

# Jesus Christ, Salvation, and the New Diversity

*By John Webster*

If renewing the heart of Adventism is our quest, then it is quite appropriate that we start by asking what this heart is.

I venture that Adventism, at heart, is about the Advent or Coming of God (that is, the whole series of events—past, present, and future—that constitute God's own self-disclosure as "God with us"). If this is correct, then it should be clear that the event of Jesus Christ ("Emmanuel," a specific event that embodies the whole) must be at the very heart of Adventism if it is to be true to itself. The Advent ("God with us") is itself the gospel.

At its best, Adventism is nothing else than a movement of advent hope that seeks to share this good news with the world. It exists then, not for its own sake, but simply as a witness to the message of the gospel

both proclaimed by, and accomplished in, Jesus Christ.

But what exactly is this message? And who authoritatively decides what it is, and what it means? This is the problem posed by the New Diversity, which we seek here to both celebrate and explore. The plethora of new voices and notions within Christendom itself makes it hard to sort out what constitutes proper belief in and about Christ, let alone make sense of claims to absolute truth.

Furthermore, many find it increasingly difficult, given post-modern sensibilities, to continue to make triumphalist claims about Christianity in a world so thor-

oughly pluralistic in politics, culture, and religion.

Faced with these problems, I wish to offer a rather modest suggestion that might help us clarify some issues. Here's my thesis: I think that our witness has become blurred, because our understanding of the gospel has become overburdened with excess baggage. We need to *disentangle* the jumbled threads that have become knotted together in our religious discourse if we want to find a way forward with regard to the problems raised by diversity.

When we face the problem of internal diversity, two common strategies present themselves. On the one hand,

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we may be tempted to directly or indirectly induce or force others to our point of view. We all know this beast when we see it. The other strategy is to try to determine what the core is and what is merely peripheral and then call for unity on the core, and allow diversity at the periphery.

Of course, the problem here is getting agreement over what the core is and what is not! To paraphrase the well-known saying: "One person's core is another's periphery." Particularly in the context of the New Diversity, the real issue is who has the power to call the shots—the old Northern Church with its money, or the new Southern Church with its numbers?

**W**hat I want to suggest is that there is an alternative that has the decided advantage of being seen at work in the Bible itself. In fact, I believe it is a key element of Paul's revolutionary understanding of the Christ-event, and we can also see it at work as Jews encounter Gentiles in Luke's account of the early church in Acts (see Acts 10, 11, 15). This is not a distinction between core and periphery, which is an attempt to weight various beliefs and practices with respect to each other, but rather a distinction between a *gift* and a resulting state of *giftedness*.

A genuine gift comes to one from another unconditionally and often unexpectedly; it is a simple act of unilateral favor. Giftedness is the state that results from having been gifted; the putting of the gift to good use. In the New Testament, it is the Advent itself that is regarded as a gracious gift to the whole world, a gift that can only be acknowledged and shared (the good news); and

everything else is to be regarded as an attempt at articulation and application of the implications of this gift to each and every aspect of life by those thus gifted.

New Testament scholar J. Christiaan Beker makes the same thrust in his distinction between coherence and contingency in Paul's writings: "[B]y coherence, I mean the abiding normative dimension of the text; by contingency, its historical and situational dimension that addresses the particular historical time of the text."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps we could call this approach a biblical hermeneutic of specific relativity (with obvious apologies

to Albert Einstein). In Einstein's special theory of relativity, all motion is shown to be relative to a single constant—the speed of light. Given that the laws of physics are the same everywhere, this means that our definitions of physical phenomena (for example, momentum and energy) and quantities (for instance, length and time) must change from one observer to another.

What results is not an "anything goes" kind of relativism, but rather an essential distinction between what is constant, and everything else that is relative to that constant and thus in intrarelational flux.

It seems to me that Paul does something very similar in the New Testament. He makes a fundamental distinction between the gospel (the advent: the event of the revelation of God's righteousness, that is, God's actual self-disclosure in human history as "God with us") and everything else—politics, culture, morality, religion, and so forth (which is, at best, our response to the gospel).

Thus, in one place Paul can say, "should anyone, even I myself or an angel from heaven, preach a gospel other than the gospel I preached to you, let him be banned!" Not that there is, in fact, "another gospel," there are only some who unsettle your minds by trying to distort the gospel of Christ. For Paul assures us that "the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.... I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1:8, 7, 11–12). Here is Paul's constant.

Now, compare what he says in another place (in



answer to questions concerning sex, marriage, and divorce): "I say this by way of concession, not command. I should like everyone to be as I myself am; but each person has the gift God has granted him, one this gift and another that....I say this as my own word, not as the Lord's....About the unmarried, I have no instruction from the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is fit to be trusted" (1 Cor. 7: 6-7, 12, 25).

These are Paul's variables. They are not unimportant—but they are not fixed (if they were, we should all be celibate!). Moral injunction (such as this), religious practice (for example, circumcision), legal prohibition (for instance, eating food offered to idols), and practical advice (like the deportment and role of women in the church) are always to be kept in relation to the gospel, but they will inevitably change with time and place.

