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**MAKING PEACE WITH DEATH:  
EXPERIENTIAL, RATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC ARGUMENTS FOR BELIEF**

by  
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**Context and Purpose**

The context of this paper is the 26th Faith and Learning Seminar sponsored by the Education Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Why should a church try so tenaciously to bring heart and mind together? For a church, the call to faith should be self-evident; and for someone steeped in Scripture, the same would also seem to be true of reason. In the familiar words of the King James Version: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all they getting get understanding" (Prov. 4:7). "Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord" (Isa. 1:18). "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

**Formal Purpose:** If Scripture is clear that faith and reason belong together, other voices in our culture are eager to force a choice between them: either think or believe, not both. The purpose of this paper is to confront that dichotomy in the interests of a both/and model. With a primary focus on the question of death, I explore the role of experiential, rational, and scientific arguments for faith in the life of the believer -- as the believer faces the reality of death in God's created universe.

**Evangelistic Purpose:** In addition to the more narrowly defined formal purpose, however, a clearly-defined evangelistic purpose also drives this paper, namely, the conviction that the time has come for Adventists to model wholism in its complete sense, not merely a wholism of the individual, but a wholism of community. I am convinced that Adventists have a God-given opportunity to demonstrate to the universe that in Christ the Spirit can indeed bring together God's children -- from every nation, kindred, tongue, people, and personality -- to form one body of Christ. In the words of Ephesians 4:13, God's purpose is that "all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (NRSV).

It is in light of that evangelistic purpose that my concerns become most urgent. As a committed follower of Jesus Christ, and a passionate member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I want my church to grow and prosper. I want it to be a home for sinners, a place where people can draw strength and courage. I want my church to help us become better people, holy people; to help focus our energies on making this world a better place; and to help us keep alive the blessed hope of a restored world. And in these respects I see much good happening in my church. I see people making decisions to follow Jesus and become part of the church; I see life-long members of the church testifying to the blessings which the church has brought them.

But I am also troubled by our failings. I find it deeply disturbing when someone who once believed turns away from my church. While Adventism has always suffered its share of losses, what I find particularly unsettling at present is the frequency with which I see Adventists deliberately choosing atheism or departing for other communities of faith, some to the liberal side of the spectrum and some to the conservative.

In a highly individualistic American culture, higher education and increasing material wealth have made Adventists vulnerable to a plethora of options within the social and economic mainstream. In the face of this volatile situation, the church must wrestle with two important questions: 1) What factors determine whether a person will choose a thorough-going secular rationalism on the left, a deeply religious fundamentalism on the right, or something in between? And 2) How much of that spectrum, the middle ground between the two extremes, can Adventism encompass and still be faithful to God, faithful to Scripture? Finding answers to these two questions requires that we listen carefully to the reasons people give for believing and for not believing, testing their arguments by Scripture.

We should also be aware of the double pendulum reaction evident both in the church and in culture, namely, that

children from conservative homes are often drawn to those of a more liberal bent, while children from liberal homes are often drawn to those who are more conservative. John McClarty, editor of *Adventist Today*, captured the implications of that puzzling crossover in the concluding words of an editorial: "So as is sometimes said in other contexts: perhaps we should stay together for the sake of the children."<sup>1</sup>

As noted above, some voices in the contemporary culture do not wish to recognize the possibility of middle ground. For them it is one extreme or the other. Typically, the rationalists on the left pose the choice as a stark either/or alternative: think or believe; not both. In many ways, popular culture has made such a "choice" seem almost coercive. A few years ago a retired Boeing engineer sitting beside me on a trans-Atlantic flight quoted Carl Sagan as saying that the IQ of believers falls between 80 and 120. Those below 80 don't know enough to believe; those over 120 know too much to believe. My seatmate told me that his choice for atheism came at age 15. It happened when he was sitting in church one Sunday listening to his father preach. Suddenly, believing just didn't make sense anymore.

The rise of modern science has played a key role in driving a wedge between thinking and believing. Throughout much of the Christian era, great saints and great scholars could live inside the same skin. Even as late as the early nineteenth century in America, anyone claiming to be an atheist was considered to be virtually insane. The dominant spirit of the age is captured in the concluding words of a poem about the Bible by Sir Walter Scott: "But better had they ne'er been born, that read to doubt or read to scorn."<sup>2</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the tables had turned dramatically. Wallace Stevens, a prominent American poet, exclaimed with reference to the Bible: "I'm glad the silly book is gone."<sup>3</sup>

As secular rationalism tightened its grip on mainstream culture, many devout believers took refuge in the Fundamentalist movement, turning away from mainstream educational institutions in favor of newly-founded Bible Colleges. In the 1930s, the accreditation debate among North American Adventists reveals that Adventist colleges almost went down the same path. We might have done so if accreditation requirements for Loma Linda had not demanded that students admitted for medical training have undergraduate degrees from accredited colleges.<sup>4</sup> By the 1960s, official sources could claim that Adventists were not Fundamentalists. But Adventist publications from the 1920s through the 1950s clearly indicate that we often wholeheartedly identified ourselves as Fundamentalists.<sup>5</sup>

The willingness among Adventist to distance ourselves from Fundamentalism in the 1960s follows on the heels of a similar development from within Fundamentalism itself. At mid-century, the so-called "Evangelical" movement was born, led by devout Christians who wished to be less strident in their relationship with mainstream culture and more open to rigorous academic pursuits. The quip by George Marsden, the highly-regarded Evangelical church historian, that Evangelicals are simply Fundamentalists on Valium, captures some of the flavor of the movement. Still committed to the "inerrancy" of Scripture, a primary sticking-point for many Adventists, Evangelicals have steadily increased their involvement in mainstream higher education, though an exasperated discontent is certainly reflected in the title of the 1994 Eerdmans book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, written by another respected Evangelical church historian, Mark Noll. The move toward openness may be gaining momentum, however, if the October 2000 cover story of *Atlantic Monthly* represents a correct assessment of the current mood. Entitled, "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind," the cover subtitle reads: "The next Great Awakening may be in the world of ideas, as evangelical Christians seek at last to wield some intellectual might."

As devout believers have attempted to return to mainstream academia, a major obstacle has been the bitter rhetoric between the two extremes. On the basis of my own observations, I have concluded that many on the rationalist left are quite willing to be labeled as wicked and blasphemous, even wearing the label as a badge of honor. No one at the religious end of the spectrum, however, indeed, no one anywhere on the spectrum wants to be dumb. No one. So it is that in exchanges between the two extremes, when the conservatives throw up their hands in horror at the "wicked" liberals who have ruled God out of the picture, the liberals just laugh and shrug. But when the liberals cast scorn and condescension on the "dumb" conservatives, the pain and anger is much deeper. Under such conditions genuine dialogue is virtually impossible. When such a standoff happens within a community like Adventism, the results can be tragic.

### **Losing Faith; Finding Faith: A Personal Assessment**

Before focusing more narrowly on the topic of death, I would like to place the discussion in the context of the larger issue of losing and finding faith. Based largely on my own observations, the following outline describes first what I consider to be the primary reasons for loss of faith, and then my own rationale for believing.

