



Memo to Elder Wilson | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Because my counsel is unbidden, it may never reach you, or if it does, it may seem obtrusive. But we are brothers in the faith, and that makes me bold to offer perspective on two challenges you are embracing.

One is revival and reformation. You pray for it and preach on it. A 2010 Annual Council appeal on this matter came out under your influence. It lifts up Holy Spirit power, puts Christ at the center, and calls us to humility and prayer.

One great pastor who wrote in a time of revival was Jonathan Edwards. Eagerness for God was sweeping across New England, and this seemed exactly the time to pose the question of authenticity: How do you distinguish the mere appearance of piety from genuine renewal? How do you test whether the spirit of Christ, or some other spirit, is actually at work?

I think you would identify with his conclusion. A revival is authentic if it produces love, if it produces what Paul famously referred to as the “fruit of the Spirit.”

When Paul spells this out in Galatians 5, he says not only that the fruit of the Spirit is love but also that it is longsuffering, gentleness and meekness. And all this strikes me, just now, as crucial. One reason is that another of the challenges you are taking on is the doctrine of creation. You want to revise the church’s Fundamental Belief on this matter to say that creation took place some 6,000 years ago, over “seven contiguous, 24-hour days.”

Our conviction that God made heaven and earth is crucial, and this came to me in a newly full-blooded way a few weeks ago. My wife and I were peeking into some art galleries in Manhattan, and one was exhibiting works by Max Ferguson. He creates ultra-realistic paintings of people and their surroundings *inside* of New York City—inside of shops, eateries, apartments and the like. One of them was on an easel instead of a wall, so you could walk around and look at the back of it. As Ferguson told us—we were surprised and pleased to meet him—he puts notes or clippings of quotes and pictures on the reverse side of his paintings. A painting’s reverse side is thus a kind of diary of his thoughts during the several months he spends on it. Just as he was saying this, we were standing behind the painting on the easel, and my eye landed on a note he’d written: “*When you removed God from the equation you removed the sanctity of human life. Once you have accomplished that, you are wiping your feet on the door mat of Auschwitz.*”

I had considered this before, but never the precise image, and never as I was standing beside the person who had done the writing. Atheists would offer counterarguments, of course, but the record of the most powerful atheists—besides Hitler, think of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot—is utterly vicious, and in scale utterly unprecedented. Dostoyevsky worried that the demise of God would make all things permissible, and the evidence, if not conclusive, is at least alarming. I admit complexity. I know very well that New Atheists pin the

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blame for violence on religion: bad faith, and abuses stemming from it, sadly abound. Nevertheless, if you re-write John 1 to say, "In the beginning was non-sense, and the nonsense was with God, and the nonsense was God," you just do, I think, open doors to devastating consequences.

On this you and I agree. But did creation occur just 6,000 or so years ago over "seven contiguous, 24-hour days"?

Here I wish you yourself would allow for complexity. Neither of us has undergone doctoral study in the natural sciences. We cannot fully comprehend, therefore, the intellectual struggles that lead most believing scientists to focus on the spiritual meaning of Genesis—and to allow that this meaning comes wrapped in mystery. In this light, we are in a poor position, surely, to insist on improvements to the book of Genesis. I love the creation story just the way it stands. Although this is what we currently affirm, I do understand the fears that make us want to insist on more than the Bible insists on. But do those fears justify meddling (not literally, of course, but in practical effect) with Holy Writ?

I know two young Adventist couples who embrace both the life of the church and the work of advanced study. In both cases, one of the spouses has, or will soon have, a doctorate in physics; in both cases the other spouse is earning a doctorate in the study of literary texts.

A few Saturday nights ago I asked one of these young people—his physics doctorate is from Harvard—how he was holding on to his faith. He had studied and worked in faith-unfriendly environments, but had realized, he said, that any ultimate point of view, whether secular or religious, is "essentially unprovable." For him this was an opening for reception of the faith that only God can give.

Although this young scientist's point should not make us indifferent to evidence, it does underscore the relevance of humility, or as we might say, based on Galatians 5, teachableness. The Greek word behind "meekness"—one char-

acteristic of true spirituality—evokes both of these ideas. And doesn't this fact take us right back to your message of revival and reformation?

Some Adventists see mystery where others see only information. For them, faith is too deep for words—too deep, that is, for the words a technical writer might deploy. Saying precisely that creation occurred some 6,000 years ago, over "seven contiguous, 24-hour, days," makes the sublimity of scripture into something as uninspiring as a common manual or handbook. And if we insist on this for creed-like purposes, we exclude, or at least marginalize, brothers and sisters who find such (extra-biblical) language to be a stumbling block.

For importance, nothing outranks human sanctity based on the divine Creator's *gracious regard*. Every committed Adventist shares your passion on this point. But if some are more attuned to mystery than others, your passion for revival has an immediate relevance. True revival, after all, entails meekness, an eagerness to listen and to learn. It entails, too, the long-suffering and gentleness of which Paul spoke. In essence—unless Jonathan Edwards got this wrong—true revival is about love.

When those who want to re-write the church's Fundamental Belief about creation know very well that the proposed language is troubling to many creation-affirming Adventists—and is in any case extra-biblical—the effort seems not to pass the test of true revival.

I don't expect these words to be widely persuasive, or even widely considered. But even though I do not live by optimism, I do live by hope. And I hope, of course, that you will consider them. ■



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