Mary in a close-up of the formation of the zygote in Mary's womb with her immaculate egg (which she is able to donate because of the miracle God performed at her own conception, according to Roman Catholic theology) and the (spiritual?) sperm provided by the Spirit (when the power of the Highest overshadowed her).

Spiritual things are spiritually discerned and attempts to concretize them result in genuine loss.

For example, the two thieves crucified with Jesus in the film are amazingly free of marks of torture, flogging, and abuse, in comparison to Jesus, but there is no historical reason to assume that they were not treated as Jesus was, for scourging and abuse were regular elements that preceded crucifixion.<sup>2</sup> But from the film's point of view, to show the thieves suffering the same treatment as Jesus did would apparently diminish the impact of what he suffered.

Contrary to the film's implied message, it is not the magnitude or intensity of suffering that redeems human beings—many crucified persons not only received treatment like Jesus received, but also endured up to a week or more on their crosses before dying. Those who argue that we are saved because of the violence Jesus suffered misunderstand the act of redemption. Violence is not redemptive—it is destructive.

For me, the film certainly created more grisly, bloody images to go along with the words of that old “gospel song.” I'll never hear it the same again, and I don't like the new way I hear it—“Would you be free from your burden of sin? There's power in the *blood*, power in the *blood*.”

## Vilification of the Non-“normal”

In my opinion, the film also draws upon subliminal Christian bigotry, though probably not anti-Semitic in the specific usage that means anti-Jewish. I fear that the film may prove to make some of its viewers more anti-Semitic in the larger sense of anti-Arab/Jew/Middle-Easterner and anyone else who doesn't accept Jesus as what Christians say he is.

The undercurrent is that such persons are rejecting the amazing love and forgiveness exhibited in Jesus' words, spoken while he was nailed to the cross after hours of the grossest brutality: “Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.”

I fear that the message the film will instill in too many of its Christian viewers is that humans are insufferable, irredeemable wretches that only God can forgive, so we Christians, also being insufferable, irredeemable wretches that only God can forgive, don't have to be forgiving toward non-Christians—after all, they killed Christ, so they deserve whatever we give them.

I say this on the basis of what seem unfortunate portrayals of evil in the film: Herod and his entourage are depicted as debauched gay men, the boys who torment Judas take on bizarre characteristics of deformity supposedly representing demonic intensities. But the visuals

unavoidably imply that deformed features are the result of some kind of demonic possession, a subtle bigotry exercised against persons whose facial features are different.

## Invitation to Voyeuristic Sadomasochism

I did not like the morbid curiosity the film created in me about the interior of the body of Jesus, wondering if those wounds depicted on the screen looked like real ones. What makes me wonder which stroke of the Roman soldier's cat-o'-nine-tails laid open Jesus' ribs? As revolting as I found much of the movie, there was still this morbid curiosity that I desperately wanted to shake off, but it would not leave.

I found myself curious about things to which I didn't want to have answers, yet I wondered—perhaps like crowds at public hangings—what death looks like. What sort of sick curiosity is this? Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "To behold suffering gives pleasure, but to cause another to suffer affords an even greater pleasure."<sup>3</sup>

Does the puzzling attraction of this movie for so many people add credence to Nietzsche's claim? When one has the right to behold this suffering because it is a sacred story—coupled with a belief that one caused that suffering—does that explain this movie's compelling attraction to so many viewers?

## Portrayal of Violence as Redemptive

When Janet Jackson suffered her "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl, one conversation about the impropriety of that half-time show for family television elicited this question from Jason Alexander (George Costanza on *Seinfeld*): "What makes us think that thirty-six guys beating the crap out of each other in the Super Bowl is family programming?"

The general American inurement to violence seems to be related to a primitive premise of many Christians that pain is required in order to atone for transgression—consider everything from penance and spankings and fasting to prison and the death penalty. As a nation, Americans have an obsession with violence as the way to make atonement for transgression. This film, I fear, will embolden depictions of violence on the screen and lower further the bar for ratings that restrict the young from movies that contain graphic depictions of violence.

If any good can come from the film, I believe it will come from a serious conversation about the popu-

lar idea of propitiation, that violent pain was required of God for the redemption of humans. There are other, better, approaches to theology.

When I think about my experience with this film, the first term that comes to mind is *gratuitous violence*. But even if the word *gratuitous* derives from the word *grace*, this film is heavy on violence and lacking in grace. There is nothing graceful about violence.

No wonder I hated the film.

## Notes and References

1. See <<http://www.hallett.com/times/movies.html#anchor332544>>, accessed on February 24, 2004.
2. Philo, *Against Flaccus* 72, 84; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12.256; *Jewish War* 2.306, 308; 5.446–51.
3. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1956).

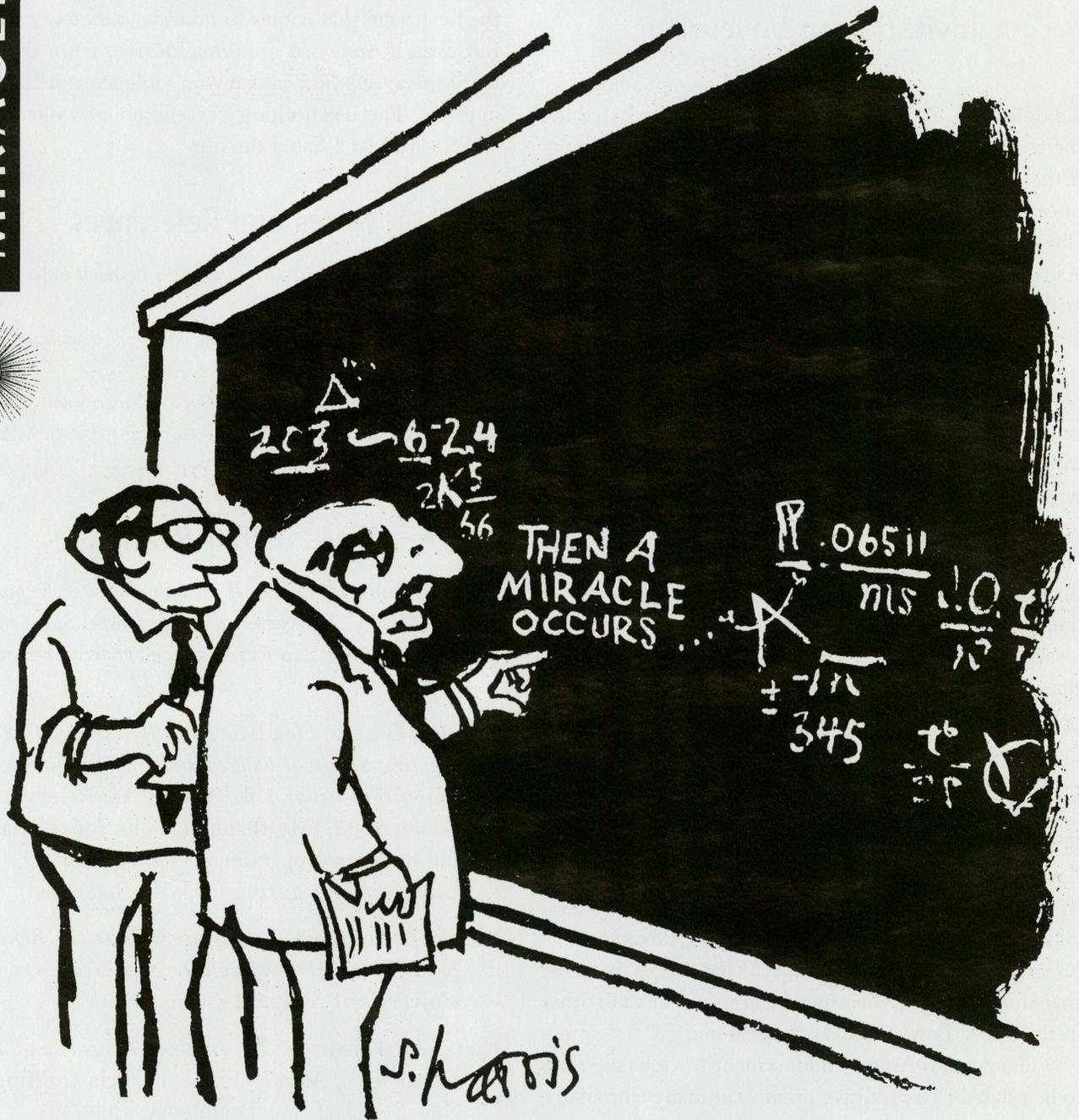
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"I THINK YOU SHOULD BE MORE EXPLICIT HERE IN STEP TWO."

# “Then a Miracle Occurs”

By Brian Bull and Fritz Guy

The conflict between faith and science has gone on for more than three hundred years, and there is no sign that it will abate any time soon. For many people, the conflict centers on the Genesis stories of creation (Gen. 1:1–2:3; 2:4–25).

On one side are those for whom a reading of the text as if it were primarily natural science is necessary to provide assurance that God is the all-powerful Creator. They believe that Christian faith demands assent to a creation of the world and everything in it, or at least all the various forms of terrestrial life, in six literal, twenty-four-hour contiguous days a few thousand years ago.

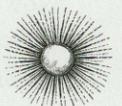
On the other side are those who find compelling scientific evidence that the world is very old and that life has existed on it for a long, long time. The first group accuses the second of placing science above faith, and the second accuses the first of placing unrealistic, scientific demands upon an ancient text whose authors had no such thing in mind.

This is a vexing question for many Christians. But a larger and more fundamental question concerns the way we understand God’s relation to the natural

regularities of the created universe. The question of the relationship between faith and science is part of the question of the relation of God and nature.

## The Interaction Between Faith and Science

A thirty-year-old drawing by Sidney Harris that has achieved cartoon immortality depicts two scientists standing at a blackboard covered with equations. Halfway along the board the calculations break off and in the resulting gap is the phrase, “Then a Miracle Occurs.” Following this insertion, the calculations resume. The older of the two scientists is looking critically at the blackboard and saying to the younger, “I think you should be more explicit here in step two.” This cartoon has been reproduced thousands of times, and it is reproduced once more here. It is available on T-shirts and coffee mugs. Why



has it had such staying power? What does it have to do with the interaction between faith and science?

Do you find the cartoon funny? Most people do, and it is a reasonable guess that you do, too. That is probably why the cartoon has had such staying power. It is funny because of the unexpected interaction between two worlds that normally do not interact, at least not in this way. Science and faith, the natural and the supernatural, do not normally appear side by side in the middle of an equation where the mathematics has bogged down. Mathematical science and belief in miracles do not exist comfortably together. Yet more than 40 percent of practicing scientists say they are religious believers, so faith and science must interact a great deal—just not in this particular way, at least not any more.

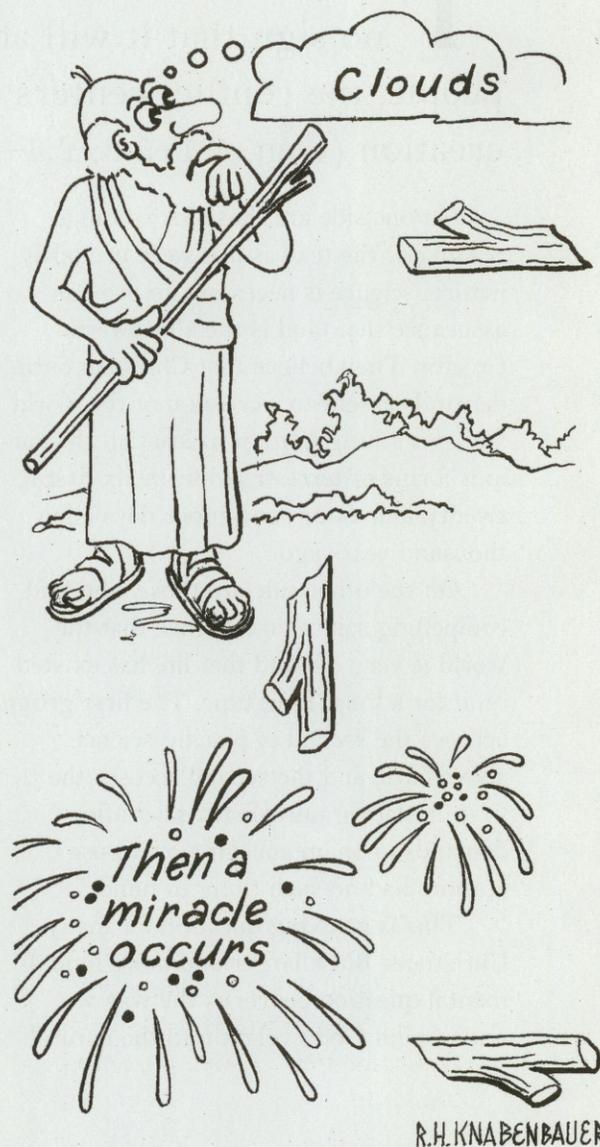
It was not always so. In the biblical world, for example, Sydney Harris's cartoon would not have been funny at all. On the contrary, it would have been completely opaque, impenetrable to anyone who saw it. This would have been the case despite the fact that the words in the cartoon meant then essentially what they mean now. The idea of miracle as divine intervention was taken for granted, and so were numbers. The reason the cartoon would not have been funny was that there was not the unexpected clash between two different worlds that makes it funny for us. In the thinking of the biblical world, whenever it was necessary to bridge a gap in the understanding of a natural, physical process, it was simply assumed that "Then a Miracle Occurs."

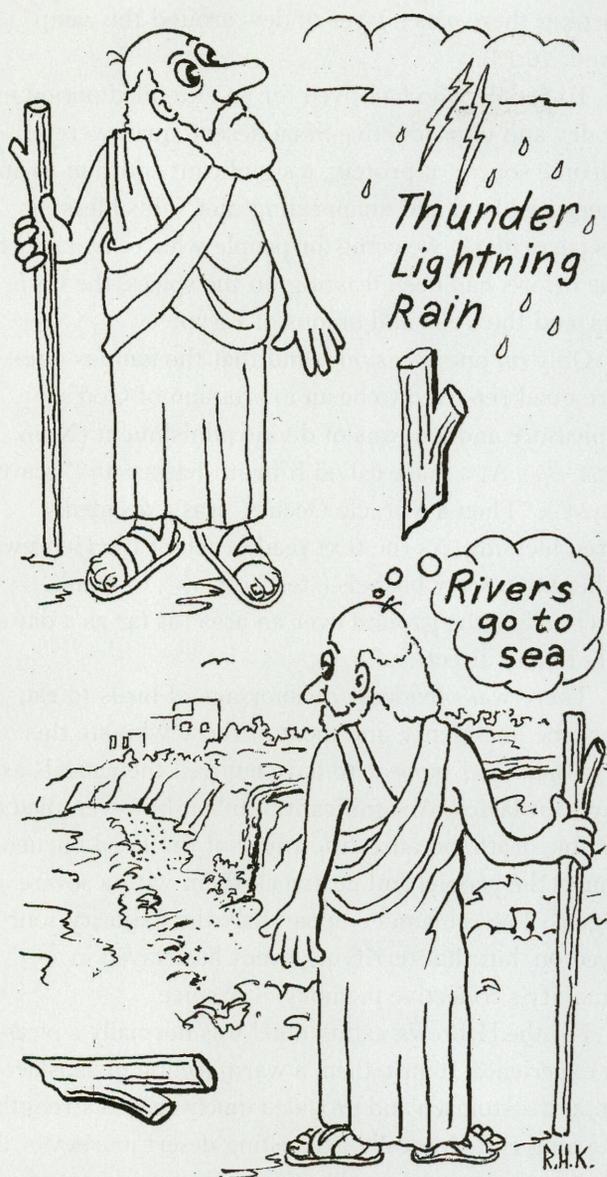
From the time of the ancient Hebrews to the beginning of Christian thought, this was the case: an incomplete understanding of an unobservable physical process was regarded as evidence of a direct act of God. For any unexplained natural phenomenon there was a presumption of direct divine intervention—a presumption we might call a *default to the supernatural* (recognizing, of course, that a contrast between "supernatural" and "natural" is an extrabiblical distinction).<sup>1</sup>

In more recent times, under the same kind of circumstances there has been increasingly a *default to the natural*, a presumption that there is a natural causal explanation of the phenomenon, even if we don't know just what it is. Our understanding of the world includes an infrastructure of "nature"—natural regularity, natural order, sometimes called "natural law."<sup>2</sup> Now (thanks to quantum indeterminacy) we also have the concept of randomness. This combination of natural order and randomness, which undergirds and

informs our current picture of reality, was completely absent from the biblical world.

This undergirding construct does not rule out the possibility of direct supernatural intervention in the natural order—what we usually mean by "miracle"—and it certainly does not limit the activity of God in nature to the supernatural.<sup>3</sup> But it puts the burden of proof on the claim of a supernatural occurrence, the claim that an event is, strictly speaking, a miracle. Any attempt we make to think within the very different biblical world always comes up against the unalterable difference between that world and ours, and we often do not appreciate how vast a gulf it is. To enter the prescientific world and see unobservable physical processes as biblical people saw them—as impenetrable, inexplicable events that are direct acts of God—is very difficult. It may well be impossible.





in others. Three illustrations will get us started on our journey: rain, quail, and blood.

## Rain

In the land of Israel, it never “just rained.”<sup>4</sup> A search of all of the texts that mention rain in the Old Testament will fail to turn up the phrase “it rained.” The coming of rain, a great blessing in a desert land, was usually ascribed directly to God (Gen. 7:2; 1 Sam. 12:17–18; 1 Kings 17:14; Jer. 5:24; and so forth). We may think that the phrase “God sent the rain” is poetic, metaphorical; the ancient Hebrews did not. For them the arrival of life-giving showers was the result of a direct act of a generous God. Sometimes it was even more than that; it was a sign that they were God’s chosen people (Deut. 11:13–14).

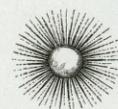
Nowadays the hydrologic cycle is known to school-children in the early grades. Clouds gather overhead and rain falls. The water nourishes the earth, then collects into streams. The streams flow into rivers, which make their way to the oceans. From the oceans, the sun’s energy draws up water vapor to form clouds and the cycle is complete.

All of these stages except the last one were visible and readily understood by the ancient Hebrews.<sup>5</sup> But the last, invisible stage is the one that receives the input of energy that makes the entire cycle function, the action of the sun in drawing up water vapor from the oceans to form clouds. Because that portion of the cycle is invisible, human understanding would wait thousands of years for an explanation. In the meantime, the Hebrews inserted, as a placeholder for a stage that to them was incomprehensible, “Then a Miracle Occurs”; and they thought it not the least bit strange or funny. It was not funny because, in their world, it happened all the time. In their world “Then a Miracle Occurs” was the default explanation for every happening whose cause was not visible.

In our present world, however, when something happens that we do not understand, immediately and without further thought we default to a physical, natural explanation. We may have no idea what that explanation actually is, but we assume that somewhere, sometime, some scientist has figured it out—or will, sooner or later. We assume that we could find it out,

Why, indeed, do we even try to enter that world? Because, however modern and scientific our understanding of the natural order has become, our Christian faith has its ancient roots in the world of the authors of the Genesis stories. If we wish to understand the modern conflict between science and faith, we must try to hear those stories through the ears of the people who first heard them several thousand years ago. Only then can we understand why the conflict between science and faith has persisted so long, and still continues.

Some biblical examples will assist us in the challenging task of reexamining and understanding (without trying to enter) the world from which the Bible and its accounts of creation come to us. It will prove to be a world that is radically different from ours in some respects, yet very familiar and readily understandable



too, if we took the time to inquire and study. This assumption is just part of our worldview. But it was not so for those who lived in the ancient world of the Bible.

## Quail

The matter of the quail will bring us face to face with the dark side of that world, the dark side of a default to the supernatural.

Contrary to what most of us remember from hearing Bible stories as children, most of the time the ancient Hebrews considered quail to be a gift from God: "They asked, and [the Lord] brought quail, and satisfied them with the bread of heaven" (Ps. 105:40).<sup>6</sup> The arrival of quail in the camp was reported in the same way as the arrival of manna from heaven: "That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the

morning there was a layer of dew around the camp" (Exod. 16:13).

