



The Courageous Few: *Can Moral Vision*

Make a Comeback? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

I don't get it. Why would anyone banish the idea of "the remnant and its mission" to a place a stone's throw from Outer Mongolia?

Okay, I do get it. If anything could annoy an astute Adventist faster than the word *remnant*, it would have to be truly off-putting, like boiled okra, or the word *hierarchy*, another unappetizing dish.

R. Lynn Sauls, retired Adventist English and journalism professor, recently ruminated on which of Adventism's twenty-eight Fundamental Beliefs are more, and which are less, "essential." Writing in *Adventist Today*, and using the graphic aid of several concentric circles, he said that his innermost circle consists of one idea: "God is love."¹ Although these words do not appear in the official statement as the name of a Fundamental Belief, Sauls argues (persuasively) that God's love is the center of the biblical vision. So he makes it the basis for "ranking" the official beliefs in their order of importance.

Other ideas, such as "The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ," "Creation," and "The Law of God," fit into his "first ring" around the center circle, and have high importance. Some thirteen beliefs cluster in the second ring, indicating mid-level importance. The idea of the remnant and its mission resides in the next-to-outermost ring, where we find ourselves, I gather, in the theological hinterlands. His outermost ring, telling us what is least important, or least "essential," has just one occupant: "Christian Behavior."

Someone who is naïve might ask how God's law can have high importance and Christian behavior have low. But an insider would know that in the Adventist milieu, "behavior" suggests "standards," and "standards" refer, at least in progressive imagination, to trivialities. And it is true, certainly, that some parts of the statement on Christian behavior do evoke bad memories about majoring in minors. But the statement also expresses legitimate Christ-

ian aspiration. Having the "character" of Christ is no paltry goal, nor is caring "intelligently" for the human body. The tub holds the baby, it seems, as well as the bathwater.

Now back to the remnant. Here, too, is a locus of moral perspective, and here, too, discomfort is palpable. In Saul's construal—and everyone knows he's not alone in this—"The Remnant and Its Mission" belongs in the boondocks.

As for me, I don't think so. A long preoccupation with "acceptance" and "assurance"—I have in mind the grace-versus-legalism controversies—has diverted attention from the fact that grace is not only forgiveness, but also power. Grace is two gifts, and one of them is new life, new ability to resist the world and embody the values of Jesus.²

Adventism's signature passages about this metaphor pass on the simple idea that God calls us to be a faithful minority who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.³

I am uncomfortable with propositional clutter in the way-too-long Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. But I have come to believe that the idea the metaphor of the remnant conveys would help us say who we are in a simpler, yet still illuminating, manner. Thus a brief summary of Adventist conviction could be this: *Thanks to the grace and peace of Christ, and for the well-being of all humanity, we join together in keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.*

This might be plausible to someone as thoughtful and provocative as Sauls. But it might not be. His ranking of Adventist beliefs casts doubt upon any vision of Adventism that puts moral (or prophetic) witness at the heart of what the Church is about. When he invokes "The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ," he quotes the entire statement. It has first importance for him, after the fundamental point that God is love. But even though the Gospels say repeatedly that Jesus called his disciples to radical obedience, Sauls accepts uncritically the official statement's focus (a good thing) on forgiveness and inat-

tention (a bad thing) to discipleship.

Sauls does invoke the official statement on God's law, and that statement does hint at the idea that Christ's life is exemplary. But it nowhere acknowledges how the whole Bible story comes to its moral summit in the Sermon on the Mount and in the forgiveness prayer that Jesus uttered on the Cross.⁴ These defining moments, with their deep debt to Isaiah's Servant Songs, expose the false glamour of violence, and show how true sinlessness confronts and absorbs human evil *without passing it on*. Here you finally see, as Hebrews 1 declares, "the exact imprint of God's very being."

This moral summit, and the discipleship that follows from it, are what the Resurrection validates.⁵ But the word *discipleship* appears nowhere in the Church's official statement of beliefs, and this, it must be said, is a stunning oversight. Adventism's roots go back (as we now know) to the Radical Reformation, not just to state-aligned reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. And for Radical Reformers, Christ as final truth and discipleship as right response were both key ideas.

Another focal point for the Radical Reformers was the book of Revelation, with its vivid (or "apocalyptic") sense of the *difference* between loyalty to Christ and loyalty to what is popular or commonplace or handed down by imperial authority. These reformers knew better than Luther and the others that authentic Christian life is *distinctive*—it stands apart from ordinary.

This is where the ongoing relevance of "the remnant and its mission" comes in. It's true that to anyone who has recoiled from old-fashioned evangelism in our heritage recalls, in its use of this motif, the arrogance and self-importance that always threatens church integrity. And in this light the temptation to push the remnant motif toward Outer Mongolia is entirely understandable.

But what if, instead of pushing it away, we asked, How shall we reframe it? If we did, we'd have a chance, I think, of finding the new identity most thoughtful Adventists are now groping for.

We'd need, of course, to embed the motif inside the fundamental message—here I tip my hat to Sauls—that God is love. The first word must always be, as in the book of Revelation, the love—the grace and peace and freedom from sin—that we receive through Christ.⁶

We'd also need to disabuse the Church of claim-making. We'd offer, instead of prideful declarations, simple

reminders—that we are *called* to be the remnant, and that this call asks us, like any hearers of the gospel, to respond to divine goodness with discipleship. In large part, "the remnant and its mission" is an *ideal*: it's something you aspire to, not something that gives you bragging rights.

Then we'd need to show the relevance of the aspiration. Commonplace morality is too often unresponsive, or even callous, in the face of human need. It is too narrow in scope, and too easily disposed to bloodshed. The metaphor of the remnant takes us to "the faith of Jesus"—takes us, in other words, to the Jesus story. And this story expresses a faith—and a hope—that truly does transcend the commonplace. Against the un pitying confederacy of evil and indifference, it offers a path to healing and peace that is nothing short of revolutionary.

Why not renounce those timorous and conventional forms of faith that bolster self-esteem without asking us to embody the faith of Jesus? Why not resist invocations of grace that play down how it's the courageous few who make the most difference? And in order to keep the right focus, why not embrace (and rethink) the metaphor that made our pioneers into...pioneers, people who had the guts to *be* the courageous few?

The "remnant" is a metaphor that, in both Testaments, drives both hope and passion. Paying attention to it would help us see that moral urgency, and not just forgiveness, belongs to the heart of the gospel. That, in turn, would steel our nerves and hone our relevance, so that our collective witness could have the force of prophecy. ■

Notes and References

1. R. Lynn Sauls, "Ranking the 28 Fundamental Beliefs," *Adventist Today*, May–June 2008, 18–19.
2. Consider, for example, Romans 6:1–4 and 1 Corinthians 15: 9, 10.
3. Compare Revelation 12:17; 14:6–12; and 19:10.
4. See Matthew 5 in particular, with its call to nonviolent peacemaking; for the forgiveness prayer, see Luke 23:34, and compare the companion prayer of Stephen in Acts 7:60.
5. Romans 1:1–4, where the Resurrection establishes Jesus' status as the ultimate revelation of God.
6. See Revelation 1:1–6.

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