

And Then What: The Views of Three Adventist Students in Graduate School

Eric Guttschuss, Lauralea Banks, and Kristel Tonstad

No One Calls for Justice

By Eric Guttschuss



I am told that in a few short months I will be a lawyer. As such, I take pause to consider what

this somewhat daunting reality means for a professed follower of Christ in the global community of faith that we call Adventism. In theory, the answer should be clear. I need only read Isaiah and the Prophets to encounter a wealth of prose familiar to the ears of any law student: "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

Yet when it comes to issues of social justice, my own community of faith remains largely silent. Are we able to say that we seek justice for the destitute? How are we an encouragement to victims of human rights abuses? Do we defend the cause of the child sold into prostitution? Are we pleading the case of the widow seeking asylum? Oppression and injustice still undeniably encompass our world today. All too often, though, it would seem that the prophet

Isaiah is right: "No one calls for justice."

There are legitimate reasons why not to call for justice. Our well-founded belief in the separa-

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tion of church and state leads us to be wary of mixing religion and politics. As a result, we respond to suffering by focusing our efforts instead on caring for the sick or providing aid to the poor. The words of Christ, however, must

still give us pause: "You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former."

History also tells us that confronting injustice can often only be done at great personal cost. The life expectancy of the prophets, to be sure, was abysmal at best. Isaiah ended up stuffed inside a hollow log and brutally "sawn asunder." But as followers of Christ, we profess that Christ died for humanity to free us from sin and death so that we might have life everlasting. If in fact we have this assurance, then we need no longer fear death or live lives of risk aversion.

Quite simply, Christ's death has now freed us to live with what Martin Luther King, Jr. termed "dangerous unselfishness." As he poignantly observed, the question in the face of oppression and injustice cannot be: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" Rather, the gospel of Christ necessarily compels me to ask: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

I cannot say whether as a lawyer I will take this path of dangerous unselfishness, or whether as Christ forewarned "life's worries, riches and pleasures" will lead me to rather choose silence in the face of injustice. I can only throw myself on the mercy of a loving God and pray that I choose the former.

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Adventist Josephs

By *Lauralea Banks*



There is a moment in every Adventist's life where they have to decide how to interact with the world. To me, the fact that there are so many burgeoning Adventist metropolises that surround various Adventist institutions indicates that a good number of Adventists choose to isolate themselves from the world.

At the other extreme, an increasing number of people aren't just going into the world, they are leaving Adventism altogether in favor of the world. And of course there are many people between.

As I'm beginning my graduate study at an Ivy League institution, I face the tension of deciding where in the spectrum of Adventists I want to fall. And I'm finding a whole new level of spirituality that is breaking down all definitions and stereotypes I ever had.

I am discovering that I can find my place in the world the easy way or the hard way. The easy way is defined by the extremes, where

everything is either black or white. Either you exist in your little Adventist ghetto, "disciplining" yourself by avoiding contact with "those sinners," or you go out and throw discipline out the window along with your religious heritage.

Both of these options, in my experience, are connected by one fatal spiritual flaw: blind acceptance of norms in the environment. Blind acceptance of our environment is nice—it's comfortable. We don't need to contradict people we encounter; answers are defined for us. We feel warm and fuzzy and think we're changing the world somehow with our well-defined answers to life. In reality, both options lack discipline—that's why this is the easy way.

We tend to hate those places that make us feel uncomfortable—where we must question our definitions or evaluate a given situation

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to decide how a principle might fluctuate to accommodate certain anomalies. Those are the places where we discipline ourselves by questioning our assumptions, falling down a time or two, and

finally figuring out what the underlying issue really is. Here we're extended beyond ourselves and we are frightened because we might end up looking like a fool because we don't have all the answers worked out.

I want to argue that to be truly a spiritual person you have to exist in an ambiguous place, to find your place in the world the hard way. Look at the Bible's empirical data: God's greatest servants weren't living in any Adventist ghetto. In fact, most of them (Joseph, Esther, Moses, and so forth) only achieved their greatness by moving outside their ghettos.

Isn't that one of the major points of Christ's ministry, making the point that the status quo is flexible and malleable while at the same time indispensable? But notice that with each of the great Bible characters, not one of them went out and bought into the system of the world. They went out and struggled to understand the deeper principles that allowed them to be godly people, but not "holier-than-thou" in attitude or deed.

The major issue for these people wasn't the Twenty-Eight Fundamental Beliefs; it was their relationship with God. And that relationship with God meant questioning all of their assumptions, definitions, and norms.

So where are the Adventist Josephs? Clearly people like Ben Carson immediately come into mind. But if you think about it, there really are too few of them. And that frightens me. It frightens me because it means we've stopped growing. We've stopped struggling with God to understand the gray areas of his principles and the real meaning behind ideas such as this one in 1 Corinthians 9:27: "disci-

plin[ing] my body and mak[ing] it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."

For some people, discipline may mean not judging other people's weaknesses. For others, it may be struggling with how malleable they will be when they must network with bigwig drunks—finding the right balance to make them feel comfortable without buying into their habits.

We're too content to sit in our mental armchairs and pretend we're doing what God has led us to do, but we feel no tension—no discomfort or inquisitiveness—about the principles we've built our lives around. We've stopped moving, and once we stop moving or testing the boundaries, God calls us lukewarm and spits us out.