To people who had lived for an extended period in the dry and unproductive Sinai desert, quail were a welcome source of protein, a significant addition to an otherwise bland and unappealing diet. This blessing was particularly welcome for people who, only a short time before, had been feasting on the spices, the flesh pots, and the leeks and onions of Egypt.

Only on one occasion—and that the famous one—were quail reported to be an expression of God's displeasure and a means of divine punishment (Num. 11:31–34). At a place called Kibroth-hattaavah ("graves of lust"), "Then a Miracle Occurs" was a decidedly mixed blessing. As the text reads, each of the Hebrews gathered up sixty bushels ("ten homers") of quail, which fell to the ground over an area "as far as a day's walk in any direction."

There was obviously no shortage of birds to eat, everyone had plenty, and most of those who ate this early "fast food" appear to have enjoyed their meals as long as it lasted. A significant number, however, died a horrible death, because "the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague." The remainder, apparently the majority, journeyed on, but that terrifying event has stayed in humanity's collective memory ever since.

For the Hebrews, eating quail was normally a pleasant experience. It gave them a warm feeling of satisfaction in the stomach and provided much-needed strength for a long and physically exhausting desert journey. What were they supposed to think when, for some of their company, the quail brought a rapid and horrifying death? Furthermore, the mechanism of death in those who died did not involve the usual symptoms that accompany the consumption of spoiled food—symptoms that were no doubt well known to the Hebrews.

The connection between eating spoiled food and the subsequent gastric pain, diarrhea, and dehydration would not have occasioned even a passing mention in the annals of their history, and certainly would not have achieved the almost mythic status of this particular story. But if it was not food poisoning, what exactly was this plague that struck "while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed"? It must surely have been the case that "Then a Miracle Occurs." Inevitably, they attributed the outcome to God—the same God who was the default cause of all unexplained physical phenomena.



R.H.K.

Now let's fast-forward to our modern world. Today, if the same sort of thing happened to us, we would default to a natural explanation without a second thought—something like food poisoning, we would guess (as the Hebrews might well have done). Even if we could not immediately classify it, we would assume that some researcher somewhere could explain it in due time. As we thought further about it, however, we would recognize that food poisoning was not an entirely satisfactory explanation. After all, the quail were fresh, so bacterial overgrowth would have been unlikely.

It turns out that the quail in question are not native to the Middle East. They are European birds that, twice each year, join with thousands of other species and fly one of the world's great migration routes around or across the eastern end of the Mediterranean. From there, they make their way south into the desert, headed for their winter range in Central and Southern Africa. In the spring, they return by the same route. Given this behavior, they are now known, not surprisingly, as the European migratory quail.

Because they are still hunted and eaten by the populations all along their migration route, the disease that so stunned the Hebrews is now well understood. As we moderns would have assumed all along, there is a completely natural, physiological explanation for the horrible death that occasionally follows the eating of quail.

Sometimes, within hours of quail consumption, there is the onset of severe muscle pain accompanied by myoglobinuria (literally, the red respiratory pigment of muscle in the urine), followed by kidney failure.<sup>7</sup> The urine turns dusky red because muscle cells throughout the body disintegrate and the respiratory pigment of muscle, myoglobin, enters the blood stream. The myoglobin pigment is excreted by the kidneys, but the capacity of the kidneys for excretion of this pigmented protein is not limitless. If the portion of quail meat has been sufficiently large, the kidneys will fail and, in a society that lacks machines for renal dialysis, death is inevitable.

Such a death accompanied by the pain of disintegrating muscle throughout the body would certainly have been frightening to those friends and relatives who stood helplessly by. Nor are the symptoms in any way similar to those of food poisoning. Still, to have had one's urine turn red, decrease in quantity, and then cease—shortly after a meal of quail—would certainly have left a lasting impression on those who were unaffected by the plague. It would also have had an

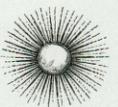
even greater effect on those who produced the ominous red urine but survived.

In the past several years considerable progress has been made in tracking down the reason why the migrating quail sometimes cause the dreaded myoglobinuria and renal shutdown. As the quail migrate southward they will often stop in the Greek islands to feed. Growing on the island of Lesbos and other islands nearby is the red hemp-nettle whose scientific name is *Galeopsis ladanum*.<sup>8</sup> It blooms late in the summer and sets its seed by the first or second week in September. This seed, ingested by the quail, makes their flesh poisonous to mammals (but not to birds) because an alkaloid in the hemp-nettle seed causes the cell membrane of mammalian muscle cells to disintegrate.<sup>9</sup> At other times of the year, or if the quail have not eaten the seed of this particular plant, the meat produces no deleterious effects.

## Blood

The ancient Hebrews appear to have been obsessed with blood. It is mentioned frequently in the Pentateuch, almost always in connection with the killing of animals and usually as a synonym for life (see Gen. 9:4, Lev. 17:11; 17:14, Deut. 12:23). To watch a sacrificial animal killed on the altar was to see the life ebb away and the heart cease to beat as the bright red fluid flowed out. It was perfectly reasonable for the Hebrews to assume that the escaping blood carried with it the life force, the invisible essence that distinguished a living creature from a dead one. They equated blood with life, quite literally. For them, blood and life were interchangeable concepts.

With this identification of life with blood, it is not surprising that the Hebrews viewed death quite differently from the way we do. For us, death is the cessation of activity across the membrane of cells individually or collectively. Because our idea of death is now very complex, we can talk easily of "brain death," "heart death," and even "programmed cell death." But for the ancient Hebrews, death was simply the absence of blood. So plants did not "die"; there was no Hebrew word for death in the plant kingdom. What we would call a "dead" tree was simply described as a "dry" tree. Animals died, but plants simply went dry. Our compli-



cated notion of cell death would have been utterly incomprehensible to them.

And our view of blood? We see it as simply a transport fluid. It is complex and multifunctional, to be sure; but it is still a commodity that can be bought and sold, transfused from a donor to a patient, frozen and stored, or, if not used within its “best if transfused by” period, discarded.

Were we to enter the ancient biblical world, blood would seem to us, as it did to the Hebrews, synonymous with life itself, the most potent of all fluids. As a crucial element in the Mosaic sacrificial system, blood—the life of an animal—served as an expiation, a means of reconciliation, for sin. To donate blood would have been equivalent to giving to another a significant portion of one’s own life. To remove blood from a person and replace it with blood from another would have

been, quite literally, unthinkable. Blood had a sacramental function in the Hebrews’ religious experience, and in their language and understanding it was synonymous with life itself.

The idea that the blood circulates, moved on its way by the action of the heart, was more than two thousand years in the future.<sup>10</sup> The ancients viewed the contents of the veins and arteries as different. According to the physician Galen in the second century, the veins contained blood, a blend of blood (as we understand it) together with some smoky pneuma (spirit) and carried the food for most of the organs. The arteries contained refined vaporous blood together with a finer pneuma and maintained the vital activities and body heat.<sup>11</sup>

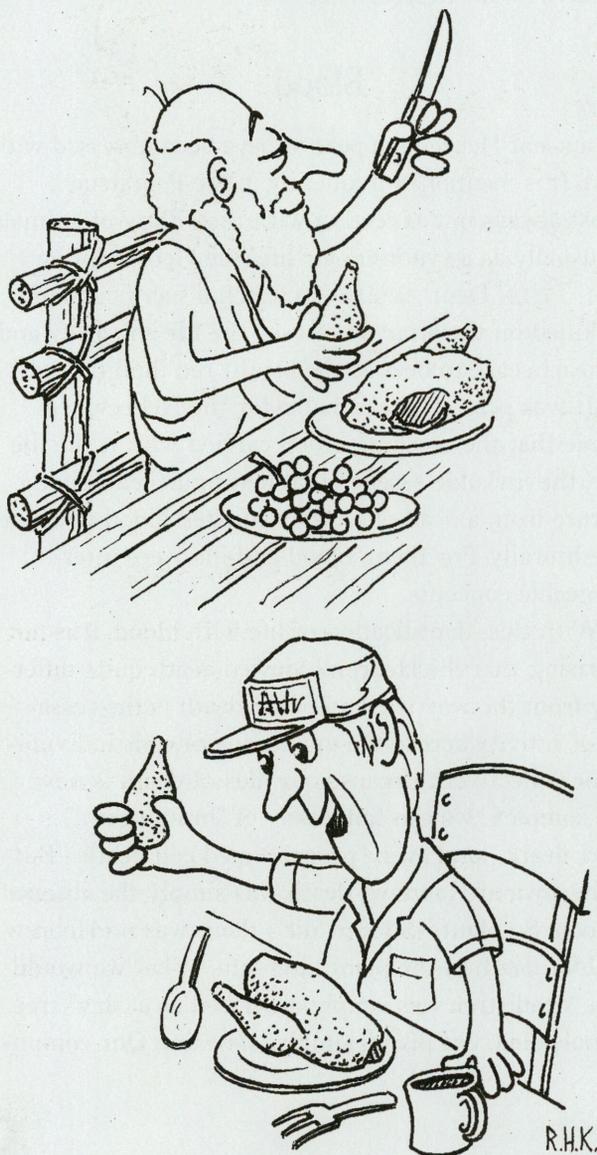
Coming from a world where we are urged to “Give Blood!” can we enter the world of the Bible? We donate blood without a second thought. The people at the donation center imply that eating a chocolate chip cookie and drinking a large glass of orange juice will make amends for the trivial loss that our body has suffered. We take for granted that they are telling us the truth. It is just impossible for us to return to a time when the loss of blood was synonymous with loss of life.

What we can do, however—and, indeed, what we should do—is read the ancient texts not as poetic expressions of our world’s understanding, but as literal expressions of the biblical world’s understanding. Only by so doing can we hear the text of Genesis as it came to the ears of those who first heard it thousands of years ago.

## Implications for Science

Actually hearing Scripture through the ears of those who first heard it may not be possible. What *is* possible, however, is careful analysis of the conclusions we reach about God’s activity in the physical world on the basis of our hearing of that text. For those who composed it (and those who heard it), the default explanation of every unexplained physical phenomenon was “Then a Miracle Occurs.”

It is clear that they understood God to be directly responsible for all created reality. It is equally apparent that they had no concept of the intermediate, natural order that, for us, undergirds and explains the functioning of physical reality. As believers, we (like Christians back to the early centuries) ascribe that natural order to God, who created it “in the beginning” (Gen. 1:1) and upholds it now; but we do not—we cannot—picture



God as miraculously intervening every time the rain falls, migrating quail eat hemp-nettle, or blood is transfused to save a life.

We have too much information about the natural order for that to be conceptually possible. We know about the hydrologic cycle; even if we personally have never studied meteorology, we hear about it on the nightly news. We have seen TV specials on the migratory patterns of quail, and have heard experts tell us that the land of Israel lays athwart one of the densest bird migration paths anywhere in the world.

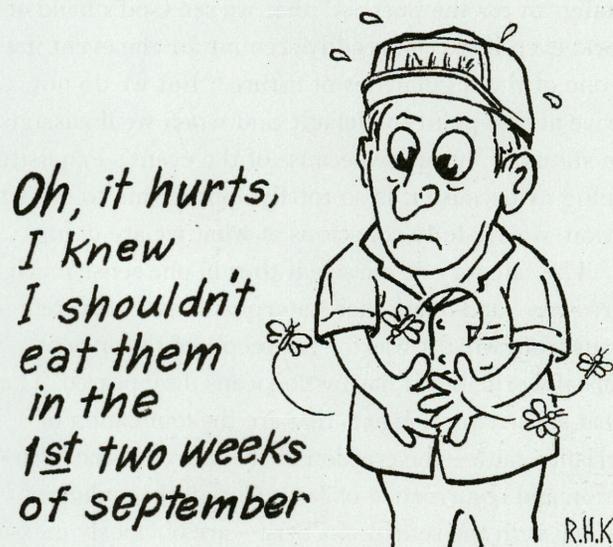
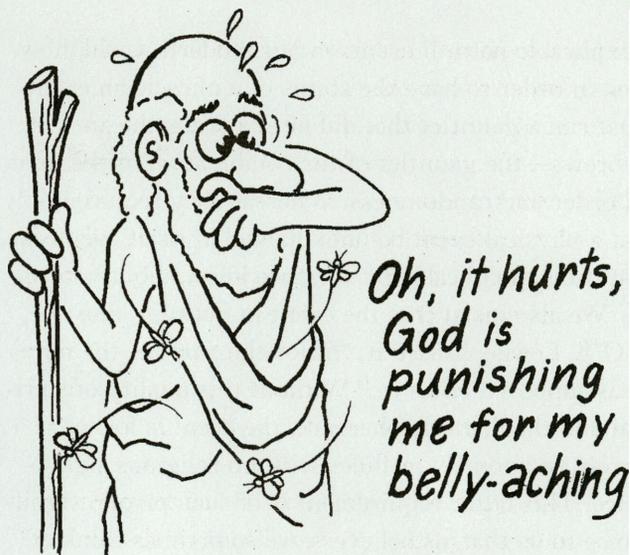
We have heard that other experts have fed hemp-nettle seed to quail, and then the quail meat to rats, and have measured precisely the resulting muscle damage. We do not view blood as synonymous with life. For us, it is merely a transport fluid that, with due regard for the various incompatibilities of blood type, can be taken from one person and placed in the circulatory system of another.

As believers who live in the modern world, we recognize that we default to a natural explanation whenever we incompletely understand a physical phenomenon. How, then, can we read aright the biblical texts upon which our spiritual understanding is based without inappropriately inserting into them our modern understandings of the natural order created and sustained by God?

One useful approach is to ask a question of each ancient text, including—and especially—the texts that have fueled the controversy between faith and science. The question is this: If we default to a natural rather than supernatural explanation of the phenomenon described, does that change the fundamental meaning of the text?

Implicitly, we have just addressed this question to the biblical texts on rain, quail, and blood. In our world, all three of these phenomena are entirely natural, whereas in the biblical world all three were supernatural. We have replaced the ancient understanding of rain, quail, and blood by our modern understanding.

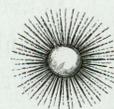
The texts, however, are still eminently “able to make [us] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” and are thus “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:15–16). But we do not attribute to God those acts in the Old Testament that the New Testament assures us contradict the revealed character of our Father in heaven, who “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45).



## Implications for Miracles

We have considered the scientific implications of a shift to a modern default to the natural instead of the ancient default to the supernatural. Before considering the theological implications, we need to consider the implications for our understanding of the phenomenon of miracle itself. If both God and nature are real, it follows that a direct, supernatural interaction between them—“Then a Miracle Occurs”—is always possible in principle.

So it is not surprising that people in the ancient biblical world, who knew little of the invisible regularities of nature, described many events as miracles. Indeed, that was their default explanation for every



inexplicable natural event. In our modern world, however, in order to have the status of a miracle an event must run a gauntlet that did not exist for the ancient Hebrews—the gauntlet of the combination of the natural order and randomness. Whereas they required only that a physical event be unexplained in itself, we insist that it be inexplicable by what we know about nature.

We also insist that the event in question must be, as C. S. Lewis phrased it, “fit for the *purpose*” the miracle is supposed to serve.<sup>12</sup> Without this quality of spiritual and theological coherence, the event is for us merely an anomaly or fluke, with no religious significance. This latter requirement is of such pivotal significance to us that, as believers, we sometimes think of an event as “miraculous” if it is too obviously and so totally “fit for the purpose” that we see God’s hand at work, even if we can readily account for the event itself as one of the regularities of nature.<sup>13</sup> But we do not arrive at this point by default, and when we do assign the status of “miracle” because of the event’s exquisite timing or because it is so totally appropriate to the situation, we are fully conscious of what we are doing.

The category of miracle is thus in one sense much narrower—and in another sense qualitatively different—for us from what it was for the people of the ancient biblical world, but it has by no means disappeared. The great supernatural events that are the foundation of Christian faith—the creation of the universe, the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the ending of history with the return of Christ—are obviously inexplicable in terms of natural regularities and randomness. And they all meet the criterion of fitness for achieving the purposes of a gracious God. So do the “lesser miracles” of Christ’s ministry—healing the sick, feeding crowds of people, quieting the elements of nature.

Once we have acknowledged the reality of both the natural and the supernatural, the possibility that “Then a Miracle Occurs” is always and necessarily present. But this is not for us a default to the supernatural. We recognize a miracle only after rigorous examination of the event in the light of what we know, directly or indirectly, about the natural order. For us who live in a scientific world, it cannot be otherwise.

## Implications for Theology

What happens if we address our question—does a default to a natural rather than supernatural explanation change the fundamental meaning of the ancient

biblical text?—to the theological content of the text? In one sense, very little changes. A default to the supernatural in relation to any incompletely understood, invisible occurrence in the province of theology—namely, in the relationship of God to human existence in the natural order—is exactly what happened in the biblical world; and that is what happens in our world, too.

The Genesis accounts of creation still assure us that God is the Creator, the originator of all reality that is not God, and that we exist as the result of an ultimate, generous love. As created beings, we experience our greatest fulfillment and satisfaction in loving, serving, and worshipping our Creator. But these theological truths do not affect our understanding of the causality of events in the physical world—although they remind us that, whatever happens, we are always within God’s unconditional love revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Conversely, these truths are not in any way changed by the substitution of our modern, natural default explanation of scientific phenomena for the ancient, supernatural one.

This does not mean, however, that there is no theological effect at all. On the contrary, some of the theological consequences are significant indeed. For example, our default to the natural encourages us to read Scripture in ways that highlight its theological (and truly supernatural) content. We do not need to spend time and energy trying to enter the ancient world without leaving our present world. Such an endeavor only diverts our attention from the truly revelatory word that the ancient text was intended to give us.

Besides, such an endeavor is futile. The two worlds are actually so different that they cannot be successfully combined. And most of the time we don’t want to. When we see a doctor, we want and expect more than a prayer for our good health. We want and expect a scientific diagnosis and treatment. So instead of trying to make the ancient text fit our present science, or trying to make our present science fit the ancient text, when we hear the text we can listen for its eternal, supernatural truth. Written by and for a people who defaulted to the supernatural, it cannot, it must not, be read by us who default to the natural as a scientific text—yet that is what we too often try to do. The result has been a three-hundred-year conflict between faith and science.

Our default to the natural also affects our ways of describing God, which both reflect and influence our

conceptions of God. The ancient Hebrews referred to God as the Owner of “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10), and, very often, as “the Lord of hosts” (1 Sam. 1:3; Ps. 24:10; Is. 1:9; and so forth, NRSV).<sup>14</sup> Again, today we hear these designations as metaphors, but for the original hearers they were literal descriptions.

A God who flung into space a hundred million galaxies each with a hundred million suns (and perhaps as many planets) surely deserves additional titles to complement those of Ultimate Cattle Rancher and General of Cosmic Armies, titles that will reflect (as best we can) our recognition of the greatness and grandeur of God’s universe. At the same time, we retain titles like Father and Shepherd that affirm the immediacy of God’s concern for our everyday lives.

Our default to the natural affects our understanding of the dark side of the ancient Hebrews’ default to the supernatural—that is, their attribution of “bad things” to the direct, punitive intervention by God. Personal disappointments such as a woman’s failure to conceive (1 Sam. 1:5–6) were attributed directly to God. And major calamities such as earthquakes, fires, and floods (not to mention poisoning by quail meat) have continued to be described as “acts of God” until relatively recently. (Now they are so designated, if at all, only in the fine print of insurance policies—which hardly anyone reads.) We think of such events as “natural disasters,” although we think of them also as belonging to the “all things” in which “God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28).

At the same time, our default to the natural encourages us to recognize the presence and activity of God in the positive results of physical regularities in nature and in our lives. Medical procedures that alleviate pain and fight malignant cells, fertilizers that facilitate the production of food, electronics that enable more efficient communication of truth and love, new insights into powerful truths about God, nature, and ourselves—all these and other “good things” can be seen as results of God’s grace.

