

Named and Known, Known and Loved: Unintended Consequences, Human Accountability, and Being Loved | BY MICHAEL PEARSON

Sermon at ASRS meetings, Boston, 18 November 2017

This year, 2017, which is now slipping from our grasp, has been a year of anniversaries, celebrations, and simple commemorations of events which it would be inappropriate to celebrate.

In the UK, it is fifty years since abortion was first legalized (October 27, 1967), under certain particular circumstances. But the law was loosely worded, liberally interpreted, and the consequence has been that the numbers of abortions carried out are vastly greater than the architect of the legislation, a devout Christian, intended. There have been serious unintended moral consequences.

On November 2, 1917, the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, made a public declaration promising mu-

tually exclusive outcomes to two populations. The Balfour Declaration effectively sowed the seeds of today's Israel-Palestine conflict. The unintended tragic consequences are still very much with us.

Martin Luther

More significantly perhaps for us at this time is the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, specifically symbolized by Luther publishing his 95 Theses on October 31, 1517. In that year, Martin Luther thought, said, and did things in Wittenberg which had consequences he did not intend.

The Catholic dissident did not intend to cause a convulsion sufficient to destabilize Rome, or generate a so-called Protestantism, whose echoes ring loud down the centuries, even in our own lives.

He did not intend to create a church specifically named after him which today numbers 80 million adherents world-wide.

He did not intend to modernize and unify a language which hitherto had been a mosaic of dialects, and encourage mass literacy.

He did not intend to set in train a sequence of violent events which would leave hundreds of peasants dead, victims of civil conflict.

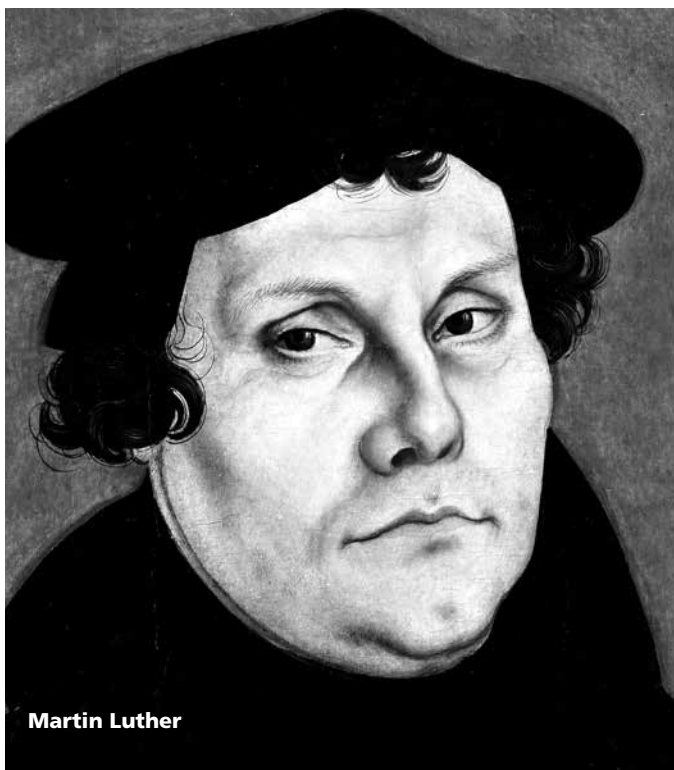
He did not intend to foster the idea that we are individuals before we are members of society.

He did not intend to act as midwife to modern Germany or to the idea of the nation state.

He did not intend to contribute to long conflict in Europe well beyond German borders.

He did not of course intend, could not possibly have anticipated, that his published views on the Jewish people should make him a poster-boy of latter-day fascism.

Luther's life offers spectacular examples of the law of unintended consequences.



Martin Luther



Devastation of WWI



Brexit protest

Many of the most important consequences of Brexit are likely to be quite unintended by those who voted and campaigned for it.

World War I

Along with Reformation celebrations, we also are commemorating, perhaps more in Europe, the various centenaries of World War I. The year 1917 was one of hellish carnage in Flanders, at Passchendaele, at Ypres, in which multitudes of men on both sides died in a very small geographical area, in a very short period of time, to very little effect.