#### **1. Reasons for Loss of Faith in God:**

- A. **Intellectual difficulties, based on the collapse of an external "proof" structure: error-free Bible, historically or scientifically-proven prophecy, historical proofs based on archaeology, proof of miracles and cosmology based on scientific models.**
- B. **Intellectual difficulties growing out of perceptions of the world and our own personal needs: the unfairness of the world, i.e. the problem of innocent suffering (random evil); God's apparent absence or silence in time of urgent need; the puzzle of a God both omnipotent and benevolent.**
- C. **Personal difficulties, a sense of impossible demands, either on the basis of performance (external acts) or character (internal condition): the sense of "I'm not good enough to be saved," based on things I want to do or can't do, expectations I can't reach (duties) or prohibitions I can't handle (needs, appetites, and passions); the emotional reaction may appear as depression or rebellion.**
- D. **Crisis of Community: failure of the church to follow Jesus' way in nurturing a caring community; the squelching of honest questions; the use of power politics within the church for personal reasons or to preserve the status quo.**

#### **2. A Rationale for Faith**

- A. **Order does not arise out of chaos**
- B. **Universal longing in human hearts for what is good and right**
- C. **Moral necessity of a restoration:**
  - 1) **The randomness of natural evil**
  - 2) **The problem of human goodness and the natural beauty in the world**
  - 3) **The problem of human evil, the incurable human heart**

#### **3. The Jesus Solution**

- A. **The appeal of a God who fully identifies with a fallen creation, entrusts himself to tainted human beings, dies on their behalf.**
- B. **The appeal of an omnipotent God who grants humans the freedom to love or rebel, thus establishing the possibility of a genuine relationship.**
- C. **The appeal of a God who not only establishes the formal and legal basis for forgiveness of sin (substitution), but also provides the motivational power to seek the good, moving us beyond the evil of our natures to love unlovable people.**

- D. **The appeal of a God who graciously reveals the way of life in words (Scripture) and in the flesh (incarnation).**
- E. **The appeal of a God who promises to return to his creation to restore the created world and renew the human heart.**

**Summary:** The essential foundation for my hope and faith is a moral one, rooted in the story and teachings of Jesus. It does assume that the witnesses to Jesus' life and death are basically reliable, at least as reliable as my best friends. But unless I am misled by my appetites and passions, nothing I see in the Scriptures or in the created world can diminish the power of God's love as revealed in Jesus; nothing can rob me of hope; and nothing can relieve me of my responsibilities to live as God would have me live.

At several points in the above outline, death lurks in the shadows. As an intellectual "reason" for loss of faith, it falls in the second category: the seeming unfairness of the world; the problem of innocent suffering. But it also figures indirectly in the third category insofar as worries about eternal salvation involve the possibility of eternal death.

Under the headings of "Rationale for Faith" and the "Jesus Solution," death is the counterfoil in the longing for restoration and when issues of salvation and substitution are involved. Hope in Jesus makes death the final enemy, an enemy that will be banished when God restores the earth. In the analysis which follows, however, it should become clear that the Bible itself does not reflect a monolithic position over against the death the enemy. Widely divergent attitudes can be found, both among the people who hope and among those who have none. That diversity must be taken seriously by the church, the community that lives in hope.

### **Interpretive Framework**

So how do believers order their arguments when they seek to make peace with death? I am suggesting a three-level hierarchy of effectiveness: experiential, rational, and scientific, in that order. This is the interpretive framework within which I develop my position.

**1. Experiential Argument.** The argument from within, often described by the Christian believer in terms of a relationship with Jesus, the experiential argument is the most intangible, the most mystical, and typically the least vulnerable to attack by external rational arguments. Owen Chadwick actually claims that it is "impossible" for an autobiographer "to describe, intelligibly to others, what moved his mind at its deepest well." Citing Augustine, John Henry Newman, and C. S. Lewis as examples of writers who fail to explain their crucial turning points, Chadwick says, "These inward movements are too profound for those who experience them to articulate successfully."<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I will assert that the experiential argument is the most powerful and effective of the three, but I do not seek to demonstrate the point.

**2. Rational Arguments: Moral and Ethical.** Perceptions of God's goodness and justice lie at the heart of the moral and ethical arguments. Believers express them in the form of a confessions of faith: "O give thanks to the Lord for his goodness endures forever"; or as questions and objections to rejected beliefs: "How could a good God...?" Non-believers buttress their non-belief in terms of the same objections and questions: "How could a good God...?" Even when non-rational factors play a key role in the acceptance, retention, or loss of faith, they are usually clothed with rational arguments. In short, people give explanations of some kind for their faith stance. This second level of argument is the primary focus of this paper. I seek to illustrate the diversity and complexity of the arguments used both for and against faith, but also to identify the common ground which they share.

**3. Scientific Argument.** If the experiential is the argument from within, the internal, then the scientific presents the argument from without, the external -- self-contained "proofs" for or against faith and God. Other types of external proofs can be added to this list: proofs from prophecy, from archaeology, and from

embedded codes in Scripture. Such proofs are generally external to the life and values of the believer, being presented simply as "amazing" phenomena beyond human capabilities and thus proof for God's existence or proof that the Scriptures are true. Such external arguments are the most concrete, the most vulnerable to change and attack, and thus the most dangerous when used in support of faith.

Though it is not the first purpose of this paper to demonstrate the point, I will assert that the believer should view the so-called scientific arguments against faith with suspicion, using them in support of faith with a great deal of caution. Indeed, I would suggest that a proper understanding of nature and science, of religion and revelation, renders scientific arguments virtually neutral. This is particularly true if one defines science in terms of that which is descriptive, demonstrable, repeatable, and testable in a laboratory setting. In our secularizing culture, however, where many devotees of science assume that a naturalist world-view has also been proven by science, believers face a difficult and complex battle indeed.

### A Three-fold Thesis

In light of the foregoing, I seek to demonstrate the following three-fold thesis:

1. **Diversity.** That with reference to death -- especially in connection with questions of sin and final judgment -- believers use a striking variety of biblically-based moral and ethical arguments to defend God's goodness and justice, with the same argument capable of encouraging some but discouraging others.
2. **Living with Diversity.** That in our present sinful world, the followers of Jesus find the appropriate resolution of these conflicting arguments in being faithful to Jesus' two great commands: wholehearted love for God and mutual love for each other. In short, they will recognize that if a particular argument has roots in Scripture, it deserves a place in the life and thinking of the church.
3. **Ultimate Resolution.** That the major conflicts and points of tension diminish significantly (but do not entirely disappear) when believers envision a restored world on the basis of the descriptions in the New Testament.

### Assumptions

The assumptions noted below provide the parameters within which I have chosen to work. Though derived largely from my interaction with Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, they also bear the marks of the cultural and personal biases which are inevitably a part of my own life experiences.