Although we read the biblical text through different eyes and hear it with different ears, so that we cannot default to “Then a Miracle Occurs,” the ancient texts still tell us of a God who created us, loves us, comes to us, and ultimately saves us. What more can we ask? This knowledge of God’s attitudes, involvement, and actions is the most important miracle that occurred in the lives of the ancient Hebrews. If we are willing, it will occur in our lives, too.

## Notes and References

1. For the biblical mind, God was directly involved in all events; nothing was exclusively the result of what we today would call “natural law.” What the modern mind would call a “miracle” was understood in biblical times as an extraordinary act of the God who is always active. Thus the distinction we make between the “supernatural” and the “natural” would have been understood instead as a distinction between the “usual” and the “unusual” activity of God.

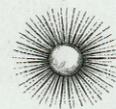
2. See Alan G. Padgett, “The Roots of the Western Concept of the ‘Laws of Nature,’ From the Greeks to Newton,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55.4 (Dec. 2003): 213: “The notion of a law of nature (Latin: *lex* or *regula naturae*; Greek: *nomos physeos*) has two sources in the classical period: Hellenistic natural philosophy, especially Stoicism; and the Christian patristic tradition.”

3. By “miracle” we mean an event that is (a) extraordinary, (b) unexplainable by ordinary natural or human factors, and (c) religiously significant. This meaning is not uncommon in current discussion; see, for example, Michael Peterson et al., *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 173–93. We do not mean by “miracle” an event that is (a) a “violation of the laws of nature” as claimed by David Hume, “Of Miracles,” in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1739), and, more recently, by J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 18–29; or (b) evidence of God’s involvement vs. noninvolvement in a particular situation.

4. See Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 272, reprinted from “Predestination,” in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols., ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribners, 1905), 4:49: “It is rare to meet with such a phrase as ‘it rains’ ... and men by preference spoke of God sending rain.”

5. Job 36:27 might seem to indicate otherwise: “He draws up the drops of water, which distil as rain to the streams.” Eugene Peterson’s popular paraphrase, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 898, elaborates: “He pulls water out of the sea, distills it, and fills up his rain-cloud cisterns.” The Hebrew, however, literally means “He makes the drops of water small.” The Septuagint says simply, “He numbers the drops of rain.”

Modern interpreters have often read into this simple statement the hydrological cycle, but there is no evidence that the Hebrews understood the role of the sun’s energy in evaporation of water from the oceans (though they did see mists arising from the



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earth). It seems most likely that the author of Job was simply saying that God made the drops of water small enough to stay up in the heavens as clouds. The solution to the even more perplexing problem of how snow and hail stayed up in the sky was to ascribe storehouses to God for the purpose (Job 38:22).

6. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

7. A. G. Billis et al., "Acute Renal Failure After a Meal of Quail," *The Lancet*, Sept. 25, 1971, 702.

8. Th. I. Ouznellis, *Journal of the American Medical Association* 211 (1970): 1186.

9. R. Aparicio et al., "Epidemic Rhabdomyolysis Following Quail Ingestion: A Clinical Epidemiologic and Experimental Study," *Clinical Toxicology* 112 (1999):143-36.

10. The circulation of the blood was first described by William Harvey (1578-1657).

11. Maxwell M. Wintrobe, *Blood Pure and Eloquent* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 6.

12. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 129-30.

13. Peterson et al., *Reason and Religious Belief*, 174-75, includes the following story related by R. F. Holland in "The Miraculous," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965): 43: "A child riding his toy motor-car strays onto an unguarded railway crossing near his house, whereupon a wheel of his car gets stuck down the side of one of the rails. At that exact moment an express train is approaching with the signals in its favor. Also a curve in the track will make it impossible for the driver to stop his train in time to avoid any obstruction he might encounter on the crossing. Moreover, the child is so engrossed in freeing his wheel that he hears neither the train whistle nor his mother, who has just come out of the house and is trying to get his attention. The child appears to be doomed. But just before the train rounds the curve, the brakes are applied and it comes to rest a few feet from the child. The mother thanks God for the miracle, although she learns in due course that there was not necessarily anything supernatural about the manner in which the brakes came to be applied. The driver had fainted, for a reason that had nothing to do with the presence of the child on the line, and the brakes were applied automatically as his hand ceased to exert pressure on the control lever."

14. The New International Version regularly translates the Hebrew *Yahweh sabaot* as "the Lord Almighty," evidently influenced by its interest in affirming the divine sovereignty but thus disguising the military language.

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# When Christopher Sings

*By Tom Williams*

I can recall that day in the spring of 1997 as though it were yesterday. Christopher, my six-year-old grandson, and I were having one of our frequent chats together in his backyard, which bordered on the Pacific Ocean.

It was fun having conversations with Christopher. He had a variety of interests, an inquiring mind, and what seemed to be a zillion gigabyte memory. Any topic was fair game: animals, astronomy, prehistoric creatures, toys, games, and occasionally just nonsense. But on this day we had a serious matter on the table. Christopher and family were going to be moving soon, from the shore of the Pacific Ocean to the mountains of western North Carolina.

The thought of Christopher and his family moving almost three thousand miles away prompted conflicting messages between my mind and heart, and it soon became obvious that Christopher was coping with similar conflict in his own remarkable way. My mind reasoned it would be best, under the circumstances, for his family to relocate to a place of more potential and new opportunity for him, but my heart was unable to echo that theme.

Christopher had thought a lot about the coming move. As he talked, it seemed to me he was trying to make the move a

bit less painful, the separation somewhat easier, the distance not so far.

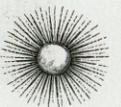
"Grandpa," he said, "You know, even though we're moving to North Carolina and we will be far apart, we will always be together."

"How's that Christopher?" I asked, recalling the many times I had held this once-fragile infant on my lap and read to him the popular story of Pooh Bear and Christopher Robin.

"Because you will always be in my heart, and I will always be in yours, so we will be together," he replied. Surely the magnitude of what Christopher had just spoken was beyond the comprehension of us both.

While I attempted to plumb the depths of those words of encouragement my little grandson had just offered, he began to sing to me. I can no longer recall the lyrics of the song, but I will remember forever its theme and sentiment. It expressed so beautifully our need for love and the value of treasuring its blessings in our lives.

Christopher had experienced a full



measure of love from his birth. Indeed love had made the difference between life and death for him, and now his song from the depths of his experience was a moving tribute to the healing power of love.

Listening to Christopher sing that day was like hearing the voice of an angel. As I looked at him sitting on the branch of a small magnolia tree, I beheld a miracle. It was a miracle that had its beginnings six years earlier at Christopher's birth.

**D**uring his delivery it became immediately clear to attending staff and Teri and Mark that this tiny infant had very serious medical problems beyond the scope of the large medical center where he was born. Within hours, he was transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit of CHOC, the Children's Hospital of Orange County.

Medical personnel were hesitant to permit his adoptive parents to see him before the completion of a three-hour major surgery during the first ten hours of his life. They were told he might not awaken from that surgery, but he did. His prognosis was uncertain. Would he survive? Would he ever be able to eat or eliminate? Would he be brain damaged? It would be months, even years before the answers to these questions would be known.

The Children's Hospital of Orange County was to be Christopher's home for many months. Here highly skilled professionals provided an environment where the latest medical technology blended with skillful and loving care to mend an infant's body. Here also was the place where Christopher began to bond with his adoptive parents, Mark and Teri Muir. They had eagerly and happily anticipated his birth from the time his birth mother and biological father had agreed that Mark and Teri would be the parents of the new baby immediately after he was born.

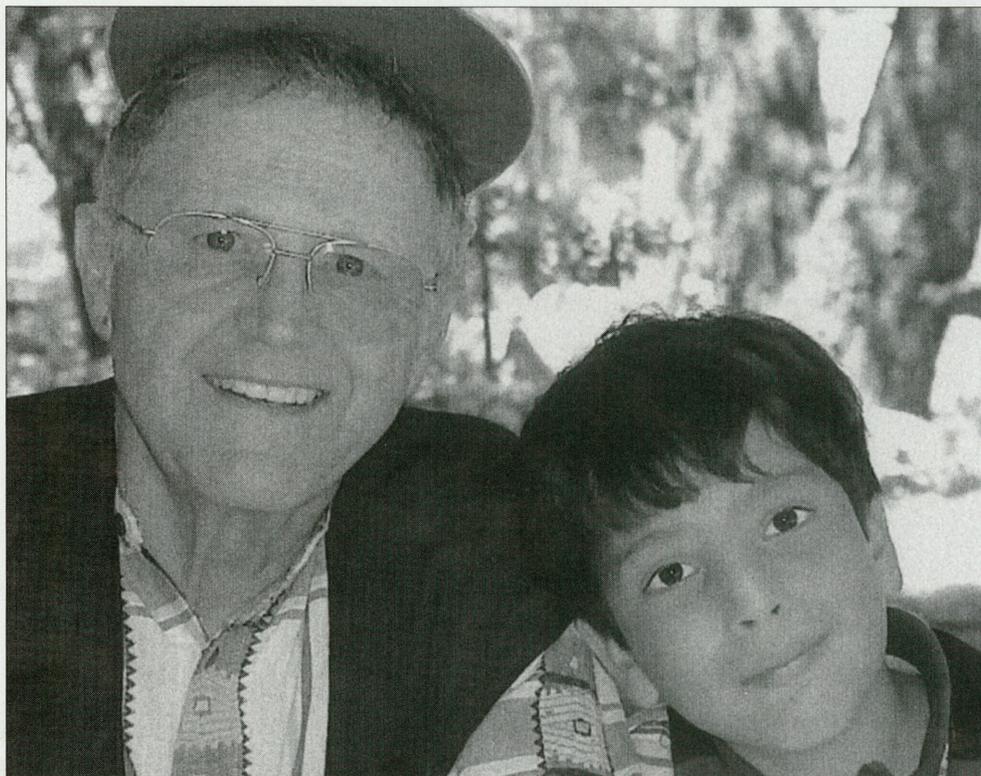
Christopher's birth parents were high school students who were not prepared for the obligations and responsibilities of parenthood and were, as the unfolding story revealed, incapable of providing for the many needs of a gravely ill infant and supporting him in his fight for life. Their love for their unborn son, coupled with their circumstances, led them to choose adoption so that he could begin life in a stable, secure, and loving home.

Mark and Teri were a childless couple who longed for a baby to love and bring completeness to their family. They were upwardly mobile professionals whose many talents and skills, it turns out, were dwarfed by their capacities to provide love and commitment to a baby boy named Christopher William Muir.

Christopher's medical condition was rare and serious. He was born with only 25 percent of his small intestine,

and the quality of those 37 centimeters of vital organ was very poor. His large intestine was of normal length but so tightly constricted it would not function. His large and small intestines were not joined. During his first two years Christopher would face seventeen additional surgeries to reconstruct his body and sustain his life.

Because his digestive system was incapable of absorbing nutrients, Critty, as Mark and Teri later affectionately nicknamed him, was fed through a broviac catheter. This feeding tube was used to drip miniscule amounts of



predigested formula with the goal of increasing the absorption rate of the small intestine.

This type of feeding method resulted in numerous septic infections within his system. Coli infections, liver damage, and kidney damage repeatedly threatened to take his life. But Christopher was a fighter who would not give up.

Month after month Christopher would be on the receiving end of tubes for nutrients, antibiotics, and blood transfusions, the latter provided by both Mark and Teri, who had the same blood type. The proverbial shedding of “blood, sweat and tears” was taking on new meaning. They gave their own blood to help him in his fight for life.

Their bodies often glistened with perspiration as they responded to the dreadful pain so unremittingly experienced by their little boy. Their tears of joy over having a little son mingled with tears of sorrow because of his suffering and struggle to stay alive. Teri and Mark received much encouragement and support from family, friends, and associates, and they gained strength and faith through prayer. Time after time they were found waiting in the chapel to get the results of Critty’s latest surgery.

Family and staff celebrated Critty’s first birthday in the hospital. Each holiday he experienced during the first year of his life was in the company of nurses, doctors, fellow hospital patients, and, of course, his parents. Although he still had to be tethered to two tubes twenty-four hours a day to receive his nutrients, the day finally came when he was able to remain home and hospital stays became less frequent.

He grew some and was a happy baby. This was a significant accomplishment for a little boy who had spent 200 of his first 365 days of life in hospitals.

We, his grandparents, marveled at the medical technology that helped Christopher win his battle for life. Children born a few years earlier with his condition had virtually no chance for survival. Yet we now also stand in awe of the influence and power of love in sustaining and encouraging human life. We could read the language of love and caring in the hands and faces of the medical staff. We could hear it in their voices. We saw it in their work.

As Christopher grew stronger we would visit him frequently and see him sitting with the nurses. His eyes sparkled with life as he gurgled and bubbled with joy.

We also saw the devotion and love of Mark and Teri in their eyes and heard it in their words. Who they

were, and what they were, to their little boy gave him the edge he needed to maintain his fragile hold on life. Through the miracle of love, Christopher lives today.

It was a real highlight in his life when the time came that Christopher’s feeding tube and central broviac line could be disconnected for a short time each day. Prior to this time he could be seen carrying his pumps in a small backpack or pushing them in a stroller. By this stage he was walking and talking. Our hearts were warmed to see him run and hear him shout, “I’m free! I’m free” as he was disconnected from the tube that fed life into his body.

Over the years he began to eat small portions of special food and by the time he was four and one half years old he received all his nutrients by mouth.

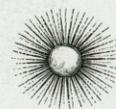
As he grew older, Critty astounded us with his ability to learn things that were of interest to him. He demonstrated a remarkable memory for many different kinds of information. Once while visiting a museum he was able to identify various kinds of dinosaurs by name and specify their distinguishing characteristics. He could do the same for certain species of sea life, such as whales.

At two years of age he could read numbers on license plates. When he was three he could repeat Disney books and videos word for word from memory. At five he could sing on nearly perfect pitch.

He was active, energetic, buoyant, and happy as a preschooler, but during that time some behaviors surfaced that concerned Mark and Teri. Christopher seemed to lack a concept of personal space—maintaining an appropriate distance between himself and someone to whom he was talking. It was difficult for him to sustain cordial relationships with peers in social settings.

He demonstrated a high sensitivity to bugs, spiders, and other insects. He reacted very positively with adults but, frequently, negatively with children. It seemed very difficult for him to perceive the feelings of others. Although he could learn many facts on a variety of topics that interested him, learning facts in a formal setting at school was extremely difficult.

Conventional forms of discipline, such as time-outs or deprivation of a cherished item or activity, seemed generally ineffective. He sometimes did not perceive



pain. Frequently Christopher was not able to control or contain emotional outbursts, a characteristic behavior of his disorder, often considered by uninformed adults to be related to lack of appropriate parenting.

He could play by himself for hours with a simple string. He was fascinated by computers and could play the same educational games over and over for as long as he was permitted to do so. It was almost as though comfort and safety were assured for him as he stayed with the familiar and avoided the new and untried.

Christopher's home had two big-screen television sets used for viewing selected videos. He enjoyed playing his favorites over and over within the time allotted for that activity. It could be traumatic for him if a video unfamiliar to him was suggested.

In sports, Critty struggled with coordination. He could, however, swim like the proverbial fish. He became an excellent bicyclist only after a month-by-month struggle that lasted over two years. He greatly enjoyed the trampoline and was adept at swinging, climbing, running, and jumping.

During Christopher's preschool years and kindergarten in a private school his parents continued to seek out the best in medical care for him. Leading pediatric specialists in medicine, psychiatry, psychology, and neurology examined and followed him. Diagnoses varied over time and included Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Deficient Disorder (ODD), and Tourettes Syndrome.

Mark and Teri arranged numerous psychological and psychiatric consultations. They attended conferences and parenting classes and purchased a small library of books and journals to study. Although there were many uncertainties surrounding his life, it slowly and painfully became increasingly evident that a cure for Christopher's condition was unlikely and improbable.

Medication would help for a while and the dosages would have to be increased. The best that could be hoped for was to treat and control the symptoms and to provide a complementary and supportive environment that would benefit Critty within his potential to respond and mature.

It was in their quest for this type of environment that Mark and Teri decided to relocate to a place where they and Christopher and Chantel, his four-year-old sister, could live in a setting that would benefit them to the maximum. They wanted a rural environment with more time for both father and mother to be home.

They wished to devote more time to the family and

less time to the fast track. They needed an environment where Christopher could be under less pressure and where individual differences might be more readily recognized as unique gifts from God rather than oddities that needed to be fixed or changed.

So they took the step; in fact, it was more of a giant leap. It was a leap that exposed again the love that had locked Critty into their hearts from the time he drew his first breath. Theirs was a compelling love holding them and their hopes together through, as it were, the very depths of hell. This was the measure of love that fashions miracles and it carried them through and sustained them.

Perhaps by now you have a clearer picture of what I am trying to convey in saying, "When Christopher sings, I hear an angel," and "When I look at Christopher I see a miracle."

The angel voice I hear is not the kind some might envision: one that emanates from white robed beings with wings and harps who inhabit heaven. No, the angel voice I hear is that of one of God's little children, now a boy and soon to be a young man.

It is the angel voice of a child in whom God's spirit lives. It is the voice of a little boy who struggled and fought a long and difficult battle to survive and live in a world that is different, in so many ways, from the world that you and I know. It is a sweet melodic voice born of the pain and struggle of one who faces obstacles and battles known to few.

It is the voice of a child of God who emerged victoriously from one battle that was won through love and medical science, who is now engaged in yet another battle as formidable as the first.

**W**hen I look at Christopher I see a miracle. I see the miracle that results when human minds, hearts, and hands, infused with divine love, minister to, and in behalf of others. This is not the type of miracle expected or required by some—that of full and complete restoration of one's body, or a new and unimpaired persona.

Christopher's miracle is not a direct intervention from the "hand of God" sidetracking the natural laws of the universe in order to bring healing to a selected one who is being favored over others. His is not an immediate and complete cure of his disabilities in a manner that skirts logic and defies reason. But it is a miracle.

It is true that some miracles do seem to represent

full and complete cures. These miracles bring wonderful results, but for many often foster a host of questions such as: "Why was my loved one healed and yours not healed?" "Why did leukemia take the life of my child while his friend with the same illness was spared?" "Why did the storm, fire, accident, disaster strike down so many others and leave me unharmed?" "Why Christopher?" "Why not someone else?"

"Why fuse his small and large intestine and not attend to his neurological deficiencies?" "Am I, are we, in God's special favor when the good things (healing) happen?" "Am I, are we, out of that special favor when the harmful and hurtful things happen?" "If God, in order to save my life, intervenes to keep me from boarding a plane that later crashes, killing all the crew and passengers, what did he have against those who were not spared?" "Were they all out of his favor?" "Why protect one and not the many?"

Of course, there are answers to these and similar heart-wrenching questions, but so often these explanations are personally unconvincing and unsatisfying to those who are hurting. Yet in spite of the bold certainty of some and the uncertainty of others on these matters, those who are wounded and in pain never cease to long for comfort and hope, and perhaps a miracle.

Christopher's life and his experiences have helped me immeasurably to understand what I believe to be the real miracles that continue to bring health and life and hope to one of God's family.

When I look at Christopher the miracle I see is the miracle of a life that would not now exist were it not for the love and care that nurtured and sustained him from infancy to the present. In the absence of modern medical science, love alone would not have brought Critty through. In the absence of love, medical science alone would not have been enough.

Christopher lives by a miracle of love. His life

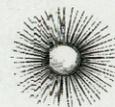


stands as a testimony of the reality that where there is love, there can be hope. The organs of his body that held him hostage between life and death as an infant have healed quite well through his tender years. He has made monumental progress in his struggle to survive, yet his life continues to be a formidable and frustrating challenge for him, and sometimes for others close to him.

Christopher and those who love him are engaged in a continuing battle. It is a battle fully as difficult, complex, demanding, frustrating, and draining as the battles that went before. The weapons are the same: love, in its many ramifications, and the best of medical science.

Shortly after Christopher's family moved to a log cabin in the mountains of North Carolina, Christopher was diagnosed at Chapel Hill with High Functioning Autism or Asperger Syndrome. The diagnosis of autism, which is a developmental disorder, brought insights to Mark and Teri, helping them understand some of the behaviors that had been so puzzling and distracting to them and others.