Three years before, in Sarajevo, June 28, 1914, the driver of the car of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria did not intend to take a disastrous wrong turn which would present the assassin Gavrilo Princip with the perfect opportunity to do his murderous work, and so create for others a pretext for declaring war. The chauffeur did not intend to fracture Europe. He did not intend to unleash all manner of geo-political consequences in World War I, whose deep awfulness no-one could ever have imagined: consequences which continue to reverberate today.

It is the law of unintended consequences.

On April 6, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed a declaration of war by the United

States on Germany. His message was cheered by Congress: "The world must be made safe for democracy," he proclaimed, as so many have done. He went back to the White House and wept. He said, "My message was one of death for young men. How odd it seems to applaud that." It seems that he *did* understand, albeit only dimly, the awful possibilities of the law of unintended consequences.

The First World War brought important unplanned social change too. For example, many armies involved in the conflict issued condoms, prophylactics against the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases as soldiers had brief affairs with local girls. Disease was weakening the military machine. Theodore Roosevelt considered the issuing of condoms "race suicide." Many moralists also condemned it. But condoms were widely used in World War I, and returning soldiers were not easily going to surrender this newly-found enhancer of sexual freedom. World War I clearly hastened the use of condoms as the primary birth control method among respectable families, for good and ill. Many churches overcame their scruples within

a decade or two. And later came other contraceptives. Their availability changed our expectations, changed our lives completely.

How odd that the obscenities of war could facilitate the tenderness of intimacy. It is the law of unintended consequences.

Brexit

And so, to the present day...

April 2017 will be remembered as the time when the United Kingdom began the process of exiting the European Union. UK Prime Minister, Mrs Theresa May, pressed the “trigger” for Article 50 to signal the beginning of the two-year transition period.

Former Prime Minister David Cameron had not intended that the referendum should lead to this—quite the opposite. He had wanted to unify his party and cement links with the EU. He achieved precisely the opposite. Prime Minister Theresa May did not intend to lose the majority she needs for effective Brexit negotiations in a general election.

Most of those who voted for Brexit do not intend to break up the United Kingdom. They did not vote for economic decline in their country. Most did not intend to make EU nationals feel unwelcome on British streets. They did not intend to leave the public health service seriously understaffed. But many of the most important consequences of Brexit are likely to be quite unintended by those who voted and campaigned for it. It will be painful for us and will have consequences way beyond our own shores.

It is the law of unintended consequences.

Our Church

And so, to our own church...

When Adventists first formulated the doctrine of the millennium, 1,000 years *after* the return of Christ, when peace would reign, and all social injustices would be resolved, they surely did not intend that generations of Adventists following them would largely ignore the need to fight for the common good *now*. They simply wished not to dilute the evange-

listic imperative of the church. They did not intend that we should for so long show so little interest in social justice, human trafficking, unemployment, poverty, debt, housing, environment, prison reform—any issues which involve civic engagement.

It is the law of unintended consequences.

In the year 2017, in the Adventist Church, various official actions have been taken by leaders, no doubt sincere in their intentions, to promote “unity” in the church. Women’s ordination has been the presenting issue but, of course, underlying this are the foundational issues of power, identity, authority, hermeneutics, unity, belonging, and much more. Those who fear that the drive for unity is really a demand for uniformity and central control, respond, and will continue to respond, by writing, meeting, leaving, and the various other forms which weeping can take. At present, the outcomes are quite impossible to predict. But one thing is certain. Some of the most important consequences of this struggle for the Adventist church, our church, our home, will be quite unintended, and inevitably rather painful.

It is the law of unintended consequences.

Newbold College

I often meet former students from my institution, Newbold College. They like to reminisce, they enjoy their memories. But the things that they remember are not always the things I intended they should remember, according to the objectives listed in my course outlines. Our time together in the classroom produced consequences for their learning, even for their lives, which I had neither intended nor anticipated. Some good, some not so.