Thus, Paul can say in Romans 14: "Accept anyone who is weak in faith without debate about his misgivings....Who are you to pass judgment on someone else's servant? Whether he stands or falls is his own Master's business....Everyone must act on his own convictions....Let us therefore cease judging one another" (verses 1, 4, and 3).

Here we have the constant (the gospel itself) and the variables (its application to life); gift ("God with us") and giftedness (witness to the advent and its implica-

tions for all aspects of our lives); coherence (the Advent of God), and contingency (the human witness to the coming of God).

I believe that the only way to state this precisely is that Paul believes that the gospel relativizes (orders, relates, subordinates) everything else, morality and religion included.

Now the problem we have is that awareness of this biblical ordering has all too frequently faded away. The distinction has been lost. Everything has been flattened onto the same level. One can understand how it happens. We live integrated lives. We are not in the habit of making distinctions between the actual acts of God in history and our witness or language about them, or about our application of this good news (which we receive as a gift) to the spiritual, ethical, religious, and cultural dimensions of our lives. All these dimensions have become enmeshed.

Words such as *gospel* or *truth*, or phrases such as *the truth as it is in Jesus* have become merely placeholders for everything we believe and practice. In actuality, "accepting the gospel" has come to stand for a package deal that includes everything from dress standards to eschatology. Jumbled together are significant theological beliefs, profound spiritual insights, important moral convictions, meaningful religious practices, and inherited cultural norms.

If we wish to cope with the challenges of growing diversity within Christendom in general, and Adventism in particular, I suggest we will need to learn to disentangle this logjam.

What follows will have to remain an all-too-cryptic hint at what a renewed Adventism that followed this path might look like. I believe that Adventist theology could make a crucial contribution to the general discussion of the problem of diversity and religious pluralism if it would only rediscover the significance of its own central theme—the Advent of God. This event itself is the Christian gospel; all else is only interpretation, articulation, and correlation—in short, religion. This insight calls for four distinct but related paradigm shifts.

1. The *gospel* is not just another name for Christian doctrine, worldview, and moral teachings. It is news (God

with us). It is not something we could have told ourselves; for it is not the product of philosophical inquiry, the result of a journey toward enlightenment, or a fact unearthed by discovery. It is not another name for a structural feature of the world.

It is a purported contingent happening, or it is nothing. The news of this event can be doubted; it can be disbelieved; but it can never properly be claimed as a profound contribution of any wisdom tradition, least of all Christianity. It comes strictly as *prevenient grace* (unmerited favor).

2. Religion is not just a synonym for the gospel. It is what we do with our finitude. It is a response to perceptions that there is something or someone greater than ourselves. In light of the Advent of God, religion is simultaneously unmasked, ordained, and enlisted in the service of God's cause in the world. Although there can be no absolutely "True" human religion, religion can discover, interpret, and contribute to our understanding of truth. And God can (and clearly has) worked through some, all, or no religion to further the cause of God's love in the world.

3. Scripture is not itself the revelation of God (that is, the Advent). It is a witness to that revelation, which is the actual coming of God into human time, space, and consciousness in the single (yet complex) sequence of events we call the Advent of God. Its authority as our

into line with the direction marked out by the recorded traces of the coming of God.

Adventism is a movement within and for the wider Christian world. The Advent movement sees its task in catalyzing a remnant of resistance to Babylon (the triumphalistic amalgam of a self-confident Christendom that lays claim to theological and ethical certainty, with the temporal power of a militant, globalized, Western world).

What these paradigm shifts mean, when taken together, is a move toward a more open, more humble Adventist Christianity that gives up an arrogant vision of Christian triumphalism (that is, the "finality of Christ," which equates with a claim to its own religious superiority) for the "singularity of Christ" (that is, the radical and startling news of God's adoption of humanity to share in God's very mode of Being, through the incarnation and resurrection of Christ). It thus means learning to read John 14:6d more carefully than is typically the case.

"No one comes to the Father but by me" in its immediate context is *not* a claim that no one else has a knowledge of God, nor is it stating that salvation is impossible apart from the name of Jesus. What it says is simply that there is no other way to participation in the Divine

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"only rule of faith and practice" lies not in its mode of production but in its irreplaceable uniqueness as the collation of primary witnesses to the developing consciousness of God's presence with us.

It is not to be thought of as a fixed, infallible deposit of absolute truths, all sufficient (if accepted and practiced) for salvation and right living. Rather it should be viewed, in keeping with its own self-understanding, as providing "treasure in earthen vessels."

4. The Mission of the Church is not so much to take a fixed body of "truth" to the world for the purpose of saving lost souls, as it is simply to witness to the gospel. This is nothing more or less than sharing the good news of the Advent of the God of Peace—God's self-disclosure as God with us. God has already saved the world.

When invited, we will gladly share what we have learned (both from our successes and our failures) in attempting to bring all aspects of our lives and world

nature (immortality) but by means of God's own adoption of humanity onto Godself in the incarnation, and the transformation of mortality to immortality in the resurrection.

If it is ontology (a matter of being) we are talking about (and it is) there simply could be no other way. For there is no way from us to God, but only from God to us.

## Notes and References

1. *The New Testament: A Thematic Introduction* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress) 1994.

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