

Because It's All About Us | BY LOREN SEIBOLD

To begin, one of my favorite stories.

A businessman hails a taxi at the airport. "I'm late to a meeting at the Consolidated Industries building. Can you get me there quickly?" "I'm your man," the driver says. "I've got fourteen brothers, and we're all taxi drivers in this city. No one knows this city better than we do." He takes off wildly, squealing tires, dodging traffic. The businessman turns a little pale, but he only complains when the driver barrels through a red light without slowing. "Don't worry," the taxi driver tells him. "My fourteen brothers and I go through the red lights all the time." The businessman is only slightly comforted by this, until they approach a green light, and the taxi driver slams on his brakes. "What—?" splutters the businessman, "Why are you stopping at a green light." "Because you never know," says the taxi driver, "when one of my brothers is coming."

I am large, I contain multitudes.

—Walt Whitman

It may not seem an especially original insight, but it is one that, unless attended to, will trip us up: each of us is the center of his own universe. My knowledge of and interest in others expands concentrically out from me. Expressed graphically, it would show a wobbly circumference, for while I'm most interested in myself and my closest friends and family, I also have some mild interest in the POTUS and a few celebrities. But even they'll be most accessible the more they're like me, and I'll see them (again, this seems obvious, but it is obscured by the near-

universal illusion that each of us is perfectly objective) through my own experiences.

To illustrate: As you listen to the casualties of any of the current wars, which figure commands your attention? The few thousands of your own countrymen lost, or the number (somewhere in six figures) of the enemy's? Most Americans value, almost without thinking about it, the lives of the several thousand killed in the World Trade Center far above the lives of the hundreds of thousands of "foreigners" killed subsequently. You'd have a hard time making the case that God has the same prejudices.

All that I believe, political and religious, gets

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arranged around me. Hang out at a political rally, and you'll quickly see that the world should be organized according to what we believe benefits us. Attend most any church and you'll get the same. What do people need? What we have! If we have a recipe, that's what everyone should be hungry for. If we feel com-



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passion, they need what our tender hearts are bleeding over. If we have a plan for how to make life go better, there's no point in our listening to yours.

And so all humanity falls into one of two groups: those who are with me, and those who should and ought to be with me but aren't—yet.

A caution: we must curse this prejudice temperately, for it is nearly impossible to avoid. We are tribal at our core. It is impossible to comprehend the needs of the whole world, so we must concentrate our efforts. It's easiest for me to assume that what is in my interests is also in yours, or else suspend interest in you altogether.

The great thinkers have always tried to get us to wrestle with this. "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee," wrote John Donne. "I am large, I contain multitudes," says Walt Whitman. And from Martin Luther King Jr.: "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

While the Old Testament allowed God's people the privilege of salvific isolationism, the New Testament opens the door. All people become valuable, not just my people. The biblical consensus is that "red or yellow, black or white, all are precious in his sight." Yet how hard—how next to impossible—it is to be that inclusive! I can say that God loves everyone as much as he loves me, but surely he under-

stands me and my kind a little better than those people on the other side of the world babbling in foreign languages!

Which is illustrated nowhere better than in our Seventh-day Adventist eschatology.

Caedite eos.

Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius.

Usually translated,

*"Kill them all, and let God sort them out."*¹

—Abbot Arnaud Amaury,

before the massacre of Béziers

When James Bond gets into a car chase, he jumps drawbridges, crashes through fruit stands, and leaves trucks and cars rolling, spinning, and bursting into flame in his wake. We follow just one figure in the chaos: James. If this were real, he'd have caused hundreds of deaths. The consequences never bother 007; in the next scene he's in a white dinner jacket with a bimbo in a low-cut dress, when he should be in prison for aggravated mayhem.

This is fiction, but we do something similar in our eschatology. Take *The Time of the End*, in which Seventh-day Adventists, approximately one-fourth of 1 percent of the world population, become the central players. All of God's actions revolve around our little group and its issues. Billions suffer plagues, war, persecution, and the breakdown of society. But all eyes are on us and our happy ending. The rest? Extras. They don't enter the story proper. Let thousands be murdered in the Sudan, thousands more in the Congo, ten thousand starve in Asia, a tsunami wipe out a million heathens at a blow: it's not *The Time of Trouble* until it happens to me.