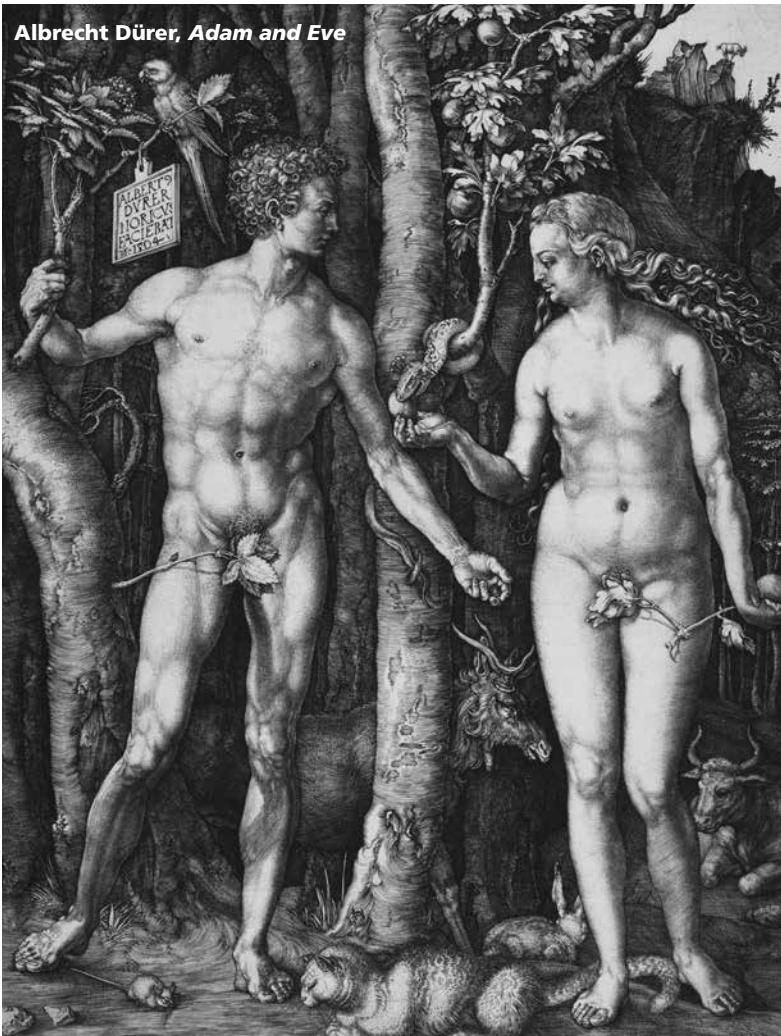
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Unintended Consequences

Unintended consequences are unanticipated outcomes of deliberate acts. The term “the law of unintended consequences” was popularized by American sociologist, Robert Merton, in the 1930s, though the idea can be traced back at

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Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Eve*



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least to Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke.

Of “Intention,” Immanuel Kant said that moral value can only be established by reference to the intention of the person acting. And many philosophers have wrestled with the idea before and after Kant.

It is partly the legacy of Luther that we individuals have a newly-affirmed freedom to make choices and to shoulder responsibilities, to be accountable before God and our fellow human beings.

This freedom raises some impossibly difficult questions. Unintended consequences, it seems, are as old as humanity itself.

The Bible

To understand consequences and intention we can go all the way back to Eden itself. In Genesis 3, God said to Adam, “eat ...and you

will surely die.” The serpent said to Eve, “eat and you will have opened eyes.” Consequences, serious consequences. What did Adam intend? How should he be judged? How could he give any meaning to the word “die”? Was the fall an unintended consequence of creation? Was Adam’s use of the gift of choice an inevitable consequence of his condition? What did God intend? How can God not intend anything that comes about as a result of the gift of choice?

Religion Teachers

Those of us whose business is “Religious Studies” face all manner of unfathomable questions whose core is right here, about our own agency and responsibility for our acts, for ourselves, and about God’s agency—what kind of God is this whom we worship? I know of few more essential questions than these.