**1. Jesus is the clearest revelation of God and the touchstone for the believer's experience.** The witness of the New Testament, affirmed and clarified in the early Christian centuries, is that Jesus was and is God incarnate, God in the flesh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of the Old Testament. Jesus' claims in this respect were understood but resisted by his contemporaries (cf. John 8:48-59). The claim that Jesus is the clearest and best revelation, highlights two further implications:

- a. **Parts of God's revelation are clearer than others.** Jesus' pointed comparisons in Matthew 5 ("You have heard...but I say") indicate qualitative distinctions within Scripture, distinctions which believers are called to recognize. Similarly, in Hebrews 1 and 2, Jesus is presented as "better" than that which has gone before.
- b. **Even God's clearest revelation to humankind still partakes of the limitations of humanity.** A pointed reminder of human limitations before God is found in Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (NRSV). Such a distinction between the divine and the human enabled Ellen White to say with reference to potentially troubling aspects of Scripture: "Men

will often say that such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible" (ISM 21). And again, "God and heaven alone are infallible" (CWE 37). In short, even God's best efforts to reveal himself to us is a call for humility before him because our finite abilities fall so far short of being able to comprehend an infinite God.

**2. All Scripture is the inspired and authoritative word of God.** Even while Jesus was claiming to be a step above the Old Testament (e.g. Matthew 5), He still accepted it as the fully authoritative Word of God (cf. Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:46-47; 10:34-35).

Because critics have often pointed to "contradictions" in the Bible as "proof" that it could not be from God, devout conservatives have often shied away from recognizing the very contradictions which I believe were designed by God to play an important part in the work his Word is to accomplish among us. The model Ellen White suggests in this connection is the Incarnation with its mysterious blending of the human and the divine (GC vi). Just as Christ was fully human and fully divine, not part human and part divine, so the Bible is fully human and fully divine. Stripping out the supernatural in the name of science is being unfaithful to Scripture just as denying the human in the name of God is being unfaithful to Scripture. Contradictory? Of course. True? Of course. The perspective is captured in a striking quotation from Ellen White which actually uses the term "contradiction" in a positive sense:

Great contradictions presented themselves in Jesus. He was the divine Son of God, and yet a helpless child. The Creator of the worlds, the earth was His possession, and yet poverty marked His life experience at every step. (DA 87)

It is my conviction that Adventists must envision a model for Scripture which allows us to be absolutely honest with both the divine and the human. Liberals want to reject the supernatural, conservatives are fearful of the human. Let us accept both the divine and the human as God's way of communicating His Word to us.

Adventists also believe that the Scriptures point to the manifestation of the phenomenon of inspiration outside the canon of Scripture. When that happens, however, that which is written or spoken under inspiration is not to be granted the same normative quality granted to Scripture. The words of Ellen White, for example, may be seen as true and authoritative, but with a more limited application than that which is granted to Scripture.

Ellen White herself presented such a position in the "Introduction" to her book, *The Great Controversy* (p. viii). On the one hand, she saw the work of the Spirit as being much more pervasive than commonly conceived: "His Spirit was to continue its work throughout the period of the gospel dispensation." And again: "These promises...extend to the church of Christ in all ages." On the other hand, these non-canonical messages from the Spirit did not have the same normative role as Scripture: "Through the Holy Spirit, men received warning, reproof, counsel, and instruction in matters in no way relating to the work of the Scriptures."

Under the general heading of the inspiration of Scripture, three additional, closely-related points more clearly define the framework within which I interpret Scripture:

**a. Cosmic battle:** Because of the cosmic battle between good and evil, God has chosen to limit his power so that goodness will prevail in the end. What Adventists know as "the Great Controversy" is the story of Job written on a cosmic scale: God allows the Enemy and evil to have a painful, shocking, but limited existence so that both evil and love may be seen in their true colors.

**b. Sin and adapted truth:** The radical effect of sin on human thinking means that God's revelation in Scripture is a radical adaptation of truth to the limited understanding of the people he is seeking to reach. The successive disasters recorded in Genesis 3-11 document the effect of demonic interference in our world: rebellion in the garden, Cain's murder of Abel, the Flood, and Babel. When God comes to Abraham, he comes to a man who is emerging from idolatry: Joshua 24:2 states that Abraham's own family worshipped other gods. If we are to understand God's violence in dealing with Old Testament people, we must first grasp

something of the violent results of sin. The cosmic battle between good and evil explains why the God of Sinai came to kill and the God of Golgotha came to die. But it is one and the same God, the God revealed most fully in Jesus Christ.

**c. Love and free choice:** Love freely chosen is God's ideal, an ideal which requires time and patience in a world of sin. Power can quickly coerce; goodness never can; love will take whatever time is needed to win and convince. The story of sin and salvation is the long story (so it seems to humans) of God's patience and love as he seeks to restore a home where love will reign for all eternity.

**3. Reason:** The only God-given faculty for interpreting nature and Scripture is human reason. In a sinful world, reason can be stubborn, blind, and perverse. But it is the only human faculty capable of evaluating data, making choices, and recognizing its own limitations. It is always involved when God makes contact with human beings. If reason is to fulfill its God-given role, it must seek to be honest with all of Scripture and with all of nature, be open to guidance from the Spirit, and be prepared to seek wise counsel from members of the body of Christ. It must be equally willing to question its interpretation of nature and Scripture.

**4. The Spirit.** Without the constant guidance of the Spirit, human reason will inevitably go astray. It is not the task of the Spirit to do our thinking for us, but to be a constant reminder that the work is not just ours, but God's. To pray for the presence of the Spirit when we do our work means that we will use the mind more, not less, and use it more faithfully.

**5. The Church, the body of Christ.** Because of human limitations, limitations made even more striking because of sin, the search for truth should call us to active consultation with other members of the body of Christ. Even with our best efforts, human conclusions will always be finite and limited, never infinite and absolute.

The above assumptions are essential for understanding my willingness to address the issue of death and explore the complex and diverse moral and ethical arguments which believers use in defense of faith and which non-believers use to deny the possibility of faith in God. I believe that the arena of the moral and the ethical is the major battlefield in the great war between good and evil. I also believe that God expects us to call on all the resources of heaven and earth as we seek to be faithful to him. I now turn to the development of my three-fold thesis.

### **Thesis 1: Diversity**

That with reference to death -- especially in connection with questions of sin and final judgment -- believers use a striking variety of biblically-based moral and ethical arguments to defend God's goodness and justice, with the same argument capable of encouraging some but discouraging others.