These behaviors and symptoms included uncon-





and frustrating road. For those close to him, unconditional love is the magnet that keeps them on course. The love that has indeed given Christopher life itself and sustained him has become an essential and inseparable part of who he is, so often enabling him to touch and brighten the lives of many others. Love is the difference that can make a miracle.

We are unable to count the many moments in our memories when Christopher's loving ways have endeared him to us and to others. How strengthening to recall these moments at times when he is out of

controlled body movements, obsessive thoughts, compulsiveness, and erratic emotional outbursts. He was treated for bipolar disorder, which is characterized by wide mood swings, depression, low self-esteem, and frequent highs that had him bouncing off the walls at times.

Essentially, Christopher's battle now was with conditions characterized by having a hard time understanding others, as well as difficulty in being understood by them. Knowing the diagnosis does not set the stage for a cure, although it does help the caring people in Christopher's life better understand what he may be experiencing. Having the diagnosis is also helpful in relating and responding to him and in assisting him in structuring his life in ways that are best for him and others.

Christopher attends a private school, Veritas Christian Academy, which has a wonderfully caring and supportive staff. Mark and Teri provided a coach to assist the classroom teacher and work with Christopher on a one-to-one basis.

In looking at Christopher's experience today, one senses that the same quality of love so vital to his very life in the neonatal unit at CHOC is supporting him now in a classroom in the mountains of western North Carolina. There is love in the Muir home in the East, just as there was love in the Muir mansion by the sea in California. Love is the miracle that makes the difference.

For Christopher, it is a long, difficult, confusing,

touch, out of control, or out in his own little world—a world totally unknown and unvisited by you and me.

We cannot know what it is like, but our own memories of beautiful moments with him make it so much easier to try to understand the world that has been given to Christopher and to feel some of the difficulty and frustration he experiences in his world.

**I**t has been over six years now since Christopher sang to me on that beautiful spring day by the ocean. Though he and his family have moved a continent away, both Christopher and Chantel have visited us in our home numerous times.

Christopher still sings. One of the last times I heard him sing was at his Aunt CeCe's wedding reception. In his tuxedo Christopher confidently walked to the front of the large reception hall, took the microphone in hand, and sang "Love You Forever."

Once again, this time with a lump in my throat and a brimming heart, I heard an angel sing. And through glistening eyes, I beheld a miracle. A miracle of love.

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Tom Williams's grandchildren visit him in Loma Linda, California.

# Was Spinoza Right About Miracles?

By David R. Larson

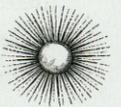
“Whatever happened, happened naturally.”

*Benedict de Spinoza*

“Spinozism has been unfairly attacked more than any other position in modern thought.”

*Philip Clayton*

Although it was written in the seventeenth century, and although it is less than twenty pages long, “Of Miracles,” by Benedict de Spinoza, the sixth chapter of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, remains one of the most thought-provoking discussions of this topic. Spinoza began by lamenting the tendency of many to find evidence for God in occurrences that they do not understand. He ended by agreeing with the ancient Jewish historian Josephus that the issue of miracles is a matter about which people should feel free to form their own conclusions. In between this start and finish, he made four assertions that are still worthy of our consideration and comment.



# 1

## Spinoza's first claim was that it is a mistake to think of miracles as events that contradict the laws of nature.

We should think of them as episodes that surpass what we now know about these laws, he held.

Spinoza's primary concern appears to have been what we say about God. If we claim that nature's laws express God's eternal essence, and if we also say that on some occasions God violates, suspends, or surpasses these laws, we thereby say that God sometimes contradicts God's own essence. We also say that God does this with no justification and no possible explanation other than God's arbitrary and perhaps capricious will, assertions that Spinoza rightly found absurd.

It appears as though Spinoza understood the laws of nature as divine prescriptions of what must happen. Today, we increasingly think of them as human descriptions of what actually takes place. If something occurs that does not fit with one of our laws of nature, our task is to reformulate our law so as to make room for what actually happens. What takes place governs our formulation of the laws of nature, not the other way around.

In view of these considerations, I believe that we should agree with Spinoza that we are not at our best when we define miracles as violations of nature's laws. I am not convinced that we should think of them as events that violate what we know about these laws, however. It seems to me that at this point Spinoza moved in the right direction but that he did not go far enough. My reservations are practical, terminological, and scriptural.

Although Spinoza did not intend this, and although at points he sensed the problem, in our practical experience defining miracles as events that contradict what we know about the laws of nature can place a religious premium on ignorance. The less we know about the universe, the more miracles we can experience, if this definition is valid. This may be one reason why some religious leaders do not encourage their followers to study and learn. How unfortunate!

Coming to us as it does from earlier words that refer to events that fill us with feelings such as awe, amazement, and astonishment, the term *miracle* may tell us more about our reactions to certain events than the events themselves. If so, an occurrence is a miracle if it prompts such feelings among us even if the event is common and understandable. Television talk show

host David Letterman recently reported that when his first child was born and placed in his arms, he initially laughed and then burst into tears of uncontrollable joy. Any definition of miracles that omits Letterman's experience and others like it strikes me as deficient.

Scripture does not often use the term *miracle*. Its more frequent expressions are the Hebrew and Greek equivalents for *power*, *sign*, and *wonder*. These terms do not necessarily imply that miracles violate the laws of nature, or even that miracles contradict what we now know about these laws. In Scripture, miracles seem to be occurrences that prompt people to pause, take note, and positively react in emotionally intense ways. Even atheists like Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins in our time freely admit to experiencing such feelings when they ponder the wonders of life. Although these famous scientists deny the actuality of the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, they do experience miracles, at least as I believe we should think of them.

According to this third definition, miracles are events, whether frequent or rare, ordinary or extraordinary, understood or not understood, that evoke in us feelings such as awe, amazement, and astonishment. Because any event that does not prompt such feelings is unworthy of being called a "miracle," this definition is necessary. Because each occurrence that does prompt them is worthy of the term *miracle*, regardless of whether we understand how it came about, this definition is sufficient.

Does this mean that miracles are in the eye of the beholder? Yes! It also means that the more we learn about the universe the more astonished we can be and the more miracles we can experience, an approach that places a religious premium on knowledge, not ignorance.

# 2

## Spinoza's second assertion was that miracles can tell us nothing about God.

Although we often overlook this point, it is as important as it is straightforward.

Although he preferred the second, Spinoza made this claim with respect to two of the three definitions of miracles that we are considering. If an event occurs that actually does violate the true laws of nature, it is unlikely that God exists at all, he wrote. We might amend this to say that if a miracle of this sort takes place, it is improbable that Spinoza's God exists. Far

from supporting theism, a claim that such a miracle has occurred leads straight to atheism, he held.

An event that does not contradict the laws of nature but only our understanding of them is not a reliable basis from which to extrapolate reliable knowledge about God, Spinoza also wrote. Our inferences from anything about anything else depend in part for their validity upon our accurate knowledge of that with which we begin. In all areas of life, we properly reason from the known to the unknown, not from the unknown to the known. Because miracles understood this second way are among the things we do not understand, they can tell us nothing about God or anything else, according to Spinoza.

In view of the frequency over the centuries with which people have based their belief in God upon miracles understood in either of these two ways, Spinoza's point seriously challenged much traditional thinking. My hunch is that he was moving in the right direction. His point does not necessarily pertain to miracles understood in the third sense, however. Patterns of regularity throughout the universe that prompt feelings such as awe, amazement, and astonishment may suggest much about God, I believe.

It is also important to underline that here, perhaps more so than anywhere else in this discussion, Spinoza proved himself to be a citizen of the seventeenth century. Although he denied that the actuality of God is self-evident, he placed much emphasis upon absolute certainty, getting rid of all doubt, clear and distinct ideas, inferences logically deduced from primary ideas, and irrefutable conclusions. In this respect he was like so many others of his era, especially René Descartes. Spinoza was a particular kind of rationalist.

Many of us now live in a different conceptual world. For us, reasoning from our best interpretations of the facts to our most adequate explanations, with no need to banish all doubt or absolutely to prove our conclusions, is as good as it gets. Also, we often prefer a thought process in which the outcomes of deductive and inductive reasoning interact in mutually corrective ways, ever mindful that every conclusion is a temporary and provincial rest stop on our continuing journey.

From the point of view of our own present rest stop, Spinoza's understanding of nature can seem quaint. He portrayed it as governed by laws expressive of God's eternal essence that determine everything that takes place right down to the smallest detail. Nothing could have been other than what it turned out to be, he believed.

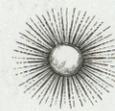
Nature strikes increasing numbers of us as more spontaneous, dynamic, and open-ended than this. Our laws of nature, if we still use the expression, take into account that at the base of things not everything is totally determined. We are no longer as confident, as Spinoza apparently was, that if we precisely understand a set of initial conditions, and if we completely understand the laws that pertain to them, we can predict with total accuracy what all their long-term outcomes will be. To a large extent, this "chaos," as some style it, is due to our permanent inability precisely to determine initial conditions; however, that the more direct study of subatomic actualities also suggests a lack of complete determinacy at the most fundamental level implies that something else is also going on.

What's more, if in everyday living we necessarily presume that we possess at least some capacity for self-determination, as seems to be the case, it makes sense to posit decreasingly powerful expressions of it all the way down the scale of life. Therefore, although it is easy to agree with Spinoza that the laws of nature cannot be broken when they are properly formulated, our understanding of nature increasingly differs from his more static and fixed account. Contrary to what he apparently thought, the dirt of which we are composed is dancing dust!

This requires us to think of God and the universe as more interactive than Spinoza did. Because he was a pantheist who believed that they are one and the same, it made no sense for him to write of their interaction. But if we are theists today, it seems necessary to talk about the interaction of God and the universe because they do not seem identical and because it seems as though not everything is totally determined, which comes close to saying one thing in two ways.

This is why panentheism, the view that God includes but surpasses the universe, not pantheism, which says that God and the universe are identical, increasingly is our preferred doctrine of God. Likewise, libertarian freedom and its primitive precursors, the view that to some extent we can choose between genuine alternatives without being compelled either by external forces or by internal conditions, not complete determinism, increasingly is part of our preferred account of all others.

This also requires us to modify the idea that Spinoza seems to have shared with many of his col-



leagues that God is wholly changeless, a view that seems odd if God and the changing universe are identical. It seems more harmonious with what we otherwise know to hold that in some respects God never changes but that in others God constantly does. We can elaborate and defend this assertion in a variety of ways; however, the primary point remains: God is neither changeless nor changeful but each in different respects. God remains God while interacting with a dynamic and somewhat rambunctious universe.

Although our views of the laws of nature, the universe, and God probably differ from Spinoza's in these important ways, his point that miracles, in the first two meanings of the term, cannot tell us anything reliable about God remains unscathed. We must base our knowledge of God, and everything else, on what we understand, not on what we don't. We will always have gaps in our knowledge, and these unfilled spaces may prompt helpful thoughts about God and the universe; nevertheless, Spinoza properly admonished us to extrapolate from recurring patterns, not from events that we experience as infrequent and perplexing.

Not content to rest his case on philosophical analysis alone, Spinoza appealed to portions of Scripture that cast doubt upon what miracles can tell us about God. One of the most important of these is the warning in the Pentateuch that the people of Israel should not follow a prophet who would lead them away from the true God even if that prophet should successfully perform miracles (Deut. 13). He discussed other passages from the First and Second Testaments as well. Nevertheless, he conceded that his scriptural case must be largely inferential because this is not an issue that the ancient texts directly address.

**Spinoza's third assertion was that when Scripture attributes some event to God we should take this to mean that what took place occurred in harmony with the laws of nature, not as a violation, suspension, or transcendence of them.**

His point was not that people in biblical times always understood this, but that we should.

Scripture often describes the mundane processes that brought about the events that it attributes to divine action, Spinoza wrote. It declares that God sent Saul to Samuel, for instance; however, its narrative provides no account of an unusual divine commission, only Saul's unexceptional need to find his lost donkeys. Likewise, Scripture says that God changed the attitudes of the Egyptians toward the Israelites; however, the story reports ordinary circumstances that easily account for this transformation. The pattern of attributing things that ordinarily take place to specific divine action is so frequent throughout Scripture that we should presume that it is present even when the texts do not provide all the details, Spinoza held.

Scripture often describes the material resources that the occurrence of miraculous events required, Spinoza also held. Wind caused the waters of the Sea of Reeds to part so that the Israelites could cross the channel, for instance. Similarly, Moses scattered ashes in the air when causing a plague to fall upon the Egyptians; Elisha revived an apparently dead child by warming him with his own body and breathing his own air into the youngster's lungs; and Jesus used mud, saliva, and other things when healing people. Again, this pattern is so frequent in Scripture that we should presume its presence even when it does not detail these tangible media, Spinoza contended.

In at least two ways, Spinoza seems to have made Scripture conform to his expectations instead of letting it speak for itself, however. On the one hand, he did not discuss biblical events like Paul's Damascus Road experience in which ordinary circumstances and means are not merely omitted from the story but apparently denied. On the other hand, at this point his conjectures as to why Scripture often attributes mundane occurrences to specific divine action may have been too dismissive. He suggested that this happened partly because the religious leaders of the time were more interested in encouraging devotion among their followers than in providing accurate accounts of what truly took place. His subsequent explanations seem more charitable and more plausible.

Spinoza's insistence that even the events that Scripture attributes to God occurred naturally is to some extent a matter of definition. If we say that everything that occurs takes place in conformity to laws of nature that express God's eternal essence, and

if we also say that something actually did occur, then it follows that what happened took place in conformity to these laws, or that it happened naturally. Although it is sufficiently valid, this line of reasoning does not seem to advance the discussion very far.

A closer examination of Spinoza's discussion reveals that in this context he said at least three additional and important things, however. One of these is that God's power is present in everything that occurs, not only in the unusual or perplexing events. His second assertion is that we need to reformulate our understanding of divine power so that we do not picture it as akin to the arbitrariness of a capricious human potentate. His third point is that the laws of nature established by God are not exclusively directed toward human welfare. Each of these three additional assertions strikes me as both valid and exceedingly valuable in our own context today.

## 4 Spinoza's fourth point is that when interpreting Scripture we need to keep in mind certain distinctive features of ancient Hebrew thought and speech.

If we fail to do this, we will misunderstand what these people had in mind and what they said.

Spinoza repeated his earlier assertion that in their fierce struggle against polytheism the people of ancient Israel often attributed everything that happened to God without concerning themselves with secondary or intermediate factors. He then added that the ancient Hebrews often preferred vivid and picturesque thought and language. Instead of saying that there was a heavy rain, they sometimes said that God opened the windows of heaven and through these holes in the sky flooded the earth. Unlike some contemporary historians, Spinoza held that even way back then those who spoke like this did not always take such ways of putting things with wooden literalness.

On some occasions, as in the extra long day that Joshua's warriors attributed to divine intervention, ascribing events directly to God may have also had some strategic value. The ancient Israelites referred to God as often and in the ways that they did for a vari-

ety of reasons, some innocent and others less so, Spinoza contended.

Spinoza cited with approval the willingness of Josephus for people to hold either that a strong wind merely happened to make it possible for the Israelites to cross the Sea of Reeds on its exposed floor when fleeing the Egyptians or that God directly orchestrated this fortunate gale. The same sort of thing occurred in the case of Alexander the Great and the Macedonians when a wind caused the Pamphylian Sea to divide so that they could cross it in their battles against the Persians, Josephus also wrote. Because Spinoza held that there is no difference between saying that something happened naturally and claiming that God did it, it is not surprising that he could be relaxed about which way one describes such events.

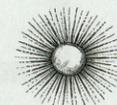
I agree with Spinoza that many of the perplexities we encounter when reading Scripture occur because so many of us today are more prosaic than poetic in our thought and speech; therefore, I am willing to give Spinoza the benefit of the doubt on this matter. Also, like Spinoza, I live in a religious community in which people often speak about God doing various things. We do so without necessarily intending to suggest that God intervenes in ways that contradict the laws of nature or even what we now know about them, however. Our common custom of thanking God for providing our food before beginning each meal is evidence of this. Rarely do we believe that God does anything unusual to make our meals possible. We are thankful, exceedingly so, for what God does usually, regularly, and predictably.

Was Spinoza right about miracles? This is a question that we must answer for ourselves. My own view is that each of Spinoza's four claims specifically about miracles is either on target or heading in that direction. Nevertheless, his more general view of things within which he makes these four claims needs to be updated in the direction of an interpretation of God and the universe that is more interactive.

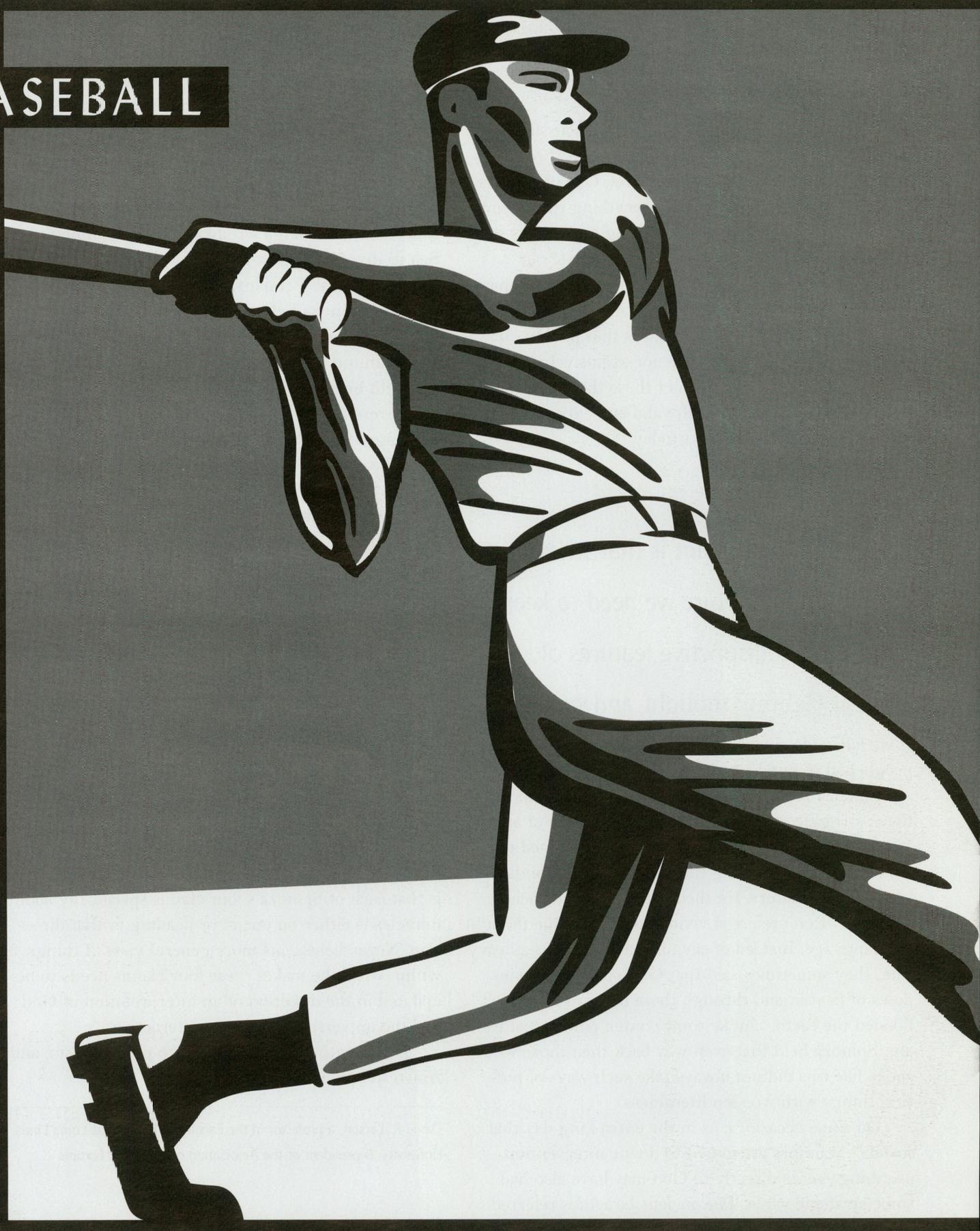
Down with pantheism, up with panentheism, and Amen to Spinoza's four assertions!