You will look in vain through the 1844 narrative for any inconsolation over the idea that most of the world's inhabitants (other Americans, and the billions in the rest of the world) were about to be lost without chance of appeal. Fortunately that changed, but not until those believers had adopted a belief called

The Shut Door. Though it was later repudiated, psychologically there's still some of The Shut Door left in us.

If we really believe what some of us have said—I mean with a deep, passionate conviction—that only those of us who are Seventh-day Adventists or a decent facsimile thereof are going to be saved in the cataclysmic horror show that is about to begin, there would be two consequences. First, we couldn't sleep at night. We'd be out warning everyone, and the last thing we'd be worried about is keeping our academy open or building up a strong staff in Silver Spring. Then shortly after that, we'd realize there's no conceivable way the other 99.75 percent of them will get shaped up in time, and we'd question the reasonableness of a God who'd let The Time of the End turn into such a hugger-mugger.

Ergo, we don't really believe it. It might help us sort a few myopic opinions, but it's not at all useful to explain God's relationship to a world so irreducibly complex that were this belief true, the earth and most of the people on it are guaranteed to burn like a termite-tunneled tenement.

**It's the dance, it's the dress,
she's a concept, more or less.**

—Donald Fagen, "At Century's End"

The most memorable thing about the first evangelistic series I participated in was the nightly après-meeting discussions about "interests." Interests were the people who had read our flyers and showed up. Anyone listening in who was unfamiliar with the process would have been puzzled, for we talked about the interests in only one dimension: their acceptance (or not) of the doctrines we offered them. We didn't even need their names, as we read the cards they'd filled out at the end of each meeting. "This one accepted the Sabbath, but doesn't understand the state of the dead."

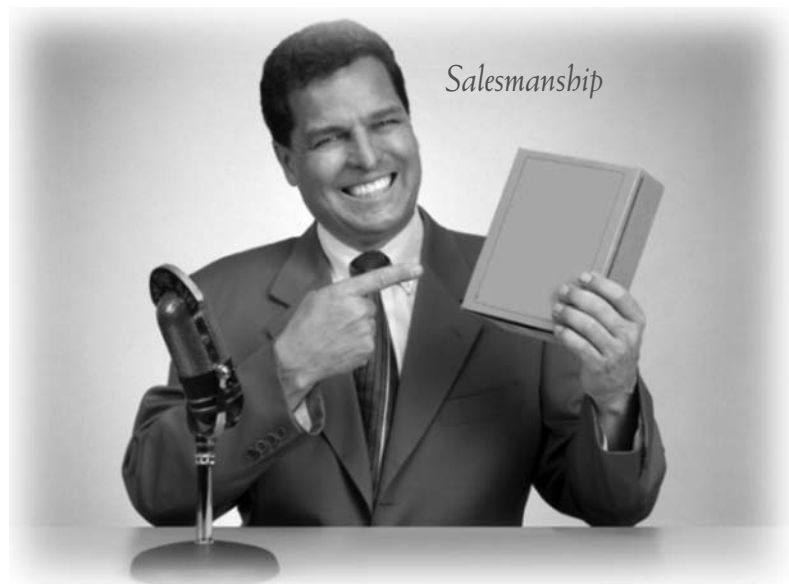
Now, it would be entirely false (and down-

right unkind) to say the evangelistic team had no genuine interest in these people. We were totally sincere in our desire that they should accept our message. But because we focused mostly on their deficiency—as it turns out, just their deficiency of what we had to offer—it wasn't a well-rounded concern. We would gladly pull them into our institutional embrace. But if they refused us, we had no further obligation to them as fellow creatures unless we hoped to nab them at some later date. We've only so much attention to give, and we give it to the people who might be persuaded to buy what we're selling.