A monolithic view of "truth" which simply focuses on information to be accepted or rejected is not adequate to the task of dealing with sinful humans. If the believer has a model which makes it safe to see the diversity in Scripture as part of a larger movement toward an ultimate unity, the evidence for diversity in Scripture crops up everywhere. In that connection, several quotations from Ellen White have significantly shaped my thinking:

#### **1. Genuine truth more important than "theological" truth:**

A jealous regard for what is termed theological truth often accompanies a hatred of genuine truth as made manifest in life. The darkest chapters of history are burdened with the record of crimes committed by bigoted religionists. (DA 309)

Men profess faith in the truth; but if it does not make them sincere, kind, patient, forbearing, heavenly-minded, it is a curse to its possessor, and through their influence it is a curse to the world. (DA 310)



## 2. Diverse authors for diverse human minds:

Why do we need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, a John, a Paul, and all the writers who have borne testimony in regard to the life and ministry of the Saviour? Why could not one of the disciples have written a complete record, and thus have given us a connected account of Christ's earthly life? Why does one writer bring in points that another does not mention? Why, if these points are essential, did not all these writers mention them? It is because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way. Certain truths appeal much more strongly to the minds of some than of others. (CPT 432)

## 3. Diversity in the understanding of truth:

Every association of life calls for the exercise of self-control, forbearance, and sympathy. We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light are to another most difficult and perplexing. (MH 483)

When we turn to Scripture for evidence of moral and ethical concerns, we discover remarkable diversity and striking unity. Sometimes the "moral" concerns are explicit; sometimes they are simply implied and assumed. The most persistent moral and ethical concern involves God's relationship with evil and death. In what follows I focus on the diverse responses to death in Scripture. It is my conviction that if a particular stance toward death can be documented from Scripture, we should be more charitable with those in our modern era who adopt a similar stance, even when it falls short of our perception of the ideal which we believe we see in Jesus and as portrayed in the New Testament. In particular, the Old Testament portrays God as much more actively involved in mandating and approving forms of death which we find abhorrent. Perhaps most surprising is the presence of death in the Old Testament conception of the "New Heavens and New Earth." Not until Daniel 12:1-2 does the Old Testament clearly point to a general resurrection at the end of time.

Where the Old Testament differs so dramatically from its surrounding culture is in its view of God's relationship to creation and history. In contrast with pagan creation myths which blur the distinction between the divine and the created order, the biblical accounts always present God the Creator and Redeemer as separate and distinct from the material world. Scholars of every perspective see Genesis 1 as a powerful polemic against the pagan view which could only imagine creation as emerging from the battle of the gods, the chaos monsters. The Canaanite religion depicted no hope for restoration, for nature simply continued in endless cycles. Modern materialists are cursed to the same hopelessness, the endless brutal cycle of nature. Only those who believe in the story of Jesus have a hope rooted in history. God's great acts in history stand as landmarks along a highway leading to restoration and renewal: Creation, Fall, and the Flood; the call of Abraham, Slavery, Exodus from Egypt, Entry into Canaan; Judges, Kings and Prophets; Exile and Restoration -- the story reeks of hope and renewal. Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection; Second Coming and New Earth. God has always had great plans for his people, for his creation. But the great battle between good and evil, between God and Satan has terribly clouded the issue. That's why the Old Testament scene is so violent. But if we know Jesus, we can see where He is taking His people even while we sense the horrific impact of sin along the way.

And now to document the complex picture of how God's people struggled to see how a good God could be involved with death:

1. **Death of the innocent along with the guilty?** Abraham and Moses provide two of the more striking statements of moral concern over death. Both were friends of God who openly challenged God when they sensed the potential for acts unworthy of a just and compassionate deity. In Abraham's case, he confronted God over the fate of Sodom:

Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it. Far be it from you

to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? (Gen. 18:23-25)

**2. A hasty death penalty on rebels in the family?** Moses showed his true colors by rejecting God's invitation to take Israel's place as God's special people. When God threatened to destroy the rebels, Moses had words with God:

Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth." Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." (Exod. 32:11-12)

Presumably, in a secular, individualist age, concerned citizens like Abraham and Moses would turn away from serving God if he were shown to be unjust or cruel. But neither Abraham nor Moses turned away -- perhaps, it could be argued, because God responded positively to the appeals of both men. God's response to Moses is particularly striking in the King James Version: "And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people" (Exod. 32:14). It's worth noting that in the King James Version of the Old Testament, God repents more often than anyone else.

Most moderns could identify with the concerns which led Abraham and Moses to confront God. Abraham had the better case since he was concerned about the death of innocent people; Moses was concerned about the death of guilty people, but still interpreted the prospect of mass death of the Israelites as a premature judgment from a God who claimed these people as his own. In short, it was human death which aroused their moral and ethical concerns. And we would readily concur.

But we are less likely to concur with other "deadly" events involving these men. According to Genesis 22, Abraham did not flinch at God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22); we would flinch; Abraham did not. Moses did not hesitate to pronounce a sentence of death on the rebels who stirred up trouble at Sinai. At his command, the Levites girded on their swords and killed 3000 men. We would rather say, "Go, and sin no more." But that wasn't Moses. Gird on your swords, he said. We flinch; Moses did not.

In Abraham's conversation with God over Sodom, however, another concern makes a tentative appearance, namely, the concern for the corporate. Abraham does not plead for justice for each individual. Rather, he asks that a handful of righteous be treated as the salt of earth, so to speak, a preservative in the midst of a wicked city. Such a concern for community is a healthy corrective to Western individualism.

Yet elsewhere that concern for the corporate functions in ways which western Christians find deeply troubling. And that leads to the next point in documenting the Old Testament struggle with death:

**3. Corporate personality: a common fate for all.** The story of Achan (Joshua 7) painfully illustrates what Old Testament scholars refer to as the idea of "corporate personality." Defined as the "extension of a person's personality beyond himself in both time and space," corporate personality submerges the individual in the corporate, so that the sin of the individual affects the whole community and the punishment of the perpetrator can include his entire family and property. Aside from the story of Achan, its most vivid illustration is found in 2 Samuel 21, the story of blood guilt for Saul, where seven members of Saul's family are impaled before the Lord because Saul broke the oath made to the Gibeonites (cf. Joshua 9). The story is so violent that even Ellen White ventures no comment on it. Indeed, in the Scriptural index which is part of the three-volume *Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*, every chapter of 1 and 2 Samuel lists numerous references from her writings. But in all of her published corpus, there is no trace of a comment on 2 Samuel 21. The index moves from 2 Samuel 20 to 22.

In the story of Achan, Joshua 7 makes it clear that when Achan broke ranks and stole some of the sacred booty from Jericho, his sin was the cause of the nation's defeat at Ai. Subsequently Achan's whole family paid the price for his sin. To illustrate how much their conception of justice differed from ours, it is helpful simply to list the specific points

in their concept of justice to which we would react negatively. To the Old Testament person, none of the points on the following list needed to be defended. However much the scene may horrify us, it was self-evident to them:

- a. Dedication of a whole city and its inhabitants to destruction, an example of *cherem*, the sacred ban (see #4 below).
- b. Determining the culprit by means of casting lots.
- c. Death penalty for theft.
- d. Death penalty by stoning.
- e. Death penalty for Achan's family.
- f. Death penalty for Achan's livestock.
- g. Destruction by fire of all Achan's possessions.
- h. Memorializing Achan's death with a mound of stones over the battered and burned remnants of Achan's family and property.

To be properly horrified by the scene, we might imagine it on video or happening in front of our church just before prayer meeting. Where is Abraham with his concern for the death of the innocent? No one in the story flinched. No one. We do, but they didn't.

