

## ***Servant God: A Review*** | BY CARMEN LAU

**H**ow is Jesus like God? What if God is just like Jesus? Have you ever wrestled with the thought that Christianity sometimes seems like a narcissistic sin-management system? If any of these questions are familiar to you, then I have a new book to recommend. *Servant God*, edited by Dorothee Cole, brings together an eclectic group of theologians, evangelists, pastors and lay Bible students to consider the issues and questions surrounding the premise that Jesus is just like God. Seeking to ground biblical authority first and foremost in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, this book delivers information on many levels: theoretical, historical, psychological, and practical.

There are eighteen authors featured in the book, including Adventist theologians Alden Thompson, Sigve Tonstad, and Jean Sheldon. The well-known evangelical pastor Greg Boyd and Adventist speaker/evangelist Herb Montgomery are also contributors. Filling out the authors' group are physicians Tim Jennings, Brad Cole, and Dorothee Cole, and their friends who are computer programmers, web designers, nurses, builders, and teachers. This community of writers, many of whom were part of the Good News Tour conferences 2006–2009, provides fresh details and new ways of looking at familiar concepts throughout the book.

Take, for example, the issue of sin. Tim Jennings examines the implications of viewing sin as the breaking of an imposed law, versus viewing sin as a deviation from design principles that have been in operation since creation. Further demonstrating the spectrum of law and its impact on

humanity, we are given a charming elaboration on the book *Proverbs: Wisdom to Live By* by Virginia Davidson and Ernest H. J. Steed.

Several chapters provide help for believers who are troubled by conflicting passages describing God. Alden Thompson provides a memorable essay on grappling with God as portrayed in the Old Testament. It has frequently been said that God's justice is not like man's justice. What does that really mean? Delving into the original Hebrew we see that God's justice gives more emphasis to healing and reconciliation than to punitive, legal matters. I appreciated Brad Cole's synthesized definition of God's justice: "Do what is right to make things right by exercising compassion to those treated unfairly."

In a way that is both conversational and challenging, *Servant God* also tackles the topics of God's wrath, intercession, judgment, community, prayer, and resurrection. While remaining loyal to the Seventh-day Adventist motif of cosmic conflict between God and Satan, *Servant God* emphasizes the subtlety of this conflict. Sigve Tonstad contends that strength is not at issue; rather, the controversy is about who is trustworthy. First, it is key to recognize Satan's deceptive nature, as evidenced in a polemic war of words (Revelation 12:9). It is also important to consider the framing of the issues that unfolded in Eden. Eve's original temptation was about more than disobedience; rather, Satan set a trap to cast doubt onto God's commitment to the well-being of humanity. Can God be trusted? It is against this backdrop that history has unfolded, providing evidence of a trustworthy God and, if God is

***Servant God* offers a discussion on theodicy, contending that God's will is best demonstrated in the life of Jesus.**

like Jesus, a servant God. Tonstad traces the debate back to the early church and references Origen, whom some say is the supreme theologian of freewill, who took note of passages in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 and identified the importance of Satan's role. Thus, we see that a concept of cosmic conflict was being recognized almost 2,000 years ago when Christianity was very young. In decades following, Constantine lessened the emphasis on humility and freewill through triumphalism and coercion, weakening the concept of a servant God as seen in Jesus. If servant-hood is the essence of God's character, we can see how this has become muted in centuries of Christian orthodoxy.

Atonement is another concept *Servant God* traces over time. Respect for etymology is necessary to discern the true meanings of atonement. The sixteenth-century King James Version translates the Greek word *katallage* as *atonement* in Romans 5:11. Though rarely used in the New Testament, the word has become a theological staple or, increasingly, a sort of hot potato. Five-hundred years ago, *atonement* referred to the concepts of unity and reconciliation more than a legal restitution, which is the common (yet narrower) interpretation today.

Author Jean Sheldon elaborates further on the concept of atonement, documenting a search for the historical roots of the word's prevalent legal emphasis. She reveals that church fathers Tertullian, Aquinas, and Anselm were influenced by the context in which they lived and therefore over-emphasized the metaphor of viewing atonement as a transaction, effectively limiting other rich meanings. Further discussion uncovers the influence of the pagans and the sacrifices required to appease their gods.

*Servant God* goes on to cite the four legs of modern evangelicalism: the immortality of souls; eternal hell; sovereignty of God (predestination); and forensic atonement. I am intrigued that some in the Adventist Church seem hesitant to explore the nuances of atonement outside the forensic view held by modern evangelicalism. We have not been afraid to reevaluate tradition in other areas. Moreover, some scholars say that to remove one of these four legs would cause the whole structure of modern evangelicalism to falter. Perhaps scholars in the Adventist Church feel somewhat hamstrung by the Questions on Doctrine debate.

Lending support to a healing view of atonement, *Servant God* highlights some key verses in their original languages. The original King James Version translates Isaiah 53:12 as "He was wounded for our transgressions" when, as Sheldon explains, a better translation of the Hebrew intent would

read, "He was wounded *from* or *by* our transgressions," to better reflect twenty-first century meaning. *Servant God* contends that the "Old Testament issue at stake in atonement is not divine anger against sin that must be legally dealt with, but the moral problem of sin as a very real destroyer to those who choose it."

The contributor with the potentially greatest name recognition (at least in evangelical circles) is Greg Boyd. His thoughts appear near the end of the book in two chapters entitled "A Different Kind of Kingdom" and "Living In, and Looking Like Christ." Boyd, the only contributor who is not a Seventh-day Adventist, challenges followers of Jesus to change the world by thousands of small choices made daily. He suggests that many in Christendom might be influenced by a sort of Gnosticism in which right belief is assumed to be the goal. Boyd says,

*True faith... always makes a difference in the life of the person who exercises it. This is what James is getting at, when he teaches that faith that doesn't lead to action is useless (James 2:20). For the same reason, the New Testament never entertains the possibility of believing in Jesus without aspiring to live like Jesus. "Whoever claims to live in him [Christ]," John says, "must live as Jesus did." (1 John 2:6)*

Careful Adventist readers will note Boyd's emphasis on studying God's character is similar to this exhortation given by Ellen White 100 years ago:

*Looking unto Jesus we obtain brighter and more distinct views of God, and by beholding we become changed. Goodness, love for our fellow men, becomes our natural instinct. We develop a character, which is the counterpart of the divine character. Growing into His likeness, we enlarge our capacity for knowing God. More and more we enter into fellowship with the heavenly world, and we have continually increasing power to receive the riches of the knowledge and wisdom of eternity (Christ's Object Lessons, 355).*

Published by Loma Linda University Press, *Servant God* is a comprehensive and conversational work that will enable readers to further understand God—what he did through Jesus and what he wants us to do now. ■

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