



## Emerging Adventism? | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Jesus said, “Follow me.” In signature Adventist passages from Revelation, the “remnant” ideal connects God’s will with Jesus’ own witness, his own lived faith. The Gospel of John says that Jesus took up his ministry so that we might “have life, and have it abundantly.” Jesus, then, was about *how we live*, and whether we feel truly *alive*. What mattered was freedom from self-fixation, an *aliveness* shaped precisely to the common good, the Kingdom of God.

If such a vision of the abundant life reflects the spirit of the New Testament, how can bickering over doctrine—over tenets *about* God rather than responses *to* God—become so all consuming?

Actually, of course, doctrinal discord is *not* that all-consuming. Many Adventists, perhaps most, do not have enough interest in church beliefs even to attend a Sabbath School class. Bible teaching has become, all too widely, a back-burner issue. The exception, of course, is the class of religious professionals. Adventist administrators, evangelists, pastors, and theologians—and the slim minority of members who share their concern—bestir themselves into regular consideration of these matters, and the conversation can be as fresh and renewing as the month of May. Healthy conversation takes place in many classrooms and Sabbath Schools, even around some dinner tables.

But talk about the church’s teachings is often fearful, defensive, and petty. In early August I listened to a presentation given at the 2014 Adventist-Laymen’s Services and Industries (ASI) convention in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Its entire focus was last-day “deceptions” and “delusions.” I heard nothing of love and justice or related scriptural motifs; nor did I feel any drive toward deeper insight than currently official understanding may provide. The theme was the shortcomings of others, and mainly, on this occasion, the shortcomings of other Adventists. Classroom listeners, largely mute, heard the presenter

worrying about new readings of Genesis 1–11 and zealous calls for the observance of Old Testament feasts. We must be ever alert, he was saying, to “heresies” like these, arising from within.

Call it the *antagonism mindset*, the “we’ve got doctrine right / you’ve got doctrine wrong” way of pursuing Christian mission. Although most members seem distant even from serious discussion of the Bible, those who are aware at all know that the antagonism mindset—its sights on insiders and outsiders alike—now typifies official Adventism. Where bureaucratic authority is prominent, this mindset is prominent as well.

Let’s be clear that our convictions do matter. Convictions are life-shaping beliefs, including the life-shaping aspects of doctrine, or what we want to teach. Convictions, then, undergird the way we live—they undergird the way anybody lives. It’s not, therefore, wrongheaded to be on the lookout for error. But it *is* wrongheaded—decisively and tragically wrongheaded—to be so caught up in us-versus-them thinking that we lose sight not only of what others can offer but also of what *we* may need. A consuming suspicion of people not ourselves gives rise to self-satisfaction and narcissism. These maladies go unchecked if we rush to dismiss perspectives different from our own.

I should say that ASI is an impressive, even an amazing, organization. Their annual convention is astonishingly professional and in many ways deeply inspiring. But the leadership appears quite at home with us-versus-them thinking. One target this year was the so-called emerging or emergent church, a movement of contemporary evangelical Christianity. The presenter I just referred to made disparaging mention of it. Another criticized the movement in some detail, arguing (according to the ASI website) that “Emergence Christianity” stands “in direct opposition” to Scripture. It is simply “incompatible” with biblical Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

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I have made myself somewhat familiar with the movement, and I know at least one Adventist, the pastor-activist-writer Samir Selmanović, who is a well-known contributor to its point of view. Advocates of Emergence Christianity take as their basic premise (aside from faith itself) the belief that civilization, certainly civilization in the West, is now undergoing a truly epochal cultural shift. The shift involves: the *relativism* (extreme, or more nuanced) sparked by historians and philosophers and also by scientists like Einstein and Heisenberg; the *democratization of information* that comes with the digital revolution, along with attendant undermining of hierarchy; the *new awareness of religious diversity*—it's now in our neighborhoods and among the caregivers at our hospitals—and with that awareness a new reluctance either to scorn or dismiss what others believe.

In short, the contemporary culture doubts whether anyone has the God's-eye view, or whether authority, not least that of sacred texts and sacred institutions, still deserves to be trusted. Such a cultural shift goes along, of course, with a shift in human consciousness, and as that new consciousness continues to "emerge," the pressure on churches grows ever stronger. Conventional church life—its collusion with violence, its doctrinal obsessions, its lack of humility and unwillingness to change—seems increasingly off-key, and people, especially young people, are walking away from it. The *aliveness* that Jesus meant to give seems to have waned.

But not everywhere. Some Christian leaders—three examples are Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Rob Bell—are meeting the "emergence" of new culture with "emergence" of fresh faith. This, they believe, is one of those every-five-hundred-year "hinge times"—the last one was the Great Reformation—and it is a threat and also an opportunity. A church "rummage sale" would now make sense. Top-down, or Constantinian, Christianity can no longer work. Ungracious response to those outside the church can no longer work. What can work, on the other hand, is new appropriation of Christ as climax

of the Bible story and model of authentic Christian existence. What can work is church life founded on persistent, honest, Spirit-guided *conversation* about what to think and do.

I don't want, of course, to align myself uncritically with any movement. I've seen Emerging Church treatments of the Holy Spirit that seem insufficiently attentive to John 16's insistence that the One who teaches new understanding also glorifies precisely—Christ. And as an Adventist (and admirer of Sigve Tonstad's work), I believe, of course, that the Sabbath Jesus honored—which has no prominent place, so far as I know, in Emergence Christianity—is not only a great gift but also a necessary discipline.

These are examples. I would no doubt benefit from further conversation about them. If I sank into an us-versus-them frame of mind, conversation with people different from me would cease even though it could help me dethrone my own narcissism and grasp my own self-deception. What is more, I would be taking an ungracious stance toward persons who are, in truth, my brothers and sisters under God. Sometimes, I heartily grant, it is important to make judgments about others: the story of Bonhoeffer and the Nazis is sufficient reminder of that. But a *mindset* of antagonism to new ideas serves no purpose but conceit. And, as for willingness to learn from others, it need not lead—that dreaded bugaboo!—to *syncretism*; I might correct—and also enrich—my own *distinctive point of view*.

What goes for me as an individual goes, too, for Adventism as a whole. Now especially, when epochal change is so challenging, we need, by Spirit-led conversation, to "emerge" into a fresh and more faithful expression of who we are.

The process could spur a new sense of *aliveness* and take us past bickering to truly constructive interaction—some of it, I imagine, in small circles on Sabbath mornings. ■

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## References

1. "2014 Seminars," <http://www.asministries.org/seminars>.