But I find so often that in response to such questions, in the end I have to say: “I don’t know.” If said on occasion, this may be a mark of humility in a teacher; if said too often, it may be seen as a mark of ignorance and incompetence. We are paid to know.

I sometimes feel at this point that I have hit a rational brick wall.

How to resolve questions about my intentions, God’s intentions, consequences both unforeseen and unintended, both in my own biography and in salvation history?

A clue comes from an unlikely source. On October 31, 2017, the editorial in the left-leaning British newspaper, *The Guardian*, said,

...one of the things which the Reformation makes clear is that progress does not proceed by rational means... [T]he actions of the reformers and their enemies were determined by their theological beliefs...about the ultimate purpose and goods of human life. They demand commitment... We may shrink from the dangers of such commitment, but we will accomplish very little without its power.

IMAGE SOURCE: [HTTPS://WWW.METMUSEUM.ORG/ART/COLLECTION/SEARCH/33622](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/33622)

Caravaggio, *The Supper at Emmaus*

The Emmaus Road

So, I turn away from any theological manoeuvres at this point, to get God or ourselves off the hook. Instead, I go for help to a story—the story of the disappointed pair of followers of Jesus on the Emmaus road.

They also had hit a rational brick wall, the brick wall of Golgotha every bit as impenetrable as today's wall in Jerusalem. The place of the skull was not the intended destination of the disciples' Galilean and Judean travels.

The two disconsolate figures were frantically re-running the deadly scenarios in their heads. They were devastated. Trying to make some sense of it all. It was not supposed to end like this. They felt now that they knew precisely nothing. "We had hoped that he was the one... but..." And the question of the stranger Jesus, apparently trying to make sense of their sadness, was divinely absurd: "What things?" Their response: "are you the only one in Jerusalem who does not *know*...?" They did not intend to ask one of the most supremely absurd questions in human history. They certainly did not intend to offer the profoundest of insults.

So, he starts to teach them in such a way that the cold corpse of their faith begins to warm. Something stirs.

And then, bizarrely, when they reach Emmaus He makes as if to go on, just as He had once on the Sea of

Galilee. Absence had become presence and now presence threatens to become absence once again. What if they had allowed Him to walk away from Emmaus? What would the consequences of that have been? But no, they urge him to stay...stay... which is sometimes the only prayer that I can offer. "Please stay!" What an extraordinary moment of freedom conferred by the Christ!

And so, it is in the simplest everyday gesture of welcome—the offering of a crust of bread—that they know! Know that it is Him. They know that they are loved. Loved beyond any shadow of doubt. He cares enough to return, to eat.

The Italian master, Caravaggio, depicts the scene in his painting *The Supper at Emmaus*. As Jesus raises His hand in blessing, the bowl of fruit on the edge of the table threatens to fall...into the lap of the viewer. It is, for all concerned, the tipping point. There will be consequences.

And then bizarrely, Jesus disappears suddenly. Are they loved still as Presence becomes absence once again? But it does not matter now because, somehow, they know beyond fear of contradiction that they are loved. Now they will have to revisit their understanding of coherence, of logic, of consequences. They saw Him executed...but here He is. They will have to interrogate their reliance on conventional rationality. They will have to return to the

Joseph von Führich,
Road to Emmaus



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questions of how they know things to be true and what things they know to be true.

Claiming to Know

So, what can we purveyors of knowledge and wisdom claim to know?

I speak for myself. You may identify with what I say or not. What can I know in my deepest heart? I repeat, I answer the question for myself only.

1. I believe that, yes, I can sometimes be held accountable for those choices whose consequences I did not anticipate or intend. The child's final appeal to a parent is often, "I did not mean to." It is not enough. My answer would feature the expressions "it depends on..." and "might reasonably have been expected to know..." This matter raises important and complex questions but this is not the right place to address them. Suffice it to say that yes, we are responsible for some outcomes of our deliberate action that we did not intend.
2. But I also know this: I cannot allow myself to be paralyzed by fear of unintended con-

sequences. I cannot live by fear. Jesus is very clear about that. I wish my Church was as clear. As the Irish political thinker, Edmund Burke, said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Doing nothing may also have unintended consequences and may be a worse option than acting. As William James, a famous former resident of this city, once said:

In all important transactions of life, we have to take a leap in the dark... We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow... If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces... What must we do? "Be strong and of good courage." Act for the best, and take what comes... if death ends all, we cannot meet death better.