Never mind that humanity is so complex and diverse that what's obvious to us isn't to 99 percent of the rest of the world. By making their acceptance (or not) of our product the focus, we dehumanize them just a bit. People become concepts. For it is impossible to listen—really listen, human to human—if the goal is to make the sale. (And no, it doesn't much matter how sincere you are in your belief that you're right and they're wrong.)

This is why, by the way, so many don't stay. The evangelists are masters of the sale, but like

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marketers of diets and exercise equipment, getting their customers to use the product isn't their job. We deliver the goods to you. What you do with it is up to you. In our case, there's a community you've got to fit into in order to make the

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beliefs work for you, which is far more difficult than getting baptized. But by that time, the good salesman is in the next city. And the church community really isn't in the acceptance business anymore: we can hardly stand one another.

Years ago, I read a book that attempted to analyze Christ's method of winning souls. It was sourced from the Gospels, and many of the principles were good ones. Jesus did, in fact, do kind things for people and teach them about God and ask them to put their faith in him. The problem was that it boiled down the Jesus experience to the evangelistic program of an evangelical church. Jesus pursued people like we pursue people: to get them in. He did good things for them so that they'd come to church. A good thing, evidently.

But all the strangeness, all the surprise, the nose-twisting, gut-punching, pulling-the-rug-out-from-under-us of the biblical encounter with Jesus disappears. Jesus gets civilized, domesticated, made respectably American, a good citizen and businessman. True, he helps people, but he has a reason: he's trying to add them into an orderly suburban church where they can hand out bulletins, park cars, sing praise songs, and give offerings. There's no danger, no challenge,

date. But The Savior of *All* Humankind, even the most despicable parts of it? Not exactly.

It seems to me that Jesus's "Follow me" differs in fundamental ways from our "Come to the altar." It's the difference between a mentor and a membership card. One is dynamic, the other settled. One is a process, the other a graduation. Jesus's church grew organically, chaotically, like a weed seedling that takes you by surprise each time you look at it. I defy you to find an example of Jesus employing a sales technique. He showed up, told the truth, and people followed.

The surprising thing is not how often he says "Follow me," but how seldom. Jesus could have done altar calls all over Palestine, and had enough church members to shout down the Barabbas crowd and storm the Jerusalem bastille. He didn't. He nabbed a few people, who were from the start followers, not theologians or bishops, which is why he warned them they might have to follow him right into death, and some did.

So we distill Jesus Christ down to a list of boring things to be believed, and discipleship into denominational franchises that by their very existence show how poorly we get along and hence what crummy Jesus followers we are. Is it any wonder people are wary of us?



no upsetting the world, no mystery, no walking blindly into the future. We've tamed Jesus. He's a megachurch pastor, a reach-your-full-potential seminar presenter, a Republican political candi-

**World is crazier and
more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural.**

—Louis MacNeice, "Snow"

Nearly every doctrinally defined entity believes that God is holding everyone else responsible to conform to its beliefs. Billions of religious adherents think that about their beliefs, just like we do about ours. It only occasionally crosses our minds that the incredibly varied human experience makes what we believe impossible to implement with the specificity we'd like to see.

I've often wondered: What could a Sunday law possibly mean for at least six of the world's seven billion people? What significance do

details like avoiding pork mean to those billions who haven't enough of anything to eat? Driving forward into the future with those as your neon directional signs means being far off the road where most people are.

And that may be just fine with some of us. However, don't be surprised, then, when no one pays attention. They're so far out of the discussion that we'll never, ever reach them with these points. Sadly, that may be just fine for some, too. Which begs the question: Is what we're advertising for everyone? Or, like the US Marines, do we just want a few good men? Is salvation big or little? Is going to heaven common or rare?

I had a discussion once with a man who told me that I and the rest of the church were falling far short of the ideal, as evidenced by our unsanctified diets, inadequate Sabbath-keeping, and damnable open-mindedness about other Christians. He cited Matthew 7:13–14 to say that only a very small number would ever be saved—and they would be those who believed and lived like he did. (This being among the least attractive arguments for heaven I've ever heard.)