**4. Cherem (the ban): dedication (to destruction) of everything alive.** Another brutal custom from our perspective is reflected in "the (sacred) ban." Usually the "dedication" is to destruction, though items or people may be "dedicated" to other sacred use. The specifics may vary, but the basic rule is that no one has the right to use the "dedicated" objects (or people) for his or her own private purposes. The following biblical passages illustrate the custom:

- a. **Jericho (Joshua 7).** At Jericho, Rahab and her family were saved; the precious metals were dedicated to the Lord's treasury; everything else was dedicated to destruction. The nation was defeated at Ai because Achan broke the ban at Jericho. Achan and his family were also punished thereafter. Joshua put it this way to Achan: "Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD is bringing trouble on you today" (Josh. 7:25).
- b. **Jabesh-gilead and the dismembered concubine (Judges 19-21).** In the story of the dismembered concubine, the whole city of Jabesh-Gilead was "dedicated" to destruction because they did not honor the community's oath to join battle against Benjamin, but the virgins were "dedicated" to sacred purpose, namely, to be wives of the Benjaminites who remained.
- c. **Saul and the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15).** In the story of Saul and the Amalekites, the ban came directly from the mouth of the LORD: "Utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:3). Saul lost the kingdom because he thought he could save the king and some of the best animals to sacrifice to the Lord. Modern horror with the story is reflected in the way *The Clear Word Bible* handles the story, eliminating "babies" from God's command in verse 3 and adding another category of animals to the list in its place. Similarly, in Numbers 31:17, where Moses commands Israel to kill the baby boys among the Midianites, *The Clear Word Bible* substitutes "every adult male" for "every male among the little ones."<sup>7</sup>
- d. **Apostates from Yahweh (Deut. 13:6-18).** If isolated from the larger picture of "the Great Controversy," there would seem to be no trace of free choice in this narrative. Any town which turns to another god was

to be dedicated to destruction. All living creatures including the livestock were to be put to the sword. Then everything was to be burned "as a whole burnt offering to the LORD your God" (Deut. 13:16).

Typically devout conservatives have "explained" this violence by declaring that Israel was under a direct theocracy. I am increasingly uncomfortable with such an explanation, for it implies that the closer God comes to humanity, the more violent he becomes in response to human sin. Precisely here the archaeologists have provided a significant illumination for us, for in 1868 the Moabite stone came to light with an inscription from the Moabite King Mesha in celebration of his victory over Israel (in the days of Ahab; cf. 2 Kings 3). Praising his god, Mesha claims that he "dedicated" 40 Israelite cities to destruction. In short, *cherem* was not God's idea, but a violent human invention in response to the violence of sin. Because God values freedom of choice, he honored their convictions on justice, expecting them to be faithful to their consciences just as he expects us to be faithful to ours. The power of the Old Testament narrative lies in its careful documentation of how God gradually led his people to a clearer and better way. He worked with them to restore their minds and consciences and he works with us. For us, that means being "conformed to the image of his son" (Romans 8:29), the Son who came to reveal the Father, the Son who never killed anyone, who never even laid a hand on anyone, not even when he cleansed the temple. As one New Testament scholar put it, Jesus only attacked the furniture, not the people. That is our ideal and our hope, a kingdom ruled by Jesus where no one will hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. What is clear in the Old Testament is the violence of *cherem*; the theocracy interpretation does not move us forward theologically, but does serve the practical purpose of preventing modern Christians from imitating the Old Testament custom. I believe that the better interpretation is to work from the perspective of a radical divine adaptation to human need. That allows us to read the Old Testament with joy and horror, saying with full confidence that Jesus is the clearest revelation of God who came to show us what God is really like -- but that he was also the God of the Old Testament. He is the same gracious God everywhere we meet him, even when He is graciously adapting his methods to include the violent custom of *cherem*.

**5. Avenger of blood (*goel* = redeemer) and the cities of refuge (Numbers 35:9-34).** Behind the gracious provision of cities of refuge is another violent custom, that of blood vengeance. The *Goel* (KJV = "Redeemer") was the "near kinsman who comes to the rescue of the family name, honor, and property." The book of Ruth reveals the joyous side of the *Goel*'s work, for Boaz serves as the *Goel* to "redeem" the family name and property by marrying Ruth. But the cities of refuge recall the violent side of ancient life, indeed blood vengeance is with us still among those who do not know Jesus, the Jesus who told us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, and go the second mile.

But even the gracious half-way house provided by the cities of refuge retain aspects of "justice" which horrify us. If you committed what we call first degree murder today (premeditated killing), the *Goel* was obligated to kill you. Even if you fled to the city of refuge, justice would require that you be handed over to the *Goel* for execution (Num. 35:21). A gentle follower of Jesus would find that requirement difficult. But even more troublesome are the provisions for the person who kills someone by accident. First you would have to be able to run faster than the *Goel* in order to get to the city of refuge ahead of him. If he caught you before you got there it was over. And even after you were declared innocent, you had to stay inside the city until the death of the high priest. The *Goel* had a perfect right to linger outside the city gate and kill you if you ventured out of the city.

But right here is where Ellen White offers explicit support for the concept of radical divine adaptation (also known as divine condescension or accommodation). It is the only instance I know of in her writings where she is explicit in this way:

The appointment of these cities had been commanded by Moses, "that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares. And they shall be unto you cities for refuge," he said, "that the manslayer die not, until he stand before the congregation in judgment." [Num. 35:11-12] This merciful provision was rendered necessary by the ancient custom of private vengeance, by which the punishment of the murderer devolved on the nearest relative or the next heir of the deceased. In cases where guilt was clearly evident, it was not necessary to wait for a trial by the magistrates. The avenger might pursue the criminal anywhere, and put him to death wherever he should be found. The Lord did not see fit to abolish this custom at that time; but he made provision to insure the safety of those who should take life unintentionally. (PP 515)

Why did God not immediately restore them to a "perfect" system of justice? Because he valued their free choice and met them where they were. That principle of adaptation affects everything in Scripture. Two additional Ellen White quotations are appropriate here in that connection, the first dealing with God's careful use of words (the context is dealing with the nature of heaven), the second with the necessity for slow, careful growth (the context is dealing with health reform):

**Adaptation:** "The Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, early perception, of earthly beings may comprehend His words. Thus is shown God's condescension. He meets fallen human beings where they are. The Bible perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought." (1SM 22)

**Slow, Careful Growth:** "We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are. Some of us have been many years in arriving at our present position in health reform. It is slow work to obtain a reform in diet. We have powerful appetites to meet; for the world is given to gluttony. If we should allow the people as much time as we have required to come up to the present advanced state in reform, we would be very patient with them, and allow them to advance [21] step by step, as we have done, until their feet are firmly established upon the health reform platform. But we should be very cautious not to advance too fast, lest we be obliged to retrace our steps. In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people." (*Testimonies* 3:20-21)

The above quotations have helped me make sense out of a world that is radically different from mine, radically different from Jesus' world, too, but headed in the direction that Jesus would want all of us to go, a world where justice is done, where the innocent are protected, indeed a world where no one will hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. And that prepares the way for us to turn to eschatology.

