

Truth-telling in a Truth Crisis

BY CARMEN LAU

Ryan White became the synecdoche that stimulated an earnest commitment to understand and treat HIV, and January 6 will likely become the trope to illustrate the problem of people with much information, but little truth or wisdom.

As analysts look for potential historical guidance, the Millerites have been cited as relevant.

Kurt Andersen points out that a 500-year, convoluted history has brought American society to a moment in which a large segment of the population is able to make space for post-facts and post-truths. In his book, *Fantasyland*, Andersen uses the case study of Seventh-day Adventists as one example to show the phenomenon in which people adapt a guiding narrative when original predictions are wrong.

Within Adventist culture, there is a mixed response to the idea that the Great Disappointment could more aptly be named the Great Mistake. In *Being Wrong*, Kathryn Schulz discusses the “wrong, but” strategy of some Millerites after the Lord did not come. Rather than owning up to being wrong, some groups tend to search for an alternate response that allows them to say, “we were wrong, but . . .” Schulz cites William Miller’s own reflection from later in his life as one where he says he was, simply, wrong.

As all men are responsible to the community for the sentiments they may promulgate, the public has a right to expect from me, a candid statement in reference to my disappointment in not realizing the Advent of Christ in AD 1843–4, which I had confidently believed. We expected the personal coming of Christ at that time, and now to contend that we were

not mistaken, is dishonest. We should never be ashamed to frankly (sic) confess all our errors” (218).

As descendants of the group who were wrong, how can we move toward self-awareness? God never endorses ignorance, yet confirmation bias complicates learning and can contort the path to wise and humble discipleship. Controlling fears limit the capacity for critical thinking. Moreover, a false sense of certainty restricts the ability to learn and yields complacency in the face of actual problems. Does the fear of being wrong, or making a mistake, hamper our witness to a great God and His work?

Based on numerous biblical commands to “fear not,” a follower of Jesus must embrace the duty to mitigate fear within oneself and within one’s context. Based on the explicit commandment not to bear false witness, a follower of Jesus must attend to cognitive strategies that guide a person to assess reality with accuracy.

Admirable folks are the ones who tell the truth. Admirable Christians are ones who “fear not.” It takes courage to be humble. It takes courage to be wrong.

Theology can be the queen of sciences. Beliefs about God impact the study of sociology, psychology, political science, ecology, and more. A person with a grounded picture of God’s character can excel intellectually in any field. We should lament that we have not put theology in its proper space as *the* head of all knowledge. We can lament that theological misconceptions have made Adventists vulnerable to a sweeping Christian Nationalism that uses the cover of “Christianity” to support efforts that move to undermine human rights for all. We can lament the encroachment of victimhood mentality upon abundant Christian living. Fearful and resentful Christians can do the

unthinkable and use misguided biblical hermeneutics to guide the way.

Jeremiah warned leaders and prophets and priests that wounds may not heal. Saying “peace, peace,” when there is no peace, will not work. Communities must lament to pierce cultural numbness, acknowledging mistakes and injustices, before healing can occur. Lament can put one in reality.

Knowing the truth of God’s character helps one sort truth and error in the culture.

What Christians claim to believe about God, and about humans created in the image of God, are *facts*. We can lament that we have been a part of something

that did not recognize these impactful truths.

Further Reading

Andersen, Kurt. *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire*. New York: Random House, 2017.

Schulz, Kathryn. *Being Wrong: Adventures in Margin of Error*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.



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LETTERS to the Editor

Appreciation for Research

Editor,

Just a few words towards the end of this strange year.

I wanted to let you know that I greatly enjoyed the last issue of *Spectrum* of 2020, in particular the meticulously researched articles by Gil Valentine and Ron Lawson. But the issue as such was of spectacular quality.

I wish you and yours, and the *Spectrum* staff, a blessed 2021. I hope I will be able to contribute in a small way also in the new year.