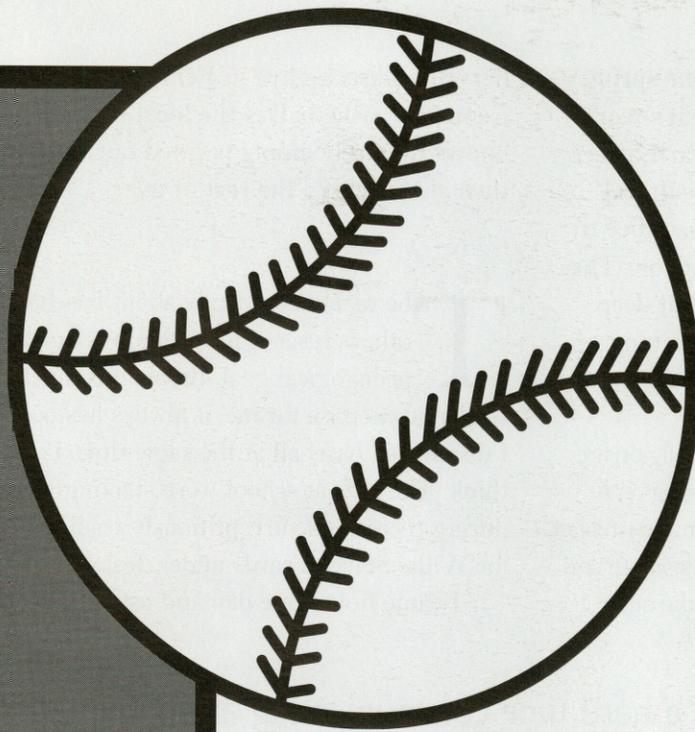
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David R. Larson, a professor in the Faculty of Religion at Loma Linda University, is president of the Association of Adventist Forums.



BASEBALL





## Box Score Theology

*By Reni Dupertuis*

I teach religion at a liberal arts college in the buckle of the Bible Belt and am often asked what my religion is. As of a couple years ago, I respond as honestly as I can and admit that I'm a baseball fan. If pressed, I usually confess my denominational affiliation: I'm a Cub's fan.

People have long noted the similarities between religion and sports. Both typically draw large crowds of devoted followers. Both typically require of their members single-minded devotion. Both follow calendars that dictate when certain rituals and festivities take place and invest a great deal of intellectual and emotional energy explaining the significance of these activities.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX SEABAUGH



Baseball, for example, comes to life in the spring and goes underground in the fall. For what it's worth, this is a pattern that, like many Ancient Near Eastern religious traditions, coincides with the agricultural cycle. Ancients believed that if they didn't sacrifice to the fertility gods, their crops just wouldn't grow. The connection? Well, I know it's not rational, but deep down I believe that if I don't go to spring training or watch my college team's first or second batting practice summer won't happen.

Some of the parallels between baseball and religion are humorous. Think of thousands of fans congregating on a given day (often on the weekend) to participate in the ritual of cheering on their team. All gather at the temple stadium and watch a ritual drama between the forces of evil (the other

nerve because we live in Kentucky where University of Kentucky basketball is the local religion and everybody knows it. Sarah simply pointed out the obvious; David then showed it to the rest of us.

**T**he real reason I talk about baseball in language others reserve for religion is not for some lofty pedagogical goal. Baseball is much more than an academic exercise for me; it always has been. My dad and I discovered baseball at the same time. I was eight, I think. The kids at school were starting to play baseball during recess and surreptitiously trading Dave Kingman for Willie Stargell cards under desks during class.

I came home one day and asked that we learn

## On days when Dad and I had a hard time communicating about most things that matter, we always had baseball.

team) and the forces of good (the fans' team) acted out before their eyes, stopping at the appointed times for certain scheduled rituals: responding in chorus to the prompt of an organ, a ritual meal (hot dogs anyone?), and singing time-honored hymns such as "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

Recent baseball celebrations tend to be "seeker sensitive" in hopes of attracting the unbaseballed or those who have been lured away by the high flying and bone crushing options offered by the other sports churches of basketball and football. Baseball has reacted by playing hipper songs and leading us in cooler dances (not that the Macarena or the wave are cool now, but admit it, you once thought they were). And, dare I say, going to a baseball game is really about fellowship—you can watch the game at home but it's not the same.

When I go on about baseball using religious language to friends I usually get a smile. Some of the superficial similarities are there, but is there anything more? What about sports as religion? Academics are increasingly taking sports as religion seriously. My friend David Hall recently taught a course called Basketball as Religion at the suggestion of his wife, Sarah. The idea was to apply theories of religion to sports to determine whether the similarities are simply coincidental or if sports can have a religious or at least quasi-religious function.

David hit the jackpot with the class: students came in droves, then came the local press, the regional press, followed finally by the national press. The class hit a

something about this sport, knowing well that my Argentine dad would be a better guide into the mysteries of kicking a soccer ball than catching a small ball with pieces of sewn leather. That afternoon we went to Peanut Sports and bought a glove, a bat, and a ball. After an hour or so of clumsy attempts, we figured out how they worked and went back to Peanut Sports to buy another glove. At the time my dad was finishing his doctorate and working two jobs, but somehow he found time to play catch with me every day for the next few years. It was our time, our little protected bubble of time no one could take away.

A year after picking up a glove for the first time, I started to play in Little League. I volunteered to be the catcher because that's where the action was—even if you stunk, you could still be a part of every play. We went out and bought a Thurman Munson autographed catcher's mitt and got to work, and, thanks to Dad, I turned out to be a passable catcher. He loved to pitch and I liked to pretend I was Barry Foote of the Cubs (I secretly wanted to be Johnny Bench—alas, he was not a Cub).

For a guy who had never held a baseball before the age of forty, Dad developed a nasty slider and curveball. After catching those for an hour or two a day, the fluffy stuff nine-year-old pitchers were throwing looked like it was coming at me in slow motion.

When Dad and I found baseball, the Cubs found us. Though not that long ago, this was still a time when

just about every game was on local TV and Wrigley Field—only two hours away—had no lights. Every afternoon held the possibility, if I played it rightly, to catch a glimpse of my beloved Cubs. I couldn't always work it out but they were there to be watched, and more often than my mom and dad know, I did.

In 1980, Dad took me to my first Cubs' game—I can still remember the way the light hit the green grass as we walked into the stadium. The first live Cub I saw was Jesus Figueroa, a reserve outfielder, who was effortlessly running wind sprints along the left field ivy. I can still name the 1980 starting roster for the Cubs, and for reasons I cannot explain that is very important to me.

We moved to Mexico soon after that. I stopped playing organized baseball and following the Cubs as closely, but Dad and I continued to play catch. By the time I was in high school playing baseball gave way to obsessing about the Cubs. Since that time we have not missed the pithos of a single season.

Some time during my last years of college and the beginning of graduate school baseball box scores became important to me. A day could not start without a careful analysis of every hit, walk, and strikeout of the previous game. The other team was easy to do; the Cubs' side took time. There was something in those numbers, something hidden, some secret the universe had encoded for me to discover if only I worked hard enough. I'm not sure what I expected to find in the box scores, but I knew it was there. Maybe I was looking for signs that the present state of Cubs mediocrity was coming to an end. I never found that one line, that sequence of numbers that was to be my flashing neon sign saying This is it; It's finally here.

I must confess that I still look at box scores every morning, only now I've added to my routine the Triple-A Iowa Cubs and the Centre College Colonels. However, box scores are no longer about the one great day when my favorite player went 4 for 5 with 2 home runs, a double, a single, a walk and 7 runs batted in. Now it's about the patterns that emerge when you put lots of box scores together, about knowing enough about the past to hazard a good guess as to what will happen in the present and near future. Baseball, like life, requires that you play the odds based on the pattern of the past—lefty vs. righty, for example. You may still get burned on a given play, but it would be foolish not to assume the pattern will play itself out in the long run.

Besides the tantalizing potential of figuring out all the mysteries of the universe in a day, box scores offered something else. I studied them every morning through graduate school like assigned readings because they allowed me to be conversant with my dad. This, I think, is the real reason baseball matters to me. On days when Dad and I had a hard time communicating about most things that matter, we always had baseball. There were a few times when that's all we talked about. But we kept talking and eventually added the other things back in. Baseball is not a sport I do or a team I follow, it is something that is part of the fabric of the relationship my dad and I have had, currently have, and will have.

I don't think it's a coincidence that we're Cubs fans. There is something very Adventist about it. At the core of Adventism is the notion that we're living on the brink of something special—the reality of the kingdom may explode into our lives any day, any moment. This reality dances ahead of us, just out of reach. It is always present, it is always coming, it is always still ahead, so we wait. Since Dad and I have followed them, the Cubs have not put together back to back winning seasons, much less win the World Series, something they haven't won since 1908.

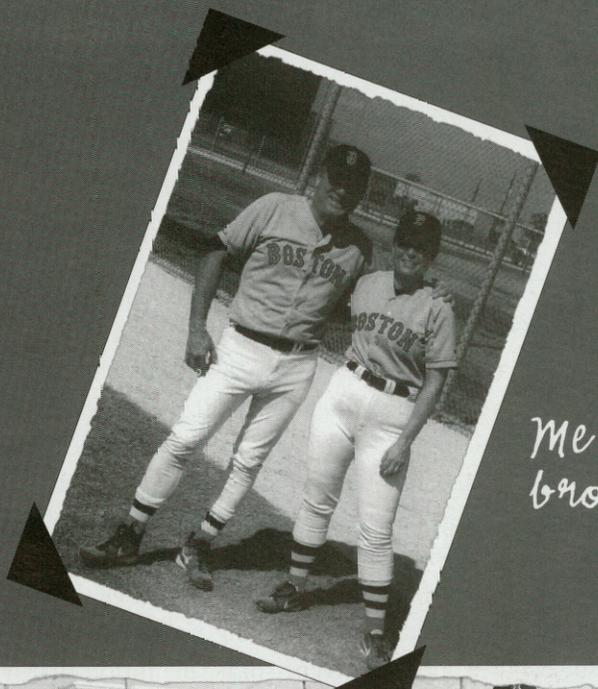
Last year there were signs the delay was finally over. The Cubs were five outs away from clinching a spot in the biggest dance of all when the universe blinked and their march to glory faltered. When they lost game six of the division series to the Marlins the baseball prophets all said they'd still pull it out, but I knew better. After game six I knew with a confidence I rarely have about anything that they would not go to the World Series and that the wait would continue. Why was I so sure? The Cubs' loss made sense within the pattern of history: the best things are ahead us, playfully dancing out of arm's reach.

As painful as this last season was, it wasn't all bad. Every year members of Cubdom fall back on the familiar refrain, "There's always next year." And there is, only this time we didn't have to wait as long for the bats to come out, the gloves to be oiled, and the box scores to show up at my doorstep. I view that as a kind of gift, a little one, but still a gift.

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Reni Dupertuis is Honorary Bat Boy for the Centre College Colonels; he also teaches religion and humanities.

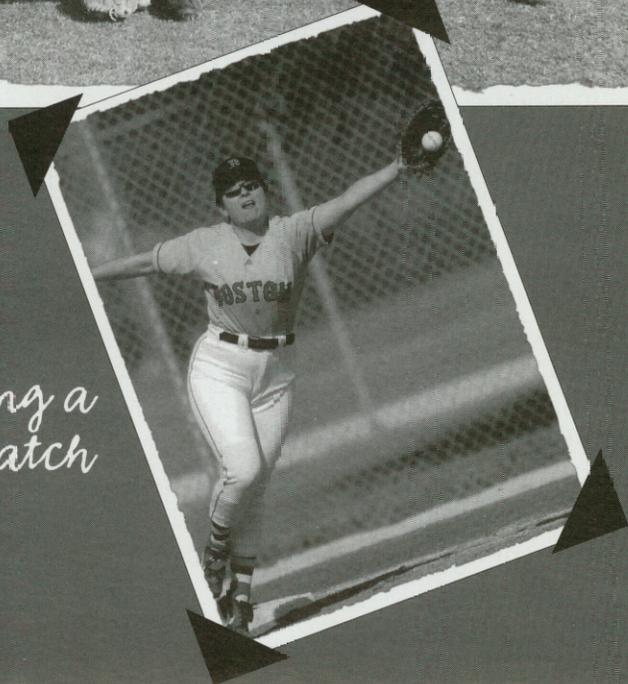




*Me and my  
brother Randy*



*The Boston Red Sox  
Fantasy Team*



*Making a  
catch*



# Almost Heaven?

*By Terrie Dopp Aamodt*

**W**hat have I gotten myself into? I tried to dislodge the cobwebs after five hours of fitful red-eye dozing. What would incite a middle-aged woman to sign onto a Boston Red Sox fantasy camp as its only female player? Being fully awake only made me more fretful as we landed in Atlanta before the sun on a chilly January morning. I trudged over to the connecting flight to Fort Myers, eying my fellow passengers. Were any of them headed for Red Sox camp?

A few men looked buff and athletic, just the right type to be annoyed at having a woman underfoot on the diamond. I looked hopefully at a few men comfortably padded with middle age. They probably wouldn't mind. Should I smile at them? Rats! If only I had a 1967 Red Sox year-book I could tuck under my arm. Then we could recognize each other and enjoy the bond of intimacy and hopelessness understood by no one else except Cub fans and wearers of St. Jude medals.

If I had only thought about it, 7:00 on a Sunday morning was too early

to encounter Bostonians on a flight to Florida. Descending the East Coast is a simple matter, something that can occur during hours when normal people are awake. Early morning flights are populated by denizens of Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Seattle, eager for a first crack at Florida sunshine, or the truly desperate, from places like Walla Walla, Washington, who take two days to go anywhere on a winter weekend.

The foliage got greener and the sky bluer as we flew south. At least if camp was miserable, the weather ought to be

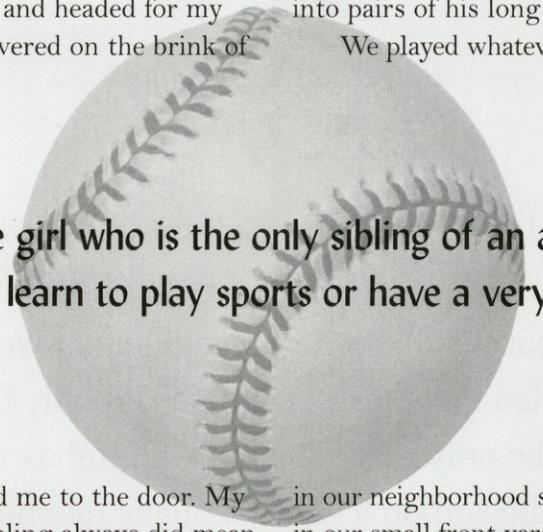
nice. I had forgotten how jarring the contrast between abstraction and reality can be. In the abstract, it had seemed like such a wonderfully logical idea. I was embarking on a major baseball research project and preparing to teach a new class, Baseball and American Popular Culture, with history colleague Terry Gottschall. I had loved baseball and had played it and its surrogates since third grade. It made sense to grab this opportunity to experience baseball from the inside. Pretty straightforward, right? Right.

I felt alone, at the ends of the earth, as I waited for the hotel shuttle. Arriving at the hotel, I was too groggy to face future teammates for a while, so I slipped through the check-in line and headed for my suite, intent on sleep. Just as I hovered on the brink of

Giants play. We sat in the right centerfield seats, and Willie Mays made a basket catch near us. It didn't matter how many future Hall of Famers were on the field that day—I had eyes only for Willie Mays, who, I maintain, is the best all-around talent ever to play the game. And he clearly loved it.

Our future was settled. Randy and I had to have baseball uniforms. We drooled over the beautiful kids' baseball outfits in the S&H green stamp catalog. If only.... But we knew we could never save that many stamps. We swallowed our disappointment and made do with the best we had: Randy's old flannel pajama bottoms, the ones with the fighter jets on them, tucked into pairs of his long white socks.

We played whatever variants of baseball would work



**An introverted little girl who is the only sibling of an athletic older brother will either learn to play sports or have a very lonely life.**

consciousness, a loud knock jolted me to the door. My rollaway bed. Being a younger sibling always did mean getting the short end of the stick, didn't it? I reminded myself. Then real, grateful slumber. "RIIIIIING" sang the phone fifteen minutes later. "I'll be there in about an hour!" my brother's voice was merry. OK, whatever. Maybe I can sleep on the way home.

I also admitted to myself that if it weren't for my brother, Randy, I wouldn't have been much of a baseball or softball player. An introverted little girl who is the only sibling of an athletic older brother will either learn to play sports or have a very lonely life. I've often wondered how my brotherless friends learned to play.

My first baseball-like memory occurred when my dad took my brother to see the King and His Court softball barnstormers, featuring Eddie Feigner. I was not included and felt terribly left out. Maybe it was a father-son bonding moment, or maybe I was too young (second grade), or maybe girls weren't expected to enjoy such things (my mom found spectator sports a boring alternative to actual play), or maybe our family could only afford two tickets.

Life improved, though, the next year when my dad included me in a trip to San Francisco to see the

in our neighborhood streets in Campbell, California, or in our small front yard in front of large windows. When I was ten we moved to Massachusetts. It was lovely, and I didn't miss anything about California except Willie Mays. I had never heard of the Red Sox, didn't know that once upon a time they had been the best team in baseball, that they had once owned Babe Ruth. All I knew was that they were perennial cellar dwellers saddled with unpronounceable names.

"Willie Mays" was such a perfect baseball name—"Willie" crisp and full of fun, plus a beautiful one-syllable last name that evoked "amaze." Who knew how to spell "Yastrzemski"? Who would want to? "Conigliaro" was a little better—at least it was phonetic, and it rhymed with "arrow" and other cool words, and "Petrocelli" sounded like pasta. Still, who cared?

Little did I know that after a ninth-place finish in 1966 the Red Sox would roar back to take the American League pennant on the last day of the season in 1967, against 100:1 odds. Yaz would win the Triple Crown, and Tony Conigliaro would excel in home run hitting before a beanball sent his tragic career into permanent decline in August.

It was an incredible story. Just as incredible was the way it knit together fractious New Englanders, including those old enough to remember some spectacular flops after the Red Sox sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1920. It knit together our eighth grade class—giggling boys, preening girls, our humorless math teacher—with fierce loyalty.

It was bigger than baseball, bigger than sport, as large as life. It was shared grief and triumph, brotherhood, sisterhood, and the hope of fulfillment that returned and will return every spring, even after the ball bounced between Bill Buckner's legs in 1986 or slid wrong off Pedro Martinez' long fingers in 2003. Baseball, especially baseball in the context of a perennially lost cause, is about passion, ritual, expectation.

**W**ould those shared bonds get me through a week of intense play with my brother and fifty-five men I had never met? I severely doubted it Sunday afternoon. We exercised our option to drive out to the Red Sox spring training facilities so we could learn our way around and practice putting on our uniforms so we wouldn't look like dorks on the first day of camp. The Red Sox spring training facility has four fields arranged in a square, a separate exhibition field named for longtime coach Eddie Popowski, a structure full of batting cages, many practice pitching mounds, and a large training building. The team plays spring training games in a stadium a few miles away.

The training building has a large weight room, a vast trainer's room with rubdown tables and several whirlpool baths, a coaches' locker room, and a cavernous room with about 150 lockers, home to all the campers except me. I was given the full run of the umpires' locker room.

My quavering spirit steadied when I stepped into my locker room. There was my name and a Red Sox emblem above my locker, and all my things were neatly arranged: the navy wool cap with an ornate red "B" sat on the high shelf; the navy blue Red Sox T-shirt hung from a wire hanger on the bar with the immaculate white home uniform, red piping outlining the shirt and pant legs, the quaint old lettering of "RED SOX" on the front of the jersey, the enormous shiny silky "25" on the back.

(I picked Tony Conigliaro's number because I could personally identify with his brief, tragic career. Although I didn't have the requisite talent to waste into tragedy, I knew my career would be brief. I could never aspire to

the sterling perfection of Carl Yastrzemski's "8" or Ted Williams's "9").