**6. A new earth where only old people die (Is. 65:17-25).** One of the most beautiful passages about the New Earth in the Old Testament contains a troublesome verse for those of us who believe that there will be no death there (Rev. 21:4). If one allows the Old Testament to place the emphasis for itself (rather than reading the New Testament doctrines back into it), then it is clear that the inspired writer was dreaming of a world where no one would die before their time. Everyone would live to a ripe old age:

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. (Isaiah 65:20)

**7. A new world where sinners only gradually disappear (Zechariah 14).** If Isaiah hints that sinners are still lurking in the corners of the kingdom, Zechariah 14 is more explicit, and thus even more troublesome if one expects to find the full New Testament picture in the Old Testament. The picture in Zechariah 14 is one in which the new earth has been established in Jerusalem, though the battle still rages in the suburbs and beyond. This is the passage used by modern Dispensationalists to argue for childbirth, death, and animal sacrifices during the millennium. Some of the more significant verses are cited here:

This shall be the plague with which the LORD will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh shall rot while they are still on their feet; their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths. On that day a great panic from the LORD shall fall on them, so that each will seize the hand of a neighbor, and the hand of the one will be raised against the hand of the other (vss. 12-13).

Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths. If any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, there will be no rain upon them (vss. 16-17).

The lesson from these passages is that we could afford to be cautious in outlining the precise details of the end time. The Lord will come. The how and the when may be a real surprise. In every case there is restoration and there is judgment, but only the New Testament in the light of Jesus promises a world fully purified of evil. That was too much for the Old Testament people to be able to understand. But the question of the final judgment is also important and here I will depart from my biblical base and turn to the experience of Ellen White who had a remarkable experience with the doctrine of hell, an experience that can be instructive for us.

**8. From hell as a necessity to hell as a cause for atheism: the experience of Ellen White.** Those familiar with Adventist history will know that the doctrine of the non-immortality of the soul became known as one of our landmarks, hammered out in the 1840s by our Adventist forbears. But in the experience of Ellen White, her use of hell as an argument for or against God underwent a dramatic change and reveals how "experience" came to play a key role in evaluating the place of Christian doctrine in the life of the Christian. In the first quotation below, she gives her "argument" in favor of hell. It is part of her autobiography, written in 1881, and describes her memory of a conversation with her mother when her mother began to study the doctrine of soul sleep (non-immortality of the soul). The second quotation, coming much later in her experience reveals her argument against hell, namely, that it drives people into atheism:

**The need for hell:** "Why mother!" cried I, in astonishment, "this is strange talk for you! If you believe this strange theory, do not let any one know of it; for I fear that sinners would gather security from this belief, and never desire to seek the Lord." (1T 39)

**The danger of hell:** The errors of popular theology have driven many a soul to skepticism who might otherwise have been a believer in the Scriptures. It is impossible for him to accept doctrines which outrage his sense of justice, mercy, and benevolence; and since these are represented as the teaching of the Bible, he refuses to receive it as the word of God. (GC 525)

The sobering truth is that if we present a doctrine in such a way as to offend a person's sense of "justice, mercy, and benevolence," we need to take another look at the doctrine. And from the standpoint of the first thesis, it is remarkable that the same person, at different points in life, can use the same argument in opposite ways, rejecting as dangerous that which once was considered essential. Ellen White and Adventists have retained a clear doctrine of judgment, but have concluded that an eternally burning hell is not taught in the Bible, a position now supported by a significant number of world-class biblical scholars. The common ground is that both positions on hell represent honest attempts to affirm the goodness and justice of God, even though hell is a friend in one view and an enemy in the other.

### **Thesis #2: Living with Diversity**

That in our present sinful world, the followers of Jesus find the appropriate resolution of these conflicting arguments in being faithful to Jesus' two great commands: Wholehearted love for God and mutual love for each other.

The essence of the second part of my thesis is that we should test everything we do by Jesus' two great commands, remembering, in particular, the concluding verse, that "on these two commands hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40). In that connection I simply wish to note several Ellen White quotations which I believe point us back to Jesus' example with remarkable clarity and remind us how we treat people is a test of the doctrines we believe. I will simply list the quotations under appropriate headings, then apply the principles more specifically within the creation-evolution debate.

**1. Treat every person as honest.** This quotation was spoken to A. T. Jones, a fire-breathing anti-Catholic in the era of the 1880s and after:

In the advocacy of truth the bitterest opponents should be treated with respect and deference.... The very last work in the controversy may be the enlightenment of those who have not rejected light and evidence, but who

have been in midnight darkness and have in ignorance worked against the truth. Therefore treat every man as honest. Speak no word, do no deed that will confirm any in unbelief. (6T 122)

**2. No ridicule or labeling of opponents.** The following words were addressed to the General Conference president, G. I. Butler, who was one of those who was resisting the new righteousness by faith emphasis presented at the 1888 General Conference by E. G. Waggoner and A. T. Jones:

If a brother differs with you on some points of truth, do not stoop to ridicule, do not place him in a false light or misconstrue his words, making sport of them; do not misinterpret his words and wrest them of their true meaning. This is not conscientious argument. Do not present him before others as a heretic, when you have not with him investigated his positions, taking the Scriptures text-by-text in the Spirit of Christ to show him what is truth. You do not yourself really know the evidence he has for his faith, and you cannot clearly define your own position. Take your Bible, and in a kindly spirit weigh every argument that he presents, and show him by the Scripture if he is in error. When you do this without unkind feelings, you will do only that which is your duty and the duty of every minister of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

**3. Start with points on which you can agree.** Rather than attacking others for their errors, Ellen White suggests that we should begin with points of agreement:

In laboring in a new field, do not think it your duty to say at once to the people, We are Seventh-day Adventists; we believe that the seventh day is the Sabbath; we believe in the non-immortality of the soul. This would often erect a formidable barrier between you and those you wish to reach. Speak to them, as you have opportunity, upon points of doctrine on which you can agree. Dwell on the necessity of practical godliness. Give them evidence that you are a Christian, desiring peace, and that you love their souls. Let them see that you are conscientious. Thus you will gain their confidence; and there will be time enough for doctrines. Let the heart be won, the soil prepared, and then sow the seed, presenting in love the truth as it is in Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

#### Contemporary Application: The Creation-Evolution Debate

If the doctrine of hell has forced Adventists to deal with "death" as an end-time issue, the creation-evolution debate forces us to deal with diverse views of "death" in connection with origins at the beginning of time. A remarkable book published by Zondervan in 1999 has brought together three different perspectives on origins, with committed evangelical Christians arguing the case for each. *Three Views on Creation and Evolution* labels the three views as "Young Earth Creationism," "Old Earth (Progressive) Creationism," and "Theistic Evolution."<sup>10</sup> All the authors argue passionately against a "naturalistic" world view which ruled God out of the picture. But the ways in which they combine their views of science with their moral and ethical concerns differ significantly.