But when Jesus spoke of the straight gate and the narrow way, did he mean to say that only a very small number of the billions on earth would be saved? If so, it was an odd conclusion to what preceded it. Listen:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matt. 7:7–11 NIV)

God is trying to shove the gift of life at us, and no one will take it? Jesus is opening the door and inviting us in, but we can't find the entrance? What a bizarre picture! My experience is that nearly all of us are, each in his own dysfunctional way, ringing heaven's doorbell vigorously, even if we don't know the secret passwords to get in.

Add to it that Jesus is knocking on my heart's door, too (Rev. 3:20), and it's odd that so few of us would pass through it.

So, how many will be saved? Jesus says elsewhere, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full" (Luke 14:23). We've always assumed he's got a pretty big house, which suggests he's going to save a passel of us. Then there's the parable of the ten virgins, which could mean that exactly 50 percent of us will make it. Or, if "straight is the gate and narrow the way and few there be that find it," only a select few.

Take your pick. As for me and my house, we believe (deeply, with all our hearts) that Jesus didn't die on the cross for a few picky eaters and religious prigs.

**Where sin increased,
grace increased all the more.**

—Rom. 5:20 NIV

Consider this: it's been to The Church's profit (and I'm speaking here of every denomination, not just the one I'm part of) to keep salvation difficult. It's built into our business plan. Why should you come to *our* church if you can get it in *any* church, or maybe even without a church at all? So, we've kept a tight hold on salvation. We say the world has to accept Christ, but really we mean Christ *and* a whole bunch of our own stuff that we've hung on him. The reason people don't understand righteousness by faith isn't because we don't preach it, but because we don't practice it. We all say we believe in grace. But we act like grace is for the people who shouldn't need it.

I submit to you that we've been stingy. What we were supposed to give away by the truckload, we've doled out in dime bags—after cutting the product with twigs of theology, broken bits of liturgy, and sweepings off the denominational floor. And maybe because we've been so damnably selfish, God is giving it away through

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other channels, without our even realizing it.

I hope so, because as much as I like all of you, to spend eternity with just Seventh-day Adventists (conversing, presumably, about our good diets and what damned fools those Sunday keepers were) sounds excruciating. If there's no end to life up there, and you're all I get to hang out with for eternity, I'm going to need a steady supply of Trenta-sized lattes. I was hoping for a more diverse mix of people; some folks with whom I don't fully agree, who can stretch my thinking in new directions. Hindus, Moslems, maybe even newly ex-atheists. Some of those sheep not of our fold.

But what about there being "none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:10 KJV)?

The only hope I have that heaven won't be as boring as the average Sabbath School class is the possibility that not everyone will need to know that Name to benefit from its power. My evidence is thin, but there is a passage in Matthew where Jesus says many will come to his kingdom "from the east and the west"—code for heathens—"and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11 NIV). An odd statement. What would the heathen have in common with our patriarchs? Here's an idea: like the patriarchs, they've experienced God's grace. These heathens got it quite without our

assistance, but until that moment didn't know whom to thank for it!²

Now, that sounds like an interesting heaven. Honest people from everywhere and every time mixing it up, and exploring all kinds of deep stuff about God that they had previously but lightly sensed in the spiritual wind, felt through relationships, touched upon while truth-seeking, seen ghosts of in their dreams, and now at last they're making the acquaintance of the one behind it all.

I don't know how God would justify saving people who don't know him. I'm just grateful that I don't have to be the judge of the universe. But given what scripture says about grace, I can't imagine that God is as parsimonious with it as we've been.

I'm trying to say that this whole business of God and salvation can't be just about us, or it is merely tiresome nonsense. I'm trying to say that God has a tower view of everywhere and every time, and he sees the world as big and as complex as it really is. I believe, if he's any kind of God, he's going to be reasonable in his judgments. Not random. Not petulant. Certainly not exclusive. Mostly, I'm trying to say that God is lavish with grace. Poured out and running over. Something like this: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' and let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17 NIV). ■

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References

1. Literally, "Slay them all. God will know His own." cf. 2 Tim. 2:19, "The Lord knows those who are his..."
2. The rest of the passage isn't complimentary to us good church members: "But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12 NIV).