3. I must seek to live always intending the good. I must live with spiritual resilience in a world where consequences seem increasingly difficult to predict both personally and in the wider world. Afterwards, I just have to live with the consequences of my choices, intended or otherwise. But I must intend the good.
4. I must acknowledge that I live in a world which shows a certain randomness, where it is often not easy to see God's hand on the levers of control. This randomness is another side of the mystery of God. I must live, and help my students learn to live, with a measure of uncertainty, and with that twin of faith which is called doubt.
5. I must pray that God will be *with* me. Emmanuel, God with us. I must pray for God's presence but sometimes have to face His apparent absence. Just like Cleopas in the Emmaus story. For Jesus sometimes appears when you least expect Him and disappears when you most need Him. Or so it seems.
6. I must live freely choosing among options and readily embracing responsibilities, even those

which are brought by consequences which I did not intend, and would not have wanted.

Knowing Ourselves Loved by God

7. Most importantly—and here we come to the heart of the matter—I, we, have to know deep inside ourselves that we are loved by God. As did Cleopas. We must *allow* ourselves to be loved by God. It sounds very simple. But there may be many barriers to this in our own biography. For example, there are damaging relationships, relationships which might have served as the anteroom of intimacy with God but did not. Some of these barriers may be painful. It may take a long time. We must be friends of time. It is one thing to affirm that “God so loved the world...” but it is quite another to say, “I know myself loved by God.”

Yes, I can say all the right words—I have produced the right verbal formulae myself many times. I have sung karaoke carols to a kitsch Christ and even maybe meant them in some measure. I can affirm the doctrines of salvation, justification, sanctification—Luther’s many concerns—but to know myself loved by God, that is a different matter.

As we grow slowly into that interior recognition that we are indeed loved by God, we will then slowly shed burdens of unnecessary guilt, of wearying obligation, of debilitating shame under which we are prone to suffer. So much use of the tyrannical phrase I should have...!” Guilt, shame, exaggerated expectations of self and others produce many damaging unintended emotional and relational consequences.

We will manage, with love, the constant, daily felt need to justify, explain ourselves, to others, to God, to ourselves. We will avoid the need to compare ourselves in value with others. Less hounded by peer review! Then, maybe, the unintended harmful consequences will be fewer.

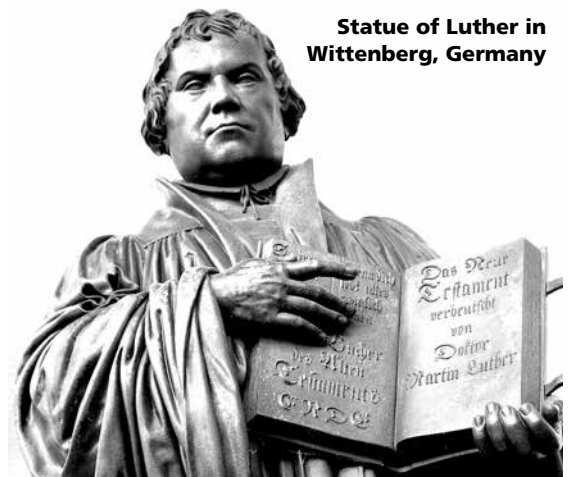
To know ourselves truly loved by God.

I find it is not easy. I suspect I am not alone even among teachers of “religious studies.” Maybe it is “the work of a lifetime,” to borrow a phrase.

Jeanette Winterson, a contemporary English writer, spoke these words over her father’s coffin: “The things I regret in my life are not errors of judgement but failures of feeling.”

Meister Eckhart, a forerunner of Luther, in a modern version says, “How can anyone be compassionate towards her neighbour who is not compassionate towards herself? This is why Jesus says: be compassionate! He wants our compassion to begin at home. He wants us to be compassionate towards our own body and soul.”