How should Adventists relate to the people and issues in this debate? If the words of Jesus are our guide, we will treat others the way we would want to be treated (Matt. 7:12); we will love them as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39); and it will be a whole-hearted love since Jesus' second command is "like" the first, calling us to love with all the heart, all the soul, and all the mind (Matt. 22:37). The three amplifications by Ellen White, as noted above, point in precisely the same direction: treat every person as honest; don't ridicule opponents or label them as heretics; and start with points on which you can agree.

Such an approach might suggest something like the following responses to those holding the positions represented in the Zondervan book and the position which they all oppose, naturalistic evolution.

**1. Atheistic and naturalistic evolutionist.** Apparently many evolutionists claim that they are atheists because they cannot believe a good God would create a brutal "evolutionary" universe. With those who say they cannot worship such a God, we can heartily agree. The company of atheistic evolutionists makes it difficult

to see the theistic alternative. We don't have to buy into a naturalistic philosophy to affirm an evolutionist's keen perception of moral good and evil.

**2. Theistic evolutionist.** If I take the Zondervan author, Howard J. Van Till, as representative here, I would say that his perception of the nature of Scripture is the one I find most helpful. But I am troubled by his cheerful willingness to accept evolution and the God it seems to imply. Other thoughtful scientists are prepared to point out the weighty challenge of getting an "evolutionary" system started and the significant gaps in the fossil record. That should give us pause before we simply affirm the dominant naturalistic evolutionary position. But we can heartily affirm the rejection of naturalism.

**3. Old earth creationist.** Speaking as a non-scientist, I have the impression that this position can claim the greatest openness to the observations of science and to an affirmation of God without the perils of evolution. But I am amazed that old earth creationists can claim to support their view from Genesis 1. They need more conversations with those who are prepared to see the Biblical text as a literary text, not a scientific document.

**4. Young earth creationist.** Here I appreciate the emphasis on a young earth and a catastrophic flood. But I suspect they are twisting their science to make it fit a rather rigid view of Scripture. The Bible is not a science text book. Still, I like their willingness to stay close to those things I believe to be important.

The Zondervan book concludes with two additional essays as "Final Reflections on the Dialogue." One of the "Reflections" is by Philip Johnson, the Berkeley lawyer who has forcefully challenged the world of atheistic naturalism. His general conclusions are worth noting: "I confess I am dissatisfied with all the answers that we have at present," he says. He affirms theistic evolution for at least recognizing God as creator, but "it gives away far too much in agreeing to adopt naturalistic standards of reasoning."<sup>11</sup>

He sees young earth creationism as facing "insurmountable scientific problems." He is perhaps closest to old earth creationism, but is far from satisfied. "Show me a better scientific position than old earth creationism and I'm open to persuasion," he says.<sup>12</sup>

As he concludes, he makes some noteworthy observations about science:

Until we can separate the philosophy from the science and get an unbiased appraisal of what the evidence does and does not show, it is premature to try to come to any firm conclusions. When we do get an unbiased scientific picture, neo-Darwinism will collapse and we will be in the midst of a scientific revolution so profound that everything will look different.<sup>13</sup>

When we turn from science to moral and ethical arguments, I find it surprising that only the evolutionist and the young earth creationist share my convictions about death. The other two are quite willing to let come from God's hand. But as I look at the Old Testament, recognizing that others have been able to live with death, so to speak, maybe I need to moderate my claims. I will not moderate my ideal, that is clear; I dream of a world where no one will hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain (Isa. 65:25), a world where no one will ever die (Rev. 21:4). But perhaps I should be more willing to be flexible in exploring what has happened in the past.

### **Thesis #3: Ultimate Resolution**

That the major conflicts and points of tension diminish significantly (but do not entirely disappear) when believers envision a restored world on the basis of the descriptions in the New Testament.

Perhaps the most important thing to say here is that most of our difficulties have to do with how we imagine God is handling the problem of evil. I suspect, I hope, indeed I believe, that our destructive disagreements will vanish when we actually live in a world where no one hurts or destroys in all God's holy mountain. But until then, we do see things



differently. My gentle wife Wanda, for example, looks forward to a world free from conflict; I look forward to one where there are fresh challenges to conquer. But we both live in hope, trusting that the Lord will meet our needs beyond our wildest dreams.

And in that connection, a remarkable quote from C. S. Lewis is worth noting. I would differ with him on numerous points: he believed in the immortality of the soul, he apparently accepted evolution in some sense, and he was scarcely a health reformer. Still he has been a great encouragement to me, for he made the choice to believe when the world was moving the other direction. In his *Letters to Malcolm*, he describes his hope of the resurrection as follows:

What the soul cries out for is the resurrection of the senses....Then the new earth and sky, the same yet not the same as these, will rise in us and as we have risen in Christ. And once again, after who knows what aeons of the silence and the dark, the birds will sing and the waters flow, and lights and shadows move across the hills, and the faces of our friends laugh upon us with amazed recognition.

Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true, something better will be. For "we know that we shall be made like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."<sup>14</sup>

### **Losing Faith and Finding Faith: Revisiting the Issue**

After tracing the remarkable variety of attitudes toward death in Scripture and raising the issue of death in connection with origins and modern science, we are now in a position to return to the reasons for loss of faith as noted at the beginning of the paper.

I am increasingly convinced that the last item on my list may be most crucial, the crisis of community. In my view, the careful study of Scripture with a clear focus on Jesus as God's ultimate revelation, goes a long ways toward addressing the first three reasons for loss of faith in God. Some final comments on each:

**1. Intellectual difficulties, based on the collapse of an external "proof" structure?** These ought to collapse for they simply are not true. Gently but firmly we should seek to turn others to Jesus and away from external proofs. Scripture will help us do that. We must put our faith in God, not in a system of external proofs.

**2. Intellectual difficulties growing out of perceptions of the world and our own personal needs.** Under this heading I list most of the issues connected with the classic discussion of theodicy, the justification of a good and all-powerful God in the presence of evil. Here we face the sense of unfairness in the world, the death and the suffering of the innocent. Again, Scripture and the story of Jesus can help us cope here. Where in Scripture do we find people free from pain and suffering? And the most sobering truth of all is Jesus' willingness to suffer and die on our behalf.

**3. Personal difficulties, a sense of impossible demands, either on the basis of performance (external acts) or character (internal condition).** I have not addressed this issue here. But an approach to Scripture which allows us to see the diversity in attitudes toward death, can also help us see a diversity of approaches to life. A one-size-fits-all approach to truth has brought tragic results. The diversity in Scripture matches the diversity in human needs.

**4. Crisis of Community.** If the church can be supportive of the diverse needs of its members and inquirers, the members of the church can survive all kinds of catastrophes. By viewing truth too narrowly and by insisting that all see the truth our way, we fracture the community and alienate people when they most need help.

As I suggested in the beginning, I believe the experiential argument for faith is no doubt the most powerful and effective one -- but also the most difficult to articulate. And so we all collect a host of additional arguments that are important for us. And worship requires that our moral and ethical arguments correlate with our experience. We can scarcely worship a God we do not believe to be good.