Also in my locker were the gray traveling jersey with "BOSTON" on the front and "AAMODT" and "25" on the back; the spiffy navy blue leather belt; the white sanitary socks and the genuine article, the authentic Red Sox stirrup socks (why don't big leaguers wear them anymore?) with red on the lower part and two horizontal white stripes alternating with navy blue at the top. There was a strap to hold it all together when they did the daily laundry. Cool. I had a locker with my name on it.

**M**onday morning we all gathered at 6:30 for breakfast. If I hadn't been so focused on my own worries, I would have realized that everyone was nervous. The best part of my week happened when I got on the van to the ball field and the driver, an old Red Sox hand, asked, "Terrie, did you used to play on the Silver Bullets?" (a talented professional women's barnstorming baseball team that played a few seasons in the early 1990s).

"No—I wish!" Yikes! Maybe they expect me to be good!

Overcome with dread, I walked into my locker room, took the folding chair out of my locker, sat down, pulled on all the various layers of socks, fiddled around trying to tuck my oversize T-shirt and the long-tailed jersey smoothly into the pants so it wouldn't make my stomach stick out any further, put on the cap, grabbed my bag of gloves, and sidled into a corner of the big locker room for the obligatory kangaroo court.

As near as I could tell, the kangaroo court was designed to shrivel various fears and trepidations through a combination of bravado, self-deprecating humor, ritual male display, masked anxiety, and a nonstop stream of Viagra jokes, a fixation that vaguely puzzled me. What would a locker room full of women act like, I wondered. Though somewhat bewildered, I was quietly relieved that my presence didn't seem to inhibit their fun.

The coaches divided us into four alphabetical groups for tryouts, meaning I couldn't tag along after my big brother, the way I had when I started first grade, and dread again overwhelmed me. To make matters worse, our first assignment was



# The Church of Baseball

By Terrie Dopp Aamodt

So what is this connection between baseball and religion? Is it a neat but pointless allegory? Is it a profane comparison? Was Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon's character in the film *Bull Durham*) sacrilegious when she confessed, "I've tried 'em all, I really have. And the only church that truly feeds my soul—day in, day out—is the Church of Baseball."

The notion has crept from popular culture into academia, most notable recently in a collection of scholarly essays entitled, *The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture*.<sup>1</sup> In an introductory chapter, Christopher H. Evans identifies the game as an aspect of civil religion: At the center of baseball's symbolic power resides a unique language of civil religion, proclaiming that the game can redeem America and serve as a light to all nations.<sup>2</sup>

Baseball, long associated with American dreams and American exceptionalism, according to this line of reasoning, logically partakes of the religious values and assumptions underlying these ideas. Various scholars have earnestly pointed out that baseball was part of an early twentieth-century Progressive social gospel that sought to redeem the benighted residents of large cities by providing them with a bit of bucolic rural landscape: the downtown baseball "park."

Baseball has been saddled with lofty expectations, with the belief that the sport is and ought to be pure, free of the taint of gambling or steroid use, filled with generosity and good sportsmanship.

If baseball has failed to live up to its own requirements, lapsing instead into greed and the exclusion of women and blacks from the sport, it deserves redemption, according to Eleanor J. Stebner and Tracy J. Trothen. It could be purged of masculine preening and the unholy striving for individual glorification by returning to its roots as a team sport: "baseball—both as a sport and as a dominant cultural myth—needs to be liberated from the gloves of patriarchy . . . [baseball can be] a radically inclusive community."<sup>3</sup>

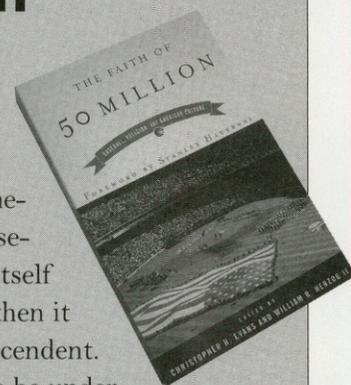
Evans and Herzog note that by being properly

humble and chaste, baseball can be redeemed from its sometimes errant ways: "When baseball has been able to awaken itself to its own fear of the future, then it has reflected something transcendent. For whether a means of grace be understood as bread and wine, or a bat and a ball, it enables us to cast away our fear of the unknown and momentarily see signs of hope for a better future."<sup>4</sup>

Although Evans and Herzog do not say it directly, the suggestion here is that baseball can serve a millennial purpose. A combination of high expectations and the hope for millennial improvement just around the corner encourages some individuals to see a future brighter than the present.

Too much talk or thought, though, can ruin a good game of baseball. After all, it is "just" a game (a high compliment). It is uniquely equipped to be enjoyed at any age level, any skill level, with a minimum of equipment and folderol. It is a team sport in which the whole can be greater than a sum of the parts. It appeals to the imagination and the medium of radio.

Baseball is best played outdoors, in spring or summer sunshine. It can be healing. It can be a blessing. But if it is elevated to the status of religion, it becomes the worship of a false god. As much as we are tempted to encrust it with mythology, it is still "just" a game, a splendid game. When executed at its exemplary best, it has something to teach all of us.



## Notes and References

1. Edited by Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).
2. "Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story," in *Faith of 50 Million*, 15.
3. "A Diamond is Forever? Women, Baseball, and a Pitch for a Radically Inclusive Community," in *ibid.*, 168, 184.
4. "The Faith of Fifty Million: A Kingdom on Earth?" in *ibid.*, 220.

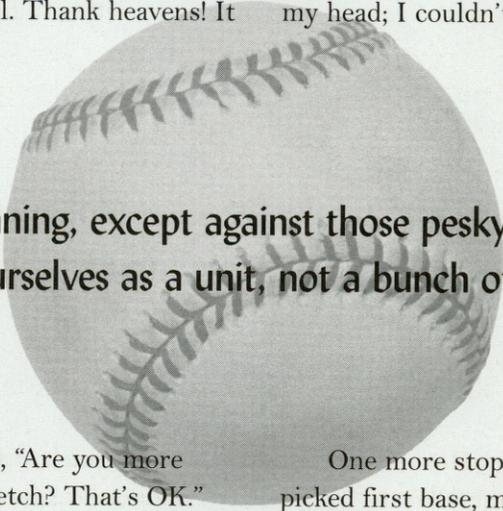
the pitcher's mound. I had never even stood on one. We played catch while we waited for everything to start, and I kept dropping the ball.

I felt so stupid in my uniform. What a dork! What if I threw my pitches in the dirt? The mound looked at least five feet high. I hung back as long as I could while Luis Tiant (perhaps the best pitcher alive who is not in the Hall of Fame) instructed eager pitchers and Rich Gedman (the steady, unflappable catcher of the tragic 1986 Red Sox) showed players how to catch without breaking their fingers.

Finally, unavoidably, it was my turn. Rich Gedman caught me himself, not wanting to pair an utterly inexperienced pitcher with an equally inept catcher. I made a sort of windup and threw the ball. Thank heavens! It

had hurt my hands like crazy. Baseball camp, thankfully, used wooden bats only. There is nothing more satisfying than the solid "chunk" of hickory against horsehide, or, in the unalliterative present, ash against cowhide. But the bats! (The camp had promised to provide bats.) They were all 36-ounce monsters! Didn't anyone remember that Stan Musial made it to the Hall of Fame using a 31-ounce bat? I feebly waved at the mechanical pitches, finally managing a weak grounder to shortstop on my tenth, and last, pitch. My day was not going well.

Then it was time for outfield drills. Reid Nichols and Dick Berardino hit us grounders and flies. My grounder was soft and easy. My fly soared way over my head; I couldn't have caught it with a stepladder.



**Our team kept winning, except against those pesky Gophers, and we began to think of ourselves as a unit, not a bunch of individuals.**

didn't bounce! Luis Tiant observed, "Are you more comfortable throwing from the stretch? That's OK."

I thought to myself, let him call it the stretch if he wants to—I don't know what I'm doing! Let me throw my other four pitches and escape!

Incredibly, none of them went in the dirt and my hardest assignment of the week was done. The catching task was better—I could do that part. Tiant and Gedman were so kind. They treated all of our efforts with grace, and the men in my group were nice.

Then we moved on to the batting tryouts, aided by a pitching machine. I had tried to prepare for this moment, I really had. My colleague, business professor Andy Dressler, a women's fast-pitch softball coach, had run through some batting drills with me, the first time I had ever batted anything other than a slow-pitch marshmallow. I batted pretty well against Andy's machine, once I figured out how to swing fast enough after the ball whizzed out of the contraption about thirty-five feet away.

My aluminum bat had connected with most of the pitches with a firm, if annoying, "clink," but it

One more stop—infield drills. I strategically picked first base, my favorite playing position. Not many grounders, not much running or throwing. Several of us waited in line to take throws at first base. I caught a couple, chased a couple of wild throws, then inexplicably missed a throw entirely. It hit me in the shoulder. What a dork! I couldn't believe I had done that in front of all those people.

Thankfully it was time for lunch. We sat at picnic tables in a shady area outside and listened to the pros' stories. After some post-lunch stretching, it was time for a practice game with us still divided into our alphabetical teams. The coaches would finish their evaluations of us and carry out their player draft that evening. Rich Gedman and Rick Wise (pitcher of two no-hitters and one of the best-hitting pitchers ever) were my coaches. I got to play first for part of the game.



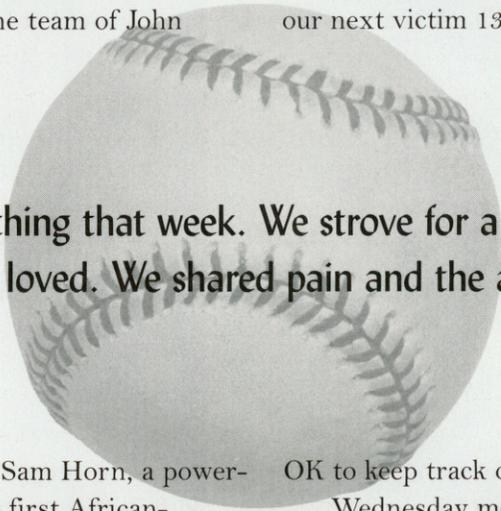
**T**he afternoon was as marvelous as the morning was miserable. At last we could play. At last we could do what we came to do. A teammate had a nice lightweight bat he let me use. I got a hit my first time up and went 2 for 4. I managed to scoop a throw out of the dirt at first, even though I think my eyes were closed. We had so much fun. The score didn't mean anything—we just played for the pure joy of playing. If we were auditioning, I didn't even think about it. Coach Gedman was cool. I wanted to be on his team, and so did my brother (family members were always a package deal at the camp).

Although Gedman picked many of his alphabetic team, Randy and I ended up on the team of John

er were thirtyish and were excellent athletes. Our team also had the camp's only woman—me—and its only disabled player, a guy I'll call Ron.

Ron had multiple physical challenges. He swung the bat, fielded, and ran in slow motion. He wore thick glasses and saw only in spots. His body was even less suited to the dimensions of a standard baseball uniform than my female form was. But he played a special tenth position in the outfield and took his regular at-bat (all of our fourteen players batted in order throughout each game).

Tuesday morning we began a four-day series of eight games. Our trepidation dissipated quickly as we vanquished our first opponent 23 to 0. We rolled over our next victim 13 to 3. Wow, this was fun! Maybe it's



**All of us shared something that week. We strove for a common goal involving an activity we loved. We shared pain and the agony of defeat.**

Curtis, a left-handed pitcher, and Sam Horn, a powerful designated hitter who was the first African-American ever taken by the Red Sox in the first round of the draft. Randy and I wondered what our team would be like. Gedman's team, the Gophers, was young—young, that is, considering campers had to be at least thirty.

Our team, Curtis's Comets, was—well—diverse. One gentleman, who had done a Boston radio show with Red Sox standout Johnny Pesky in the 1940s, was our first base coach. Our oldest player was seventy-two. He had been selected to the Senior Softball Hall of Fame and played two hundred baseball and softball games every year. Another player, sixty-seven, was one of our most consistent hitters. Our regular catcher was fifty-nine and unbelievably agile—one day he caught two seven-inning games. When he got tired on other days, the sixty-seven year old took over.

Our team had its own resident dentist, a guy who donated his time to check out tobacco-chewing baseball players for mouth cancer (and try to get them to stop using smokeless tobacco), and was one of our most effective pitchers. Our shortstop and center field-

OK to keep track of the score!

Wednesday morning was a day of reckoning. We met the other undefeated team, Gedman's Gophers, in a contest to determine camp bragging rights and, perhaps, the eventual champion. I started the game at first base (I believe I started all but one game there), and an intense, highly competitive contest followed.

It was exciting and fun and a little scary. I felt a bit over my head, playing baseball at such an intensely competitive level. I clung to my first base position, hoping I wouldn't do something too stupid, secretly wishing they would substitute another player in the fifth inning, as they often did, but not wanting to quit. The coaches left me in the entire game. I'll never know why. Maybe the game was so exciting they just forgot.

We had superb pitching and managed to stay ahead until late in the game, when one of our pitchers faltered, allowing four runs and putting the Gophers one run ahead. Our coaches told us not to worry, that we had another inning and could catch up. We couldn't figure out why the other team started yelling and jumped on top of each other, forming a pile of bodies

on the infield. What was the matter? Turned out the game was over, our coaches were an inning off (the rest of us had been too excited to keep track), and that one-run margin ended up being the difference in the camp championship.

As the week wore on, our aging bodies protested. Hamstrings zinged all around me. The worst victims were the fortysomething men, who tried to play like thirty year olds and paid dearly for it. Our older players took care of themselves and ran at speeds they knew wouldn't hurt them. The amount of time spent conditioning (or not conditioning) before camp became obvious.

It's so hard to get ready to play baseball in Florida when you live in a cold climate. My aerobic preparation was running in the early morning pitch dark and climbing on the Stair Master. I really tried hard to do the wind sprints regularly, but I wish I had done more. The weight training routines were more feasible—after all, they were indoors—but available time was always a problem. I tried to do the stretching routines every day—I had been warned it was the most important part of preparation—but I wish I had done them five times a day.

Throwing was also hard to do in the winter. My children, Alex and Erica, helped with that until the season got too cold and dark; after that my colleagues Dan Lambertson and Sheila Meharry played catch with me in the gym.

I was fortunate not to have any major muscle pulls, but by Wednesday night I was really sore. Sore legs, sore ribs (which caught an errant fastball that took my breath away, brought tears to my eyes, and left a purple/yellow/green baseball-size bruise; "I'll never ask again about a hit batsman, 'Why doesn't he just get out of the way?'" I confided to Sam Horn, who roared with laughter at my naive comment), and a sprained thumb that left both sides of my right hand black and blue, urging my pain-avoidance mechanism to strike out as often as possible.

I sat too long Wednesday evening and could hardly walk. I hurt so badly! Maybe my ribs are cracked—how can I stagger through two more days? It seemed so ludicrous I started giggling, then doubled over laughing. It hurt so badly to laugh. Fortunately, I learned that a brisk two-mile walk Thursday and Friday mornings made me feel a lot better, and I found myself pinch running for some of my more maimed teammates.

Our team kept winning, except against those pesky

Gophers, and we began to think of ourselves as a unit, not a bunch of individuals. Our shortstop was magnificent. He made us all look good. His bullet throws made my job easy. Our sixty-seven year old banged out line drive hits almost every time he came to bat. In spite of pitched blows to his helmet and forearm (pitches we were sure he never saw), Ron, or "Ronnie," as everyone started to call him, hit a couple of excellent line drive singles. My brother robbed the Gophers' best player of a home run.

Our pitchers seemed to get better and better. The seventy-two year old pitched. The stocky blackjack dealer used a hilarious delivery that unconsciously parodied Luis Tiant in 1975. They were terrific. Our fifty-nine year old catcher would bellow in his New England accent in the seventh inning, "Three outs 'til beeah!" (or root beer, as the case may be), and we would stroll back to the clubhouse in our sweaty, red clay-streaked uniforms, wondering why anyone would ever want to do anything else.

The spirit in the entire camp was wonderfully supportive. Luis Tiant, bless his heart, told me I had a nice swing. A dermatologist on one of the other teams made sure we all wore sunscreen and played catch with Ronnie every morning. Sam Horn talked quietly one day about how painful it was to be a black player in Boston in the early 1980s. Besides his bravado, hilarious bluster, and trash talk (he went after umpires and opponents as the occasion demanded), Sam had a soft spot in his heart for underdogs. He bragged about Ronnie regularly in Kangaroo Court and made a moving speech about him at the closing banquet, bringing the entire crowd to their feet.

I will always remember Friday, my last day in camp. The sun was still low in the morning sky when we went out on the damp grass to stretch our creaky bodies. Our flock of fifty-seven players looked resplendent in their white uniforms. I don't think I ever wore a uniform before, except for my forest green Pathfinder skirt and blouse. I had been averse to military uniforms in the Vietnam era and hadn't thought about them one way or another since. But it was cool to wear a uniform with my fellow players, carrying out an activity we enjoyed.

When our two games of the day were over and we had finally defeated the Gophers (our records were

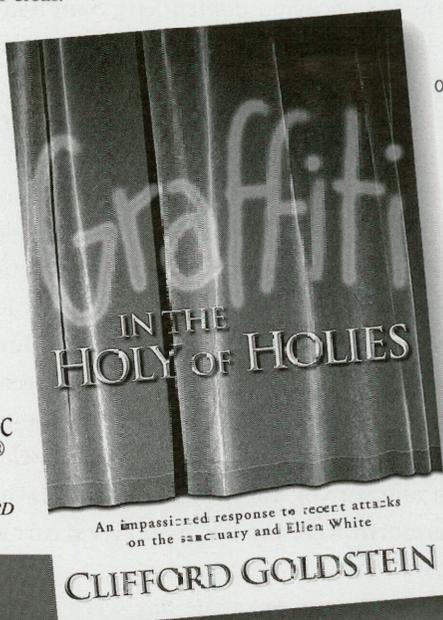


# SOMEONE IS DEFACING THE SANCTUARY DOCTRINE, AND IT ISN'T PRETTY.

An outspoken former Adventist minister is claiming that the 1844 investigative judgment doctrine is a sham and Ellen White is a "false prophet." How can we respond?

In *Graffiti in the Holy of Holies* author and church apologist Clifford Goldstein refutes the critics and gives a compelling and clear defense of the Bible-based, and gospel-uplifting truth about the sanctuary.

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identically 6-2 but they beat us twice), John Curtis called us all together and made a little speech about how much he appreciated having me on the team. I have no idea why he wanted to do that, but it was very sweet. All of my teammates were gracious and kind.

I wandered around outside the clubhouse, sat on Nomar Garciaparra's bench, and chatted with the elderly man who adjusted and repaired baseball gloves, talked with the wife of the orthopedist camper who examined my black and blue hand, and generally avoided going into the locker room and taking off my uniform for the last time. I wouldn't wear it again unless I was with my teammates. A person running around in a uniform by himself or herself is a dork. A whole team in uniform, despite what Sandlot would lead you to believe, is totally, unbelievably, eternally cool.

All of us shared something that week. We strove for a common goal involving an activity we loved. We shared pain and the agony of defeat. We learned about each other's families and lives. We talked about our kids incessantly. We pinched ourselves now and then to make sure we were really awake, really in warm, sunny Florida, really wearing our heroes' uniforms and occupying their space. We talked about our upcoming reunion games in Fenway Park in June. We cared for each other.

"You know," Randy said after it was all over, "I can't believe how nice everyone was to Ronnie. I bet they were nicer to him than people would have been in church."

I thought about that on the long ride home. Part of the reason it takes two days to get to Walla Walla on the weekend is that it involves many hours spent in a gulag called the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. I escaped to the nicest spot there—the meditation chapel—and tried to explain to myself why the experience had meant so much to me.

Was Randy right? Were they nicer to Ronnie than they would have been in church? Perhaps. Maybe in church there is too much at stake. Eternal life and salvation and the burdens of transmitting the right orthodoxy to the world can make people uptight, self-righteous, and cranky. What would it take to get a church full of people to be as loving, as supportive, as tenderly united toward a common goal as our motley bunch of baseball players? Heaven?