Warm greetings,
Reinder Bruinsma

The Church and Its LGBT Members

Editor,

Ron Lawson’s article “The Adventist Church and its LGBT Members” in *Spectrum*, vol. 48, no. 4 left me winded—it was very long (not a criticism), and, as it

recounted the many attempts LGBT Adventists have had seeking a home in the church, I was repeatedly lifted up in hope only to be dropped again by the despair these people have experienced.

Thank you for publishing it. Professor Lawson’s writing style is comfortable, clear, and thorough. I am cisgender myself, and have no direct experience with the issues LGBT people confront, in the church or society in general. So this review of the church’s relationship to its LGBT members opened a window for me. I am grateful for his forthright descriptions of his own experiences as well as that of the LGBT community at large.

Edwin Karlow

Perspective on “A Text of Tyrants”

Editor,

I finished reading the article “A Text of Tyrants: Fresh Thinking on Romans 13:1–7,” in Vol. 48, Issue 4, 2020. The article focused on an argument for the interpolation of

the passage in the text of Romans 13. That representation, though not definitive or conclusive, as the writer himself admitted, did not cause me cognitive dissonance, nor was my prior understanding of that text subjected to a transfiguration. Why?

As a layman, I have distilled five basic principles/rules that have been quite helpful to understand the Bible text. They are:

1. The Bible text should be read and understood literally in its context, and such literalism must advance the welfare of relationships.
2. If the literal meaning works violence to the immediate context of the text, then the literal rule does not apply. In such a case a circumscribed literal meaning or a metaphorical meaning ought to be explored.
3. Where a conflict arises in the application of the literal rule to two or more similar texts in similar contexts, choose the literal option that most approximates or accords with reason and reality.
4. Compare what other writers of the bible text have written about the same issue within the same context. If the literal rule applies and there is no conflict, it is reasonably safe to follow the literal application.
5. Compare what the Bible records about what Jesus Christ said about the same issue. What He said is the standard definitive principle (literal or metaphorical) applicable to the issue.

Apply these principles to Romans 13:1–7, the following observations emerge:

1. A literal application of the text would logically and practically require all believers to comply with the demands—whether good or evil, expressed or implied—of the civil authority. Such compliance would probably enhance civil peace and welfare.
2. A literal application to the believers of the fledgling church, that although needing as much a conducive environment for proclaiming the gospel as possible, would have been counterproductive. Their actual experiences, (as) far as may be determined, does not accord with a literal application.
3. When the early church faced opposition from the religious authority of the day, the same ones of whom

Jesus told His hearers, “they sit in the seat of Moses: whatever they command you to do, that do,” their response in Acts 4:19, 20 was, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, judge. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard.”

4. Peter and the church were pragmatic without betraying the principle of obeying God rather than man. They wisely suspended the public nature of their ministry within the jurisdiction of the hostile civil authority. They took practical steps in doing so as can be inferred from the record of Acts 13.
5. Paul did not use his civil leverage when the civil authority ordered him to leave the (Philippi) jurisdiction. Paul did not resist the demand but submitted to it.
6. The experience of Peter and the early church and of Paul have left us indices of how believers may submit to the civil authority demands (expressed or implied) without compromising the principle of obeying God rather than man.
7. In 1 Peter 2:13–17, the apostle Peter, as does Paul, similarly, in Romans 13: 1–7, provides the church with specific pastoral counsel within a wider context of living the life of faith in relation to fellow believers and third parties. The civil authority is one of those third parties.
8. The agreement of the apostles Peter and Paul, on essentially the same approach to the same issue of the Christian’s relationship to civil authorities, makes the suggested argument for interpolation in Romans 13:1–7 less cogent, if not entirely flawed, from my layman perspective.

Robert Innocent

Response from Author William Johnsson

I found Mr. Innocent’s response fascinating because it presents a jurist’s approach. Such multifaceted discussion can enlighten the biblical text. My article was almost entirely reasoned from the text itself; the other was based on comparison with other passages of the Bible. In doing so it failed to deal with the problems in the text itself, namely the change in mood from chapter 12 to 13:1, and again from 13:6 to 13:7 and forward. These shifts to me are persuasive.

William Johnsson