Does lack of Adventist Josephs relate in any way to loss of members in the Church? I think the answer is a resounding Yes! Because if God is spitting us out, why would people embrace what is clearly our lack of interest in getting to know them and the problems they have—to struggle with them as we discipline ourselves? Doing such a thing would mean we have to get out of our mental armchairs.

Here's another thing about our mental armchairs: They're constructed of little definitions that fit neatly into a stereotype box. But the truth, as always, never fits inside those boxes. There is only one box that everything does fit into, and that is the one labeled, "I don't have the answers." The rest of the world has figured out we don't have the answer, and until we admit it we're not going to reach anybody.

It is through not having the

answer that God can truly turn us into his likeness. And it is by not having the answer that we can truly see people for who they are and what they need, because suddenly we see ourselves as equally fallible. There's no more black and white, just changing shades of gray so that God can mold each of us into a life that adds up to more than the sum of its faulty parts.

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A Place to Call Home

By Kristel Tonstad



Graduate school bustles with newness, challenge, and inspiration every day and in virtually every way. I find these qualities in my classes, where we discuss everything from racial disparities in poverty in the

United States to the future of the human rights movement.

I find them in seminars and forums, where political leaders talk about the prosecution of war criminals in Serbia and efforts to curb nuclear power internationally. Most of all, I find these qualities in the people I meet—classmates who have lived on all continents, speak an average of eight languages apiece—including dolphinese—and have work experiences that could fill a *Guinness Book of World Records*.

The discussions do not address far-removed theoretical concepts: We talk about headline news. The concerns are human and global: What is wrong with the world, and what should we do to change it? We examine our intentions and values. I am assured that my paradigm and beliefs will be questioned on a daily basis. The entire atmosphere of graduate school is charged with curiosity, questioning, relevance, and passion.

Seemingly worlds apart, I find my faith community. Hot topics on our agenda include the Twenty-Eighth Fundamental Belief and how Adventists should relate to the world “out there.” That, indeed, has become a central question for me over the past months: How does my faith community relate to the “outside world,” where I currently find myself? What, if anything, does one world have to do with the other?

On one hand, I find myself thinking that the Church has much to learn from the world. We lag behind in terms of openness, accountability, and active involvement against injustice in our world. The Church often frames the world as full of self-centered, unfriendly, materialistic people. But, so far, I

have found the exact opposite to be true. People care more about others than themselves.

Non-Christians in graduate school want to alleviate poverty, criticize unjust government policies, and are friendly to outsiders. Whereas churchgoers are often inclusive only around people with

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whom they attended academy, the warmth and welcome in graduate school is all-embracing.

On the other hand, however, in spite of my feelings that we have a long way to go in terms of what we should be thinking and doing as a church, I also find myself appreciating many aspects of my Adventist heritage. I value the sense of transcendence and higher purpose in my faith community. I am grateful for the values and views that shaped my upbringing. I am happy to know peo-

ple with whom I share a history and an outlook.

Most of all, I am glad to have a place to call home. That, I think, is the best image for my faith community: Home is the place where I know how things work and where I am known. Home is the place where there are strains and challenges, but I know I belong there. When my classmates talk about building contacts, I also think of my faith community as a network, which cares not about knowing the “right people,” but also about knowing the One.

So instead of saying that church should be more like the world, I find myself appreciating both spheres. I love the people, ideas, and growth I am encountering in graduate school. I also delight in the fellowship and shared commitments I find in the Adventist community.

Perhaps the Church lacks openness and willingness to challenge. Perhaps graduate school needs more transcendence and humility. But for now, I am quite happy to call my faith community home base, and every other place and experience an extension of that base.

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Continued from page 35...

3. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1967), 39.

4. C. Marvin Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 18.

5. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 21.

6. Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," in *New Testament Questions for Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM, 1969), 102. Käsemann's groundbreaking essay initially appeared under the title, "Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie," *ZTK* 57 (1960), 162-85.

7. Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1972), 77.

8. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle. The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 152.

9. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy. Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993), ix.

10. Bauckham (ibid., 204), noting the allusion to the Sinai theophany that accompanies and climaxes each of the cycles, writes: "[A]t each point John uses the allusion to Sinai to suggest that the End has been reached, though not yet exhaustively described."

11. R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T.

and T. Clark, 1920), 2:147.

12. See Loren L. Johns, "The Lamb in the Rhetorical Program of the Apocalypse of John," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 37 (1998), 2:762-84; idem., *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John* WUNT 2.167 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

13. I have tried to substantiate this point to some extent in my dissertation, which is titled, "Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Andrews, 2005).

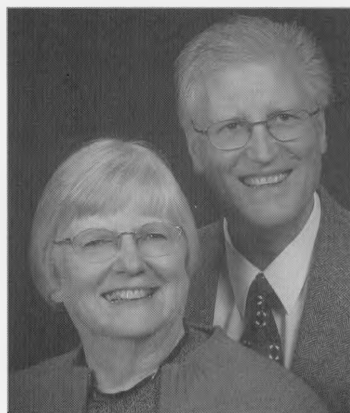
14. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 21.

15. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," in *Revelation As History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, trans. David Granskou (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 133.

16. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 51.

17. Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrors in Theological Context," *SJT* 55 (2002), 473; idem., *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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