Terrie Dopp Aamodt is a professor of history and English at Walla Walla College.

# A Day of Salvation

*By Roy Branson*

**M**y mother the missionary shouted out encouragement to Stan Musial, Enos Slaughter, Red Schoendienst, and the rest of the St. Louis Cardinals. One other fan did the same—loudly and incessantly. The rest of us were silent. After all, this was Ebbets Field on a weekday in 1951, and the Brooklyn Dodgers were losing.

For eight long innings the Dodgers had hardly heard a peep of support. True, every time an opposing player struck out, a small band behind the Dodgers dug out played a dirge until the opposing player sat down—to a raucously jarring chord. And the Dodger announcer tried to remain upbeat. But there was absolutely nothing to cheer about. The Cardinals were walking, getting on base through errors, then hitting double after double, knocking in everybody who got on base. By the bottom of the eighth, Musial and company were ahead 9-0!

My mother never let up. Inning after inning, she took turns with the Cardinal's fan, urging the Cardinals on, jeering my heroes in blue.

My mother had been raised by her father, a missionary to Indonesia who had established two colleges. She married a preacher who had taken her and the

rest of the family to Cairo, Egypt. After we survived World War II, my father established a senior college in Beirut, Lebanon (where my mother taught algebra to students from all over the Middle East). The Christian colleges her father and husband established continue to educate the young in the way that they should go. But being surrounded by two generations of religious fervor on several continents had not dimmed my mother's fanaticism for baseball.

Within a month of my father becoming the president of the Greater New York Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Mom got me on a subway and out to Ebbets Field. (It was years before Dad went to a game, and only because we had out-of-town visitors who insisted.) Before Ebbets Field, before the Middle East and World War II, as a young pastor's wife in St. Louis, my mother had rooted for the Gashouse



Gang—Leo Duroucher at shortstop, Frankie Frisch at second, with Dizzy Dean and his brother Paul on the mound. On hot, air-conditionless summer afternoons, while she ironed shirts, mother listened to the radio and cheered the Cardinals on their long march to the 1934 National League pennant.

By the time the Cardinals were playing Detroit in the World Series, my father, the pastor of the six-hundred-member downtown St. Louis Adventist church, was holding evangelistic meetings in the downtown arena, seating a thousand people. Preaching three nights a week, he had gotten through Adventist teaching on the Sabbath, the image of Daniel 2, and the “Mark of the Beast.” But before he could lay out the “Signs of the End,” the Cardinals were playing the Tigers in the last game of the World Series.

As the service started, the Cardinals were ahead. Soon, car horns started honking and the cars backfiring; fire crackers went off at a faster and faster pace.

People inside the hall began having a hard time hearing the speaker. Dad bowed to the inevitable and cut short his evangelist sermon, the “Time of the End.” It turned out that Dizzy, on only one day’s rest, had pitched a complete game shutout—11-0! In downtown St. Louis, the honking and shouting and cheering of the Cardinals’ victory went on most of the night.

From St. Louis my parents returned to the mission service in which they had been raised. In Cairo and Beirut my brother and I grew up in the “true faith” with the help of *Time* magazine and the Armed Services Radio Network. I learned to read by comparing the words of *Time*’s sports section with the descriptions of the World Series I heard on the radio: Mel Allen chronicling the heroic struggles of Don Newcombe and Preacher Roe against Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi, and the rest of the Yankee’s dynasty. In the face of defeat after defeat at the hands of the rich and powerful, I never lost hope that Jackie Robinson and the forces of righteousness would ultimately prevail.

But that first afternoon of seeing baseball face-to-face, not just hearing it, tested my faith. And my

mother was part of the problem. Far from comforting me, she was cheering the oppressors. For some reason, into the bottom of the eighth inning, she still wasn’t hoarse. I was furious. She was rooting, after all, against not just any team, but the Dodgers!

She was booing Jackie Robinson, for heaven’s sakes! How could any self-respecting person do that? She was lining herself up against integration, against racial harmony, against goodness and light. I was twelve, and brought up by two generations of missionaries to recognize a battle in the war

between good and evil. And my own mother was on the side of the powers of darkness.

Then God struck. It was not thunder and lightning. No home runs, no triples. Just the gentle dew of singles, interrupted by the occasional flash of a double. But the forces of goodness were irresistible. In the bottom of the eighth, Duke Snider, Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, and Gil Hodges pushed across four runs. In the bottom of the ninth, the Boys of Summer

scored five runs to win the ball game.

The Cardinals’ fan had slipped out. He was nowhere to be found. My mother was smiling as broadly at me as when she had been cheering the Cardinals. Perhaps faithful devotion to the Dodgers could co-exist, after all, with loyalty to my parents.

My confidence in salvation history remained untroubled for years. I was fifteen before I got around to worrying about why the innocent suffered and died in the Holocaust. Of course, no fully satisfying answer has yet arrived. One continues to believe, however, the way one believes in a God who inexplicably permitted Ebbets Field to be destroyed and the Dodgers to be taken to a far country; but also a God whose faithful agents I witnessed rise up one afternoon in Brooklyn and triumph gloriously.

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Roy Branson directs the Center for Law and Public Policy at Columbia Union College, and is a former editor of *Spectrum*.

“A Day of Salvation” will appear in *Growing Up with Baseball: How We Loved and Played the Game*, edited by Gary Land forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press.



# Sabbath and Sports

The Next Religious Liberty Battle or Too Hot to Touch?

*By Heather Osborn*

The common practice of athletic associations to host big sports events on Friday nights and Saturdays has long prevented Seventh-day Adventist schools from participating, particularly in high-stakes playoffs, where the schedules become complicated. But instead of requesting special scheduling changes around Sabbath hours, dozens of Adventist schools across the country have quietly forfeited games.

Recently, the first students claiming religious discrimination in the scheduling of games came forward to protest, reviving the Church's long-standing debate about schools participating in interscholastic sports, but with a new question at the center: Are Sabbath conflicts that involve school sporting events a legitimate religious liberty issue for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to take up?

Until the recent legal case, which was raised not by the school but by individual students on the basketball team at Portland, Oregon, Adventist Academy, Adventist academies and colleges had decided to step back from religious liberty battles that involve sports, letting Sabbath conflicts go uncontested, year after year in some cases. And church leaders, though they have long given legal support to



members who run into Sabbath conflicts at the workplace, did not support the Portland case.

The rationale for teams backing down from a search for accommodations to play, according to interviews with education leaders and coaches, has largely been due to varying opinions of local constituents on competition and the different ways that schools interpret loosely worded General Conference and North American Division policies on interscholastic sports.

But other factors have weighed in as well. Among these are budget constraints on taking the matter up in the courts and the desire of coaches to allow non-Adventist teams to play without the burden of being forced to rearrange schedules, often at the eleventh hour. Some Adventist schools simply haven't had to address the matter because they have never made it to high-level competitions where most Sabbath conflicts occur.

## A Complicated Debate

The long-standing firestorm in the Adventist Church regarding competitive sports may be holding back some schools from seeking legal help to secure accommodations to play games outside Sabbath hours. Today, more than half of all Adventist academies in the United States compete in interscholastic sports, but church members in many parts of the country remain divided on this matter, making it difficult for teams to demand full-fledged rights to participate when scheduling conflicts arise.

"Athletic competition is kind of a hot potato in Adventism, particularly at the interscholastic sports level," says Dick Molstead, the former Oregon Conference education superintendent. "The challenge has always been, How far do you go? Philosophically, it boils down to, What is the Church's position on competition?"

Athletic competition among Adventist schools reaches back more than forty years, when Takoma Academy, in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., fielded the first Adventist sports team to compete interscholastically. Today, the answer to Molstead's question remains murky.

Some, including Mitch Tyner, a lawyer in the Religious Liberty Department of the General Conference, argue that the teams should be granted full accommodations based on First Amendment rights. "My argument is, this is not about competitive sports. It's about religious equality," Tyner says. He compared the issue to the Church's legal department providing support for legal cases by Sunday observers seeking

religious rights. The Church believes that religious accommodations should be made for people from many religious backgrounds.

Some say that Adventist schools should play in as many games as possible, but step aside as soon as the Sabbath factor becomes burdensome to other schools that must change their schedules. That's the stance of Ronald K. Russell, director of the Mid-America Union Office of Education. "If a team plays and wins in the tournament and the association does not choose to move a game away from the Sabbath, the school should forfeit," Russell wrote in an e-mail. "Our witness should be clear and Christ-centered."

## The Portland Case

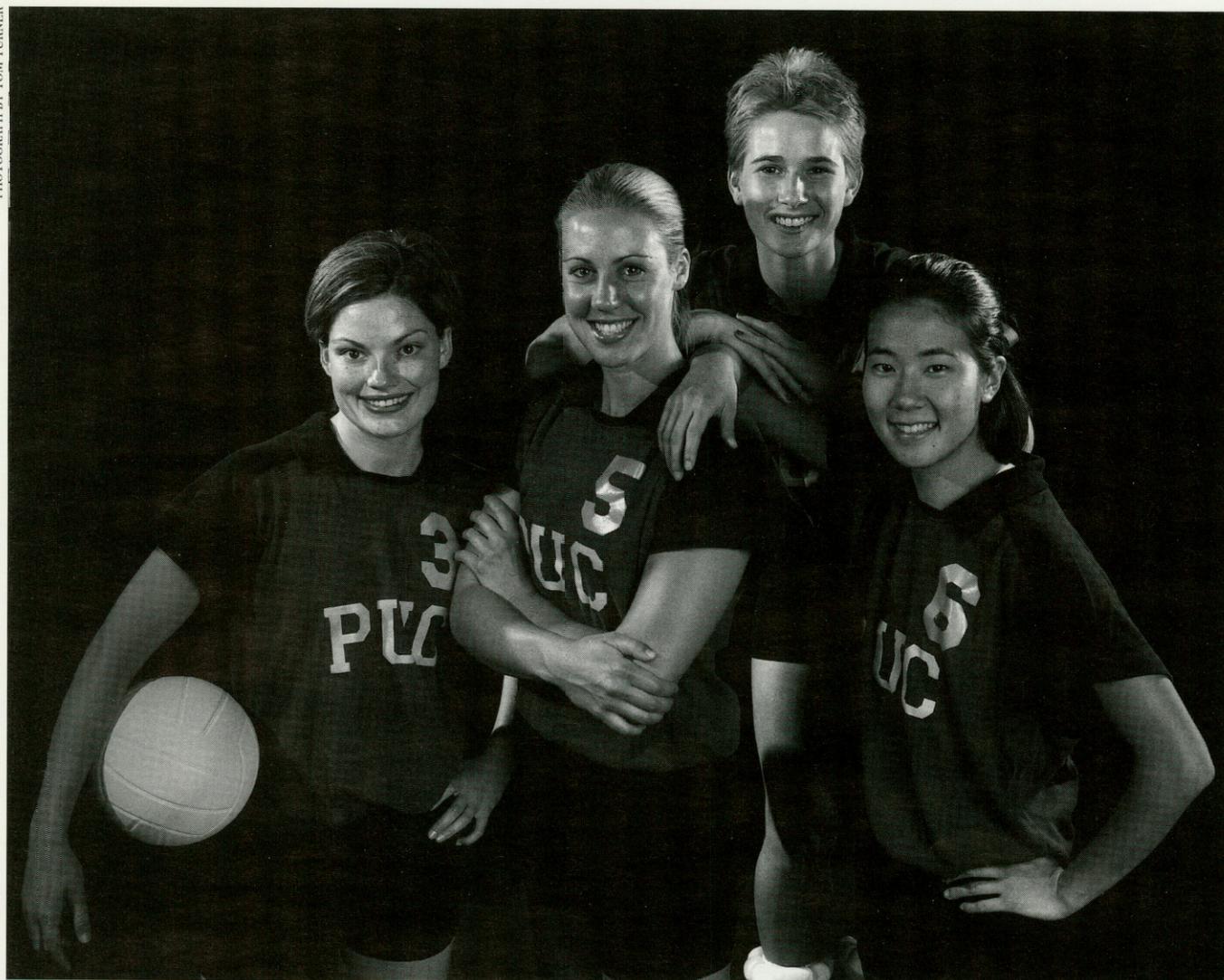
The Portland case is the first to test the Church's reaction to whether sports scheduling is a worthy religious liberty cause. It's been a lengthy battle with muted victories for the Adventist basketball team, but the case eventually ended in defeat for the team, at least for the 2004 season. "It is religious discrimination, no matter how you put it," says Jonathan Long, a sophomore on the basketball team at Portland Adventist Academy (PAA). "It's hard for me to understand who would think it's not legitimate."

Although the Oregon Court of Appeals ruled in June 2003 that the athletic association in question must make "reasonable accommodations" for the Portland Adventist Academy team to play in state tournament games, the state Board of Education in February reinforced the athletic association's assertion that the accommodations the academy sought are too burdensome to the other teams.

The Board of Education's decision surprised the team, which thought it would finally be able to play in the state championship this year. "We thought we'd be eligible," says Lance Judd, the coach. Going into the championship, they would have been 24-1.

But the Court of Appeals' decision didn't completely clear the way for the school to participate because the Oregon Schools Activities Association has said that any scheduling changes for the Portland team would be unreasonable, and the Oregon Board of Education agreed.

The case, which began in 1997, is still inching toward a conclusion because the team has appealed the Board of Education's ruling. The students accuse the Oregon School Activities Association of unfairly



excluding the Portland Adventist Academy basketball team from competing in the annual state championship by refusing to move Saturday games to allow students to observe their Sabbath. The case started one year after the Portland team won the 1996 state championship. The school tried to work out differences with the athletic association outside of the courts, but wasn't successful.

The team won the state championship in 1996, in part because the league changed a semi-final Friday game in a one-time accommodation. The next year, the athletic association required the school to sign a form agreeing that it would not forfeit a Saturday game in the future. Portland Adventist Academy would not agree to that condition. In an emergency court injunction in February 1997—a measure the PAA school board backed—a federal judge denied the school the right to play.

According to a September 2003 report from

Vicki Ballou, a parent of a former team member and Portland lawyer who worked on the case, the judge claimed that the “students’ belief in Sabbath was so strong that being excluded from the tournament was not a burden to those beliefs.”

The team didn't play in the state tournament in 1997, and one month later the Oregon Conference Executive Committee voted against the school taking further legal action.

The issue didn't surface again until winter 2000, when the PAA basketball team was undefeated going into the state tournament. Parents, this time deciding not to involve the school or the conference, asked for an emergency hearing with the athletic association to make sure the team's Sabbath games would be resched-





uled if needed. Because the parents did not request a hearing on the matter until a few days before the play-offs, the athletic association denied the request.

In June 2000, the parents appealed to the Oregon Board of Education, which denied the team the right to Saturday accommodations. A hearings officer heard the same request in February 2001, and concluded in August 2001 that the athletic association had “illegally discriminated against the PAA students,” according to Ballou’s 2003 report.

Despite the hearings officer’s findings, in 2002 the athletic association again refused to change Saturday games for Portland, although it did shift Friday games. The team lost the Friday games, so a Saturday forfeit wasn’t necessary, but before the tournament the superintendent of Oregon schools said the athletic association did not have to accommodate the school.

The students appealed that decision, and the Court of Appeals reversed the superintendent’s decision on June 5,

2003, calling it “illegal discrimination.” The Court of Appeals sent the matter back to the Board of Education, requiring the board to set up the parameters for the association to accommodate the academy reasonably.

The board released its findings in February, saying it agreed with the association, which said it could not change Portland’s Saturday games to after sundown.

Still, supporters of the Portland students are saying students with religious beliefs may have better odds of being considered when interscholastic activities are scheduled because of the ruling from the appeals court. According to lawyers involved, the Portland case is the first to demand that the religious beliefs of students be considered when interscholastic events of any kind are scheduled.

But lawyers warn that a tough road lies ahead for religious students asking for consideration in the scheduling of interschool events. “What is ‘reasonable’ is so fact intensive, and that’s why precedents are not

terribly helpful in this area of law," says Charles Hinkle, a cooperating attorney for the Oregon American Civil Liberties Union who argued the case for the Portland students.

Complicating the matter even further for Adventist schools are the wide-ranging beliefs of church members, which remain chief roadblocks to taking up Sabbath issues in athletic scheduling. Consider what happened at Burton, Texas, Adventist Academy in 2001 in a situation like the Portland case, but with a much different outcome. The school ran into problems

this happens again, he says, "There are some people who might take up the torch with it."

Burton officials, like many before and after, never reported the matter to the Legal Affairs Department at the General Conference, which hasn't had any complaints of religious discrimination from sports teams until the Portland case. Part of the challenge church leaders face is that they don't know how widespread the problem is. "For what it's worth, if we don't know about a problem, we can't help with it," says Tyner, the attorney in the General Conference Legal Department

## Will the scheduling of interscholastic sports become the next religious liberty issue for Adventists?

that year when the boys' varsity basketball team won its district title, qualifying for the regional playoffs with a record of 17-2.

Teams at the local level had been willing to schedule games around the Sabbath so Burton could participate during the regular season. But the athletic organization overseeing the league, the Texas Athletic Association of Private and Parochial Schools (TAPPS), would not change the time of regional play-off games from Saturday afternoon to Saturday night.

"Going in, we knew they would not accommodate those types of situations. But we hoped they would change," said Tony Simmons, an assistant coach at that time. Burton coaches contacted the director of the facility where the team was supposed to play a regional play-off game, and the facility director said the game could be moved to a different time, but TAPPS would not budge, according to Simmons.

The Texas Athletic Association schedules games for religion-affiliated schools in the area, including another Adventist Academy. "You'd think they'd be sensitive to religious liberty issues, but obviously they weren't," Simons says. But the issue was larger than the unwillingness of TAPPS to move the game to a time after sundown. Church members in the area were divided on the matter, some saying, "If we're going to make that big of an issue out of it, maybe we shouldn't be playing," Simons recalls.

Ultimately, the school forfeited, received lots of positive local media coverage, and enjoyed short-lived fame in the area. Looking back, Simons believes the school did the right thing. However, if something like

who argues roughly twenty Sabbath cases a year.

"I'd like some quantification of the issue," Tyner continues. "Is this becoming a serious problem for more of our schools?" Tyner urges school leaders to report incidents of religious discrimination to the department, even if the school does not plan to protest it in an official capacity or through the courts. Tyner says there are one thousand incidents of Sabbath discrimination reported each year to his department.

### Another Stance

The complicated nature of scheduling games is one of the reasons John Gatchet, principal of Idaho's Gem State Academy in the 1990s and currently education superintendent for the Oregon Conference, backed the school's participation in a local league but agreed that it should always forego a chance at regional or state titles because of the scheduling issues, even when the team was ranked high in its division.

At the district tournament in the late 1990s the school decided, win or lose, to go to the loser's bracket for the sole purpose of avoiding Sabbath conflicts. At the tournament, Gatchet said, "We pretty consistently lost, probably because the kids were not that into it in some ways. And that was fine."

For some of the people involved in Gem State athletics, playing in "friendship tournaments" against other Adventist teams at Walla Walla College, Pacific



Union College, and other schools was enough to make up for bowing out of the regional and state competitions. "We didn't have to worry about someone trying to accommodate us," Gatchet said.

Gatchet has high regard for the coaches in the local league willing to play on Saturday nights even though they preferred to play on Friday night. "It pinched on their family time, and they were OK with it," Gatchet says. "At first, they kidded us about it. But they realized that it was fun to play us, that we're good competition, and we helped to sharpen their teams."

Bob Paulson, who's been a coach at various Adventist schools in North America, agrees that the Adventist beliefs can make it difficult on the others involved. "For a lot of people, Saturday is their 'sports day,' and they look to Friday night sports as a staple," said Paulson, a longtime coach at Adventist academies and colleges. "Thank goodness we don't play football because we'd never find a place to play."

Some teams have not had scheduling conflicts because they have not done well enough to reach that point. Most schools seem to be doing well in terms of scheduling games at the local level, but have seen scheduling problems intensify at higher levels of competition.