The invitation to us passed on by Luther is that we should know ourselves deeply loved by God, overwhelmed by grace. Not in some technical sense to satisfy a system of checks and balances. Loved “in the inward parts,” to use the psalmist’s phrase. Then, and then alone, will we be able to live with the consequences of choices, intended and unintended, of our lives. If we do not know ourselves loved by God, we shall always feel close to being overwhelmed.



Statue of Luther in Wittenberg, Germany

True Reformation

I wonder if Luther had any idea that his simple affirmation—that we are saved by grace, justified by faith—would be entombed by generations of church people who would try to make a thing, a system, a concept, a doctrine, out of the love of God in Christ Jesus? Any idea that Jesus would be entombed a second time by churchmen? Such distortion has sometimes been a death-dealing and unintended consequence of Luther’s new life-giving understanding of faith in God.

It is one thing to affirm that “God so loved the world...” but it is quite another to say, “I know myself loved by God.”

Reformation...“Revival and reformation” is a slogan much loved by some in our Church. But reformation begins not in the strategic planning committee of any large ecclesiastical organization but in a monk’s cell, in a small provincial town, far from the seat of power, on the margins.

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Named and Known, Known and Loved

Scholars all, we need to know ourselves loved by God. That is our main qualification for teaching our students. To hear our own name spoken by God in the stillness.

Name me! Tell me who I am! Tell me why I was created! An old rabbinic prayer captures it well: “O Master of the universe, let me once before I die, hear my own true name on the lips of my brothers and sisters.”

Mary recognized Jesus after the resurrection when He spoke her name.

“I have called you by your name – you are mine” Isaiah 43:1.

We need to have access to ourselves. We must give God access to those parts of ourselves which we rarely visit.

The simple prayer of the Welsh poet-priest captures it precisely: “Eavesdrop my heart.”

I believe I need to submit myself to a discipline, yes, a regular discipline, of knowing myself deeply loved by God. Have I travelled across the Atlantic just to say that? Yes, I have. Partly because there are many voices—even in the Church—telling us that we barely make it into the suburbs of God’s affections.

“You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart” Psalm 51:6.

Or as the two Emmaus followers said: “Stay! For our hearts were warmed on the road...”

2017...it’s a year for celebrating, remembering. Perhaps the most important thing for us to remember is that we are, I am, loved by God. To know ourselves loved by God.

All the rest is footnote. (And how we love our footnotes!)

To know ourselves truly loved by God. I

wonder what the unintended consequences of knowing that would be?

So, I pray that you may recognize the pulse of God’s fierce love beating in your hearts...

Now, and in what little remains of 2017, and always. Amen. ■

NOTE: It is, in my view, not necessary to provide footnotes to a sermon as one would with an academic paper. However, some readers may wish to pursue some of the citations I have used. The words of Edmund Burke were slightly refashioned by Abraham Lincoln. The citation from William James is from a lecture he gave at Harvard and subsequently widely published as “The Will to Believe,” for example in J. Hick, ed., *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 214–231. The words are not actually his; he himself is quoting from Fitz-James Stephen. Ellen White famously said that “Sanctification is the work of a lifetime.” *Christ’s Object Lessons*, (Washington DC: Review and Herald), 65. Jeanette Winterson’s words come from her memoir *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2011), 210. The words cited from Meister Eckhart are from an unusual collection of his words: Simon Parke, *Conversations with Meister Eckhart*, (Guildford: White Crow Books, 2009). The rabbinic prayer is from Rabbi Yehuda of Prague in the sixteenth century. The brief prayer of R. S. Thomas is from “Requests,” in R. S. Thomas, *Selected Poems*, (London, UK: Penguin, 2003), 236.



Michael Pearson is Principal Lecturer Emeritus at Newbold College of Higher Education where he has spent a lifetime—some of it as Vice-Principal—but most of it teaching Ethics, Philosophy, and Spirituality. He is spending his retirement writing, teaching, and enjoying being with his family, free from the demands of endless committees.