If a particular argument for faith collapses, especially in a time of personal crisis, faith may collapse as well. And in

that connection it is worth noting that non-rational factors often loom large in the experience of believers, even if these factors are camouflaged in rational garb. Indeed, as the following quote from C. S. Lewis suggests, the relationship of logic to faith is easily garbled:

Have we now got to a position from which we can talk about faith without being misunderstood? For in general we are shy of speaking plain about Faith as a virtue. It looks so like praising an intention to believe what you want to believe in the face of evidence to the contrary: the American in the old story defined Faith as 'the power of believing what we know to be untrue.' Now I define Faith as the power of continuing to believe what we once honestly thought to be true until cogent reasons for honestly changing our minds are brought before us. The difficulty of such continuing to believe is constantly ignored or misunderstood in discussions of this subject. It is always assumed that the difficulties of faith are intellectual difficulties, that a man who has once accepted a certain proposition will automatically go on believing it till real grounds for disbelief occur. Nothing could be more superficial. How many of the freshmen who come up to Oxford from religious homes and lose their Christianity in the first year have been honestly argued out of it? How many of our own sudden temporary losses of faith have a rational basis which would stand examination for a moment? I don't know how it is with others, but I find that mere change of scene always has a tendency to decrease my faith at first -- God is less credible when I pray in a hotel bedroom than when I am in College. The society of unbelievers makes Faith harder even when they are people whose opinions on any other subject, are known to be worthless.<sup>15</sup>

The last line of that quote from Lewis throws into bold relief a key factor often overlooked in discussions of reasons for belief, namely, the role of companions and associates in affirming a particular line of thinking and rejecting another. This has a powerful bearing on the crisis of community. Sociologists of knowledge use the term "plausibility structure" to refer to a pattern of thinking which only appears "plausible" because a particular culture or subculture has provided "social support" for that way of thinking. Put bluntly, much of what we consider "reasonable" is simply the consensus of the people around us.

From the standpoint of the believer, such a perspective reveals how a culture or a sub-culture can be both friend and enemy of faith. On the positive side, "social support" helps us retain our commitment to those things we believe to be true; on the negative side, "social support" for the culturally dominant ideas can prevent us from seeing the value in new ideas or can serve to erode those convictions of the sub-culture community which run counter to the dominant culture.

Sociologist Peter Berger candidly described the phenomenon in connection with neo-orthodoxy, a post-World War I theological movement which sought to recover a sense of a transcendent deity at a time when cultural forces made the idea seem quite unlikely. As Berger put it, "Put crudely, if one is to believe what neo-orthodoxy wants one to believe, in the contemporary situation, then one must be rather careful to huddle together closely and continuously with one's fellow believers."<sup>16</sup>

For believers who may have greater confidence in the Holy Spirit than in the sociologists, a biblical passage declares the same truth, Hebrews 10:23-25 (NRSV): "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

It is not difficult to imagine illustrations which show how the "social support" phenomenon protects traditional ideas and excludes new ones in preserving the status quo. In a church committed to inerrancy, for example, no member would risk announcing the discovery of an "error" in the Bible. Neither the member nor the announcement would be tolerated. Similarly, in a society of scientists fully committed to naturalism, no member would dare announce the discovery of a "miracle." Under such normal conditions, then, changes would be few, minor, and gradual.

But chaotic conditions may break the old molds and make way for change and innovation. In 1844, for example, the

Great Disappointment shattered the status quo for Adventists. With their old ties and old "social support" gone, they met together as a new community, finding powerful "social support" for the idea that God had new truths for them to discover. The result? New landmarks for a new community: Sabbath, the non-immortality of the soul, sanctuary. It was a successful counter-cultural move because the members of the community provided "social support" for each other. But note that their previous world had not been totally shattered; they still had powerful "social support" from the broader culture for their belief in a personal God and their confidence in the Bible as God's Word.

Today, the same rules of "social support" apply, but the landscape is quite different. "Science," however one might define it, is universally revered, with social support from every level of society, believers and non-believers alike. That is why believers are so alarmed when critics attack their beliefs in the name of science. The idea that science has destroyed the possibility of belief in God also receives widespread social support in our culture, but is mightily resisted by believers of every stripe. Are we troubled when an article in *Scientific American* announces that "top scientists are more atheistic than ever before"?<sup>17</sup> Of course we are, and we vow to prove them wrong by holding seminars on the integration of faith and learning.

In sum, as Adventists survey the faith and learning scene, we would do well to remember how "social support" serves to preserve that which the community holds dear, but also serves to prevent the acceptance of that which is new. And when it comes to contemplating change, we would do well to heed the wise counsel of C. S. Lewis to continue believing "what we once honestly thought to be true until cogent reasons for honestly changing our minds are brought before us."<sup>18</sup>

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1. John McClarty, "'Liberals' and 'Conservatives,'" *Adventist Today* 6:3 (May/June, 1998), 2.
  2. Sir Walter Scott, "Book of Books," from Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, eds., *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by The Bible*, Vol. 1: *Genesis to Malachi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.
  3. Atwan and Wieder, xxix.
  4. See Richard Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Lightbearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, revised and updated edition (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 426-34.
  5. Under the heading of "Fundamentalism," both the 1966 and 1976 editions of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* put some distance between Adventism and the Fundamentalist movement. Gary Land's article in *Adventism in America* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998, pp. 135-37 [revision of 1986 Eerdman's edition]), is more candid about the mixed picture on inspiration as is *Light Bearers*, by Schwarz and Greenleaf (pp. 627-47), the revision of Richard Schwarz's *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Pacific Press, 1979).
  6. Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975), 13.
  7. Jack Blanco, *The Clear Word Bible: A Paraphrase to Nurture Faith and Growth* (printed and distributed by Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998). Later editions dropped the word "Bible" from the title. The revised edition (2000 copyright) is entitled: *The Clear Word: An Expanded Paraphrase to Build Faith and Nurture Spiritual Growth*. In the revised edition all references to Review and Herald have been deleted. The revised edition restores "infants" to the death list in 1 Samuel 15:3 -- while retaining the additional category of animals. In Numbers 31:17 where Moses commands the death of all the Midianite baby boys, both editions of *The Clear Word* change the text to refer to adults: "every male of military age" (revised edition).
  8. Ellen White to G. I. Butler, Letter 21, 1888 [October 14], *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* 1:98.

9. Ellen White, *Gospel Workers*, 119-120 [1915]; *Evangelism*, 200.
10. J. P. Moreland & John Mark Reynolds, eds., *Three Views of Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999). "Young Earth Creationism" is presented by Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds; "Old Earth (Progressive) Creationism" is presented by Robert C. Newman; "Theistic Evolution" is presented by Howard J. Van Till.
11. Johnson, *Three Views*, 276-77.
12. *Ibid.*, 277.
13. *Ibid.*, 277-78.
14. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1964; 1992), 121, 124.
15. C. S. Lewis, "Religion: Reality or Substitute?" in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 42.
16. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969), 164.
17. Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, "Scientists and Religion in America," *Scientific American*, September 1999, 88-93.
18. Lewis, "Religion: Reality or Substitute?" 42.