



Creation and Devolution | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

**"I saw Satan laughing with delight
the day the music died..."**

—Don McLean

Optimism? Pitch it in the dumpster. The Adventist church reflects the American—and now the contemporary American—environment, so it may be expected, I suppose, to decline into reckless quarreling. Certainly, disagreements about Genesis seem likely to worsen and to cause yet more injury to the body of Christ.

No doubt everyone who speaks up bears some of the blame. I am touched by the tawdry goings-on in the human heart, and so are you.

Still, even if optimism is a little screwy and our defective hearts a grievous burden, we may still *hope* for something better. It's not inevitable that we pick up the worst features of the culture around us.

But hope for what? Exactly what would we have to overcome in order to become a community of constructive conversation? What would it take to exchange the shouting and sneering for searching and praying—together? This latter, after all, is far more likely to heal our hearts and expand our minds.

Consider first the problems of arrogance and unfriendliness. Which of these has the firmer grip on Adventist life is sometimes hard to tell. But, we Adventists just do find it difficult to allow that God's thoughts are higher than ours, and equally difficult to show empathy and kindness toward those we disagree with.

Consider also fear and ignorance. Again, which of these explains more about our problems is hard to tell. But it's certain that many church-employed Adventist scientists, along with more than a few pastors and theolo-

gians, are afraid to say what they think about creation and science. At the same time, some Adventists, at least, have made anti-intellectualism a near-article of faith.

These traits guarantee devolution—of conversation, certainly, but also of the church itself. When they infect our disagreements about Genesis, they exacerbate decline. No organization suffused with arrogance and unfriendliness or bogged down in fear and ignorance can long endure; not, at least, in a vibrant and mattering way.

But can we not *hope*, at least, for less of all these toxins—less of arrogance and unfriendliness, less of fear and ignorance?

If time and again optimism is shallow and too easy; hope is, well, a *virtue*. You train for it; you hold on to it against the odds. When you succeed in being hopeful, it often surprises you. You feel gifted, like a receiver of grace.

As for myself, I am hopeful. With respect to the debates about creation and science, what, then, do I hope for? In a word, faithfulness. I hope for wider faithfulness to the risen Christ whose story the Gospels tell.

From the Gospels I learn that, against the pull of pride and pomposity, Jesus listened. He listened not just to those He was comfortable with, but also to those capable of challenging Him, such as Nicodemus and the foreign woman He met in Syrophenicia. What is more, He said, according to Mark, that not even the Son knows all that the Father knows. In this person's life, humility showed arrogance the back door.

I learn also that despite indifference and cruelty all around Him, Jesus loved others—including His enemies. He knew nothing, so far as we can tell, of sustained unfriendliness, and certainly did not shut out, or try to hurt, those who disagreed with Him. In the end, He idealized friendship as the crucial feature of His bond with the disciples.

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The Gospels also say that during His public ministry, right up to the crucifixion, Jesus showed great audacity and nerve. He did not give in to fear, and neither did He stifle discussion through the tactic of fear. He embodied and facilitated courage.

They say, too, that from start to finish Jesus was eager to learn. As a child, He sat at the feet of rabbis asking questions. As a teacher, He manifested an astonishing grasp of His religious heritage. The book of Hebrews says that He was learning obedience even as He suffered. No evidence—nothing substantial, nothing itchy-bitsy—suggests that He was hostile to knowledge or afraid of the intellect.

Jesus embodied traits that renew, not traits that destroy. Why, by God's grace, can't we? Why, at least, can't we move by inches, or even a hair's breadth, in the right direction?

Then we'd start to see that the God's-eye view is simply *unavailable to us*. So we'd all be less preoccupied with the fine details of orthodoxy and more preoccupied with the big picture and with the practice of faith to which it points. As we already regard Jesus' Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus as, in some sense, metaphorical; we'd

more readily interpret words and stories about God as *pointers*—often metaphorical pointers—to a truth too deep for language to express fully. We'd get in touch with our finitude. We'd accept mystery.

Furthermore, we'd start to love one another—and not in the abstract alone. To our fellow Adventists, we'd begin to say: If some mysteries of faith leave you thinking differently from me, I still welcome you—into conversation and into joint solidarity with Christ. We'd begin to exclaim: Let's bear one another's burdens, intellectual and otherwise, and not make these burdens harder to bear. We'd each begin declaring to the other: So long as you intend to follow Jesus and to build up the life of your congregation, I will not sneer you out of the Adventist circle; I will not try to disgrace you; I will try not to put your church employment or the institution you work for at risk.

Then, without supposing we'd ever plumb its depths, we might actually progress toward a deeper reading of the Genesis story. We'd have the courage to say what we think. We'd begin seeing, perhaps, how the story is really about relationships and values, as Sigve Tonstad says in his fine, new book, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*. We'd begin to get past hostile arguing about creation's how and when, and shift to far more constructive and congenial discussion of creation's why.

By generous listening, we could also consider ways in which evolutionary theory may shed light we really need to consider. In addition, we could explore how, taken to reductive extremes, the theory undermines our sense of freedom and dignity, and so sets itself, as the University of Chicago's Leon Kass has said, "against the evidence of our lived experience."

But we can only take up this conversation if we begin to embody traits evident in the life and faithfulness of Jesus. If we did, we might thereby renew our sense of the deeper music of Adventism. And we might thus—in small increments, if not at one fell swoop—cause Satan, who otherwise laughs with delight at our bickering, to feel...sad. ■

Charles Scriven chairs Adventist Forum.