For Gary Eggers, athletic director at Loma Linda Academy in southern California, competing in regional or state championships hasn't come up yet because the school has not made it that far. But the school has been told it would have a problem with Sabbath games if it got into the playoffs.

"It gets complicated for the (athletic association) if they can't schedule Saturday or Friday night games," Eggers says. He's grateful that the section of that division that Loma Linda played in has been very accommodating.

## Church Policy Questioned

The General Conference released statements against interscholastic competition in the 1960s and again in the 1980s. General Conference policy adopted in 1989 states the Seventh-day Adventist Church's position on interscholastic league play. The North American Division has adopted the same policy.

The policy gives rationale for the position, including the cost and time of competing and the "inherent hazards" of competitive rivalry, which have the "potential to be exaggerated in interorganizational events."

The policy concludes that occasional "friendship

games" are acceptable, that Christians should function with "high motives" in their quest for athletic excellence, and that God has given every person talents that should be "developed to the best of their ability." The conclusion also refers to Colossians 3:23, which states, "Whatever you are doing, put your whole heart into it, as if you were doing it for the Lord and not for men, knowing there is a Master who will give you your heritage as a reward for your service."

Some people are calling for church leaders to update education policy on this issue, giving schools more clarity, considering that the policy has been broadly interpreted. Some principals and athletic directors say the policy provides flexibility to academies on the question of interscholastic league play. "Does this policy absolutely forbid it?" asks Gatchet. "It says the Church is opposed to it, but it doesn't say that it's forbidden."

However, others disagree. Molstead, the former Oregon superintendent, says the foggy nature of the Church's stance must be addressed. The Church allows other kinds of competition to take place, which is inconsistent. "Is there an equitable standard that athletics are held to, the same as other competition, whether scholastic or other activities? If they see competition to be competition, whether its academic or music or athletics, we should be consistent," Molstead says.

Eggers agrees. There is competition in Pathfinders, literature evangelism, and music, he says. "You can't say it's evil in one place and not in another."

The policy hasn't stopped Adventist academies and colleges from competing in interschool games at various levels. According to a June 1996 study by Brian Sather, who did doctoral work on Adventist sports at Brigham Young University, more than half of all Adventist academies and colleges in the United States competed interscholastically at that time, and several more had plans to compete interscholastically in the future. The schools not participating cited finances, local conference regulation, General Conference statements, and constituents' beliefs as their reasoning, Sather wrote.

Nonetheless, the legislative committee of the General Conference voted against backing the Portland case, in part because of the Church's historical stance against competition, says Tyner. The other reason cited for not supporting the case was the high chance the students would not win, he adds.

Regardless of church policy and how the General

Conference and North American Division reacted to the Portland case, schools have been treating the topic of interscholastic sports differently across the United States. The Portland students brought the issue before the courts, but dozens of others have stepped away from a fight for various reasons.

The attitude of each school depends on many factors: the location and the beliefs of church constituents in the immediate area regarding sports events; the size and success of the athletic program; and the personal beliefs of the coaches. Schools have taken drastically different philosophical approaches on the matter, but all have decided against taking legal action even though they have been victims of religious discrimination, most often when teams advance to regional and state tournaments, where the lineups are tighter and the stakes are higher than at the local level.

The wide-ranging interpretation of the Church's position on sports competition has affected how some schools address the matter. Pursuing full-fledged rights to compete in tournaments is challenging when the church policy is unclear and carried out differently at every school, some officials say.

Although the Portland case may open doors for Adventist students around the United States to compete in interscholastic events—including music, academic, and sports contests—its impact on Seventh-day Adventist schools remains to be seen. Although more than half of Adventist schools in the United States are taking part in interscholastic sports, some church members still condemn the practice, citing General Conference policy and the writings of Ellen G. White.

Now the question remains: Will the scheduling of interscholastic sports become the next religious liberty issue for Adventists? If the Portland case is any indication, the Church may stay divided.

"From a strictly legal sense, is it a religious liberty issue? If you want to be a diehard, it could be considered a religious liberty issue," Gatchet says. "But how many different allowances does this society have to make?"

On the other hand, Gatchet adds, "You can see where the (Portland students) are coming from. A student's choice to honor the Sabbath is being impinged upon."

For another Portland basketball player, junior Tony Nakashima, the issue is even more personal. "I have a relationship with my God, and I want to follow his commandments."

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Heather Osborne is the education reporter for the Napa Valley Register.

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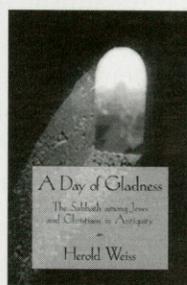
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### A Day of Gladness

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## Evil and Our Assumptions About God

Richard Rice raises excellent points in “The Great Controversy and the Problem of Evil” (winter 2004). If we were examining this issue from a truly critical perspective, then I believe we would find a powerful indictment against the veracity of this story. I am disturbed that the central, defining event in the history of the universe (original sin) is so poorly understood or revealed.

Whether explained by Augustine, Irenaeus, or Ellen White, the presence of evil in a universe governed by an all-good God is simply baffling. This “mystery of iniquity” purports a spontaneous mutation of all that is perfect from no apparent cause, a rebellion that spread to perfect beings with advanced intellects and is perpetuated through warfare on a lonely outpost within a vast universe where freewill creatures continue to serve as laboratory experiments for the onlooking creation.

The mystery of sin is terribly thorny to the basis of monotheism. Unlike eastern thought, which stresses universal balance, Christians are faced with knitting together a credible explanation as to how a clear duality of these forces exists in a universe spawned from a perfect God. Perhaps we

might want to rethink our assumptions about God rather than piece a story together from shards of traditional Christian thinking that don't have a clear basis in Scripture.

*Scott Davis  
San Diego, Calif.*

## Sabbath School as Continuing Education

With one of the largest educational systems in Protestantism, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is most lax in continuing its educational process through the Sabbath School after its members leave the system.

Even with all the recent “increase in knowledge” regarding the Bible, I would suppose that a majority of Adventists doesn't know that:

1. Moses did not write the “books of Moses.” In all probability, they were products of four authors and editors.
2. The Gospels are not eyewitness accounts and were not written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Rather, they are treatises written on a theme.
3. Paul wrote only a portion of the books attributed to him.
4. That schools of theology seemed to develop around the great early church leaders and continued their thought—thus the

Gospel of John and Paul's pseudo-letters.

5. Inspiration does not mean God said, “take this down,” as in verbal inspiration, nor does it mean “here's what happened—put it into your own words,” as in thought inspiration. The production of the Bible was a complex work that took centuries.

The Adventist Church seems to be a proponent of the idea that anyone, anywhere can pick up a Bible and understand what is written—that understanding literature, culture, and history have little, or no, impact on the Bible's message. How unfortunate! What a gold mine it is missing!

*Jim Chilson  
Washington, D.C.*

Numbers have never impressed me when it comes to God's work on this insane planet (“Adventism by the Numbers,” fall 2003). I firmly believe that had every newly baptized member kept studying the Bible, challenged by the pastor of his/her church to do some “homework” on his/her own, the numbers would have been different today.

Nowadays, and for many years in the past, new members have been, and still are, left alone. Swim or drown, who cares?

But the Lord does care. How

can we expect neophytes to know God's and their Savior's love for them beyond filling in the gaps in prechewed Bible lessons? Experience has taught me that personal Bible studies enrich the inner man by far more efficaciously.

*Boris Pache  
Lacombe, Canada*

## Toward a New Paradigm of Adventist Mission

The articles by Børge Schantz, and others (winter 2004), on the relationship between Adventist mission and ADRA illustrated very well how thorny a problem the relationship is between the evangelistic and the social-economic dimension of mission. It always has been, throughout the history of mission.

One powerful attempt to solve this enigma is to distinguish between two different mandates: the one spiritual, the other socio-economic/developmental. In the United States, it was Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) who saw it that way. To him, God's work of redemption clearly has two facets: conversion and sanctification of individuals and, the other, God's grand design in creation, history, and society. To Edwards, these two mandates were inseparable.

Gradually, however, a shift developed toward the primacy of the evangelistic mandate. This shift occurred as a corollary to the development of premillennialism in the second half of the nineteenth century, of which Seventh-day Adventists were a powerful part. Between 1900 and 1930, when Adventist mission fully developed, all progressive socioeconomic con-

cerns became suspect, and disappeared dramatically. It was a protest against the this-worldliness of the Social Gospel. Much of that spiritual heritage still prevails in Adventism today.

The problem of this two-mandate approach is that mission becomes perceived as consisting of two separate components, each of which develops a life of its own. The (recent) articles made that very clear. Their plea for a separate theology of development—as necessary as it is!—only underscores that view. But that separation implies that it is possible to have evangelism without a social or developmental dimension, and a work of relief and development without an evangelistic component. And that cannot be.

Moreover, by sticking to the primacy of evangelism—our Adventist heritage—one implies that one dimension is essential, whereas the other is merely optional. However, there is no such dichotomy in Scripture between the Word spoken and the Word made visible in actions of social justice or development; between the Love of God expressed in the gospel, and love in action.

The articles made something else very clear: Adventists stand in need of a new paradigm of mission. Our current paradigm, biblical as it is, is too one-sided and cannot supply us with the road map needed to become effective to two-thirds of the world's population—that is some 4.5 billion people—that now either live in an environment hostile to mission, or have become so indifferent to the promises of the gospel that they cannot respond to its messengers.

Adventist mission currently is—and has been over the years—rooted in an ecclesiocentric approach. The Church, its growth, and expansion

around the world, is central to the very nature and goal of mission. The Church is at the beginning and end of mission. Its purpose, according to the General Conference Working Policy, "is to teach all nations the everlasting Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the commandments of God" (Article II: Purpose).

In that ecclesiocentric approach, evangelism is not just primary; it is the defining factor of all missionary activities. From a biblical point of view, however, it is clear that the ecclesiocentric approach to mission is too one-sided, too narrow, and starts from the wrong premise.

Mission does not start with the church, nor does it end there! The church does not even have a mission; it is itself the fruit of a divine mission that has its origin in the sending activities of the triune God. The church's mission is nothing else than to participate in that divine mission, the mission initiated by God, made possible by God, paid for by the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the very embodiment of that *Missio Dei*, that Mission of God, that he defined as the restoration, the bringing about, of the Kingdom of God.

From all the Scriptures it is clear what that means: people's hearts are turned to God; the blind can see and the lame can run; the poor can make a living and peace prevails in the land; the deaf can hear and the mute can sing praises. Prosperity, peace, and justice rule. These are all integral—and integrated—parts of the Great Commission.

There are no dichotomies here; no distinctions between two or more mandates; no conflicts between evangelism and development. They are

all part of the same mission of God. All activities Christ himself was involved in are "sacred" activities, aimed at the very goal and purpose of restoring, bringing about, the Kingdom of God, or the very signs of it: his preaching, his healing, his call for social justice, his liberation and elevation of the poor and the powerless; his criticism of the government of King Herod, whom Jesus called "that fox"; his work for peace.

In the ecclesiocentric view of mission, these latter activities are optional; good, but optional; or, at best the fruit of conversion. In the *Missio Dei* concept of mission, all these activities derive directly from God.

That's what ADRA is doing! There may remain for many some things hard to accept, such as ADRA employing non-Christians to accomplish its goals. But has not God himself always employed heathen warriors and kings and slaves to bring about his rule! It's amazing how enlightening and liberating a new way of looking at things may be.

It should be stated very clearly, however, that the notion of the *Missio Dei* as the new paradigm of Adventist mission comes with new demands as well. One is that the different aspects and dimensions of God's mission are all integrated. And that demands that all activities of development or actions for peace and social justice should never be goals by and in themselves.

Secondly, the integration of preaching the Word and development demands that both listen to each other, encourage each other, support each other, and if necessary, critique each other. That is a great challenge to the way Adventists will manage and organize their mission activities.

Will it happen? If leadership per-

ceives this paradigm to be biblical and inevitable for an effective work of mission in our time, it will lead out in whatever changes may be necessary.

Will it be easy? No. Many are so rooted and vested(!) in the traditional ecclesiocentric approach to mission, that it will take a miracle to change it to the more Christocentric approach of the *Missio Dei*.

But in this church, miracles still do happen.

*Gottfried Oosterwal  
Berrien Springs, Mich.*

## Balancing Compassion and Conversion at ADRA

I believe ADRA would welcome any and all constructive discussion about the social aspects of Christian ministry that Børge Schantz raises in his recent article (winter 2004).

Having worked for ADRA and its predecessors since 1968, I have never seen ADRA as an organization base upon government donor policy its belief that its humanitarian assistance should be delivered without proselytic strings attached. To the contrary, it has always taken its raison d'être from an understanding of Scripture that differs from that espoused in Schantz's article.

The poor and disenfranchised need to see Jesus, and they do daily through selfless acts of mercy, love, and care delivered by our members and organization through entities such as ADRA.

The balance between compassion and conversion is a delicate one at best, but to suggest that compassion is delivered only as a means to the end of conversion is, in my view,

a distortion of the principle of agape love and my Lord's incarnational life upon earth, where he helped us to see the God of love in action.

*David Syme  
Regional Vice President  
ADRA South Pacific*

I was interested to read Børge Schantz's article on ADRA and the two responses by Reinder Bruinsma and Charles C. Sandefur, the current ADRA president.

What concerns me is that neither response made any attempt to address specifically the eight important questions Schantz raised. Certainly no rebuttal was made to the most basic charge that ADRA has essentially divorced the humanitarian mission of our church from its evangelistic mission.

If ADRA is perplexed as to why SDAs aren't giving more freely to their organization, it might look to this detail and realize that our church members are increasingly aware of what's going on. Such members, or many of them, may be quite principled in their reluctance to fund a willingly hamstrung organization when it claims to be operating as part of the Church.

What if Jonah had left off the Great Commission given to him, and decided to work merely to feed the people of Nineveh, to take care only of their physical needs? Would we not applaud and support this work in the hands of others, but not for Jonah who would have left aside the ministry specifically given to him in order to do purely humanitarian work?

That is what I see happening with ADRA.

*Janine Goffar  
Loma Linda, Calif.*

Association of Adventist Forums

# The Next Adventism

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# HOW TO START AN AAF CHAPTER

Members of the Association of Adventist Forums are invited to form local chapters by following three steps:

1. Convene at least five AAF members and plan some activities. These may be as simple as meeting now and then in homes to discuss a thought-provoking video, article, or book, and they may be as complex as organizing major conferences.
2. Forward to the *Spectrum* office in Roseville, California, the chapter's constitution. Model constitutions for local chapters are available upon request.
3. Forward to the *Spectrum* office in Roseville, California, contact information for the chapter's leaders that can be listed in the association's journal and posted on its Web site.

The purpose of local chapters, each of which is financially and administratively independent, is the same as the AAF and *Spectrum*: "To encourage Seventh-day Adventist participation in the discussion of contemporary issues from a Christian viewpoint." AAF officers are able and willing to assist local chapters.

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Chapters wishing to be acknowledged in this list, please contact the Association of Adventist Forums: (916) 774-1080

# AAF ... Wither or Whither?

**A**s I mentioned in my first editorial (summer 2001), there were two conditions under which I accepted the vice presidency of the Association of Adventist Forums: reinstatement of regular national meetings, and revision of its out-of-date constitution and bylaws.

Last summer's first international AAF conference, in Hope, British Columbia, renewed my hope for national meetings. I am overjoyed that the next national conference is already scheduled for this fall in Ohio on the 160th anniversary of the Great Disappointment (see enclosed registration form). These sessions provide important opportunities for enhancement of the precious sense of AAF community.

For almost four decades the AAF Constitution and Bylaws were structured on a framework of geographic representation similar to the union conferences of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's North American Division. However, to put it bluntly, this has not been functionally operational for at least a decade.

Following the move of AAF headquarters to California in 1998, the board decided to incorporate the association. The new articles of incorporation supplanted the 1985 constitution and facilitated revision of the bylaws. I am very pleased to report that the board unanimously approved new bylaws on March 18, 2004.

The revision process began with a proposal for building on successfully functioning AAF chapters, but this concept was abandoned after an intensive weekend meeting with nonprofit organization development experts. The advisors convincingly suggested that in order for AAF to become financially stable and positioned to offer additional services and programs for the most educated members of our church, two significant changes were needed: (1) creation of a self-perpetuating board of directors made up of members willing to give generously of their "time, talent, and treasure," and (2) hiring of an executive director to facilitate carrying out AAF's mission.

The new bylaws establish a board of directors consisting of up to twelve members, with seven elected

officers: chairperson, vice chairperson, director of finances, director of board development, director of media, director of meetings and conferences, and director of membership and chapters. Each of these officers chairs a standing committee. Individual board members also commit to participating in four meetings per year, sponsoring the association by raising money and/or making financial gifts, serving as ambassadors for the organization, and contributing personal expertise.

The search has begun for a whole new cadre of committed volunteers to envision AAF more fully and carry out its noble purposes. Once the new board is in place, an executive director will be recruited.

The Church (particularly in North America and Europe) continues to face great challenges dealing with and providing for its most highly educated members. The AAF is particularly designed to meet the needs of this group of church members by providing a forum (written, spoken, and virtual) for the discussion of challenging issues in such areas as theology, ethics, biology, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, culture, and morals.

Thank you for your enthusiastic support of the new soon-to-be-appointed board of directors and its soon-to-be-elected officers. If you would like to be involved personally on the new board or have a suggestion for a nomination, please contact the *Spectrum* office either by phone ([916] 774-1080) or by e-mail <editor@spectrummagazine.org>.

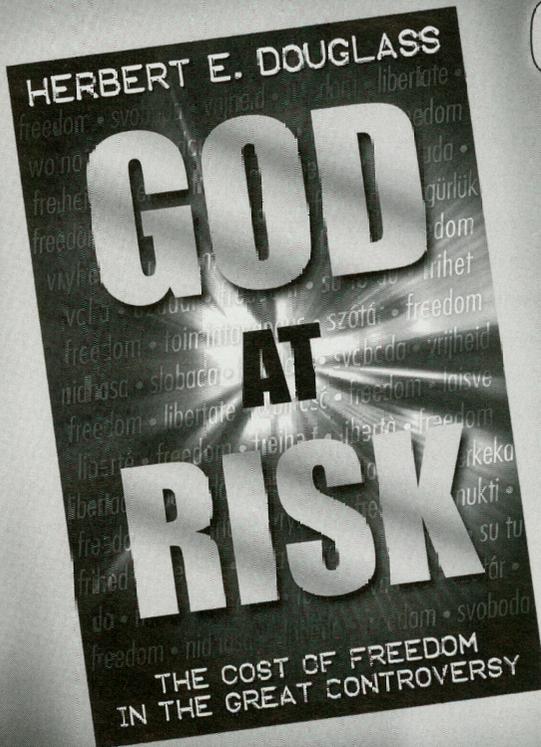
Together, we can assure an AAF "whither" rather than "wither."

Gordon M. Rick

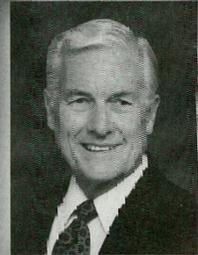
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For more information, contact:  
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# THE CHAPTER I WOULD WRITE

*By Pat Cason*

In the history of uneasy relations  
between heaven and earth,  
lightning  
is the chapter I'd write.

What the eye thinks  
is that lightning flashes down  
from the clouds of a storm  
like a serpent striking,  
or an argument with only one side.

But the eye, in its nakedness,  
might be forgiven this lack of belief  
in what the camera's split-second lens understands clearly:  
that lightning also strikes back from the ground.

Matching the charge  
in clouds overhead, ions align on the earth,  
then ascend a tower or tree,  
casting up a vertical river of current—  
lightning fighting itself.

Before photographers saw this,  
Michelangelo's firmament painted this history  
of friction between earth and sky.  
Above the prayers of the Sistine Chapel,  
his fresco records the eternal reaching  
of divine and human, toward one another.  
Their trajectories meet, but the space  
between their fingers' extension  
is an aching distance that neither can span,  
a visible, brittle fissure  
in something not easily broken.

It is the gesture of lightning,  
and the gesture of prayer.

