

The Spiritual Discipline  
of Coming Out

Is Hell in Siberia?

The Dark Side  
of Repentance

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# Adventist *Today*



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TELLING



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## Living and Leading Truthfully

By Loren Seibold

I remember the first time I was aware I had told a lie.

It was a benign lie, as lies go. I bragged about seeing something that I didn't really see, and I added to it an athletic accomplishment that I didn't really achieve. I can still remember where I was when I told it (on the steps going downstairs in the church) and who I told it to (an older man, rather quiet and very bald, who probably didn't remember it a minute after he heard it, assuming it—correctly—the nonsense talk of a 7-year-old).

But I was a 7-year-old with an unusually sensitive conscience. I knew right away that I had committed a sin. I also knew that I wouldn't go to heaven unless I confessed. Not just to God; that part was easy. I had to go to that man I'd bragged to and say, "Remember when I said that I had done thus and so? That wasn't true." It was just too hard, and I never did it. But I thought about it every day for years, even into high school: that I had on my record a lie that would keep me from going to heaven.

There was no relief in the lie's being of absolutely no consequence. The kind of God we had been made acquainted with was mathematically precise about sin and confession. I remember our pastor telling us (admiringly) that he knew a man who called up people 50 years after he'd had an interaction with them that he still felt guilty about, to make sure that his sin debt was zeroed out.

Now, when I think about someone calling people about some small thing 50 years in the past, it sounds slightly unhinged, evidence of a life overshadowed by fear and guilt. But the God we served was very much at home in the fear and guilt territory. Even at that age, I knew that he was going to stand by while we all were persecuted by our neighbors for keeping the Sabbath. He'd let folks be eternally destroyed for eating the crackers with the "and/or animal fat" on the ingredients label, and he'd give up as lost women who colored their hair. This was a God of great and glorious spleen. To serve a God like this as he'd expect to be served, to want to spend eternity with him, you'd have to be a little

unhinged yourself. And we probably were. This is, after all, the church that used the word "peculiar" as a boast.

### Truth Isn't Simple

Truth is not nearly as simple as we were taught in *Our Little Friend* or *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*. Our truth, yours and mine, could only be *exactly* true if we had perfect inner integrity and infinite wisdom. But none of us does. Social media has put on display people who would insist they are honest but whose posts, tweets, and comments show no more than a passing acquaintance with factualness and reveal that their truth is polluted by their passions, self-interest, anger, and characterological problems. They may not know they're wrong, but it's more likely that they simply cannot admit they're wrong. Their intentions, while possibly good, are more likely unexamined. Their responses are more like burps than reasoned replies.

Alas, they are only the visible subset of the rest of us. The rest of us have just as many sinful tendencies, self-deceptions, observational biases—in short, some screws loose—and the only thing that redeems us is that, occasionally, we notice it and admit it. I have a conviction that the more absolutely certain you are, the more likely you are to lack deep integrity, because you are unlikely to examine your own limitations. Paul says the church is built of living stones, but read the leprous comments on any Facebook post that puts forward a controversial premise about God or the church, and you'll come away with the conviction that it is infested with mildew, dry rot, and woodworm. That the structure stands at all is up to God, who is entirely truth and truthful. But even we who study his Word cannot reproduce those qualities with much accuracy.

Which is to say that by the nature of our human finitude and sinfulness, none of us is a good container for truth. Truth may go in, but we are porous and fermentative, and it's hard telling what will come out.

None of us is a good container for truth. Truth may go in, but we are porous and fermentative, and it's hard telling what will come out.

Furthermore, there is a difference between truth-telling and being truthful. One should tell the truth, but must one always be telling it? I don't say, even if it crosses my mind, "My goodness, that's an ugly baby." Or, "You are extraordinarily fat." Or (more to the point and possibly of salvific importance), "You're a self-righteous prig, who under the name of Christ causes more suffering to people than Roman soldiers on execution day." I may think these true. But are they helpful? Given our sin-addled sense of truth, trying to be helpful may be the best we can manage.

I think of a man I know who felt the compulsion to tell the truth about an affair he'd had 40 years earlier, to his wife just as she was dying of cancer. It seemed necessary to him: God expected it, and his eternal salvation was at stake. Even if God were as exacting as he imagined, it would have been more Christlike for this long-ago adulterer to accept his eternal non-existence than to send someone he loves off into eternity with that as her final memory of their life together. But he did, by his rather poorly adjusted lights, tell the truth: a cruel truth that served him but devastated her.

### What Is Truth?

I remember sitting one day with a group of fellow Seventh-day Adventist pastors. These were, I insist, among the most thoughtful, most loving pastors I know. All were men (it was some years ago) who put goodness and kindness above being right, who genuinely loved their people, and who wanted to bring healing and hope to them through the grace of Christ.

Which may have been why one of us, assuming he was among people he could trust, said: "There is something I want to talk to all of you about. I am troubled that there are significant parts of the Adventist message that I either can't believe or don't find meaningful."

He'd opened a faucet. We admitted that we found certain prophecies having to do with 1844, whether true or not, rather useless in ministering to people. Several spoke of the difficulty of saying that Christ was coming "soon" after nearly 200 years of waiting. No one believed that Seventh-day Adventists had a unique claim on salvation to the exclusion of other Christians, and several were troubled by the only-we-get-to-be-saved "remnant church" designation. At least one mentioned that the clean-unclean meat distinction, such an important cultural marker for Adventists, made no biblical sense in light of Matthew 15 and Romans 14. Most had positive regard for Ellen White but were disturbed that her writings were too often given the same importance as the Bible. All felt that the General Conference, whatever its self-proclaimed role as God's voice on Earth, was sometimes overbearing and irrelevant, and they had diminished respect for the institution.

Yet they were actively and faithfully ministering to the saints. They were loving and loved. They admitted that they sometimes

had to do intricate ballets around certain teachings, which they did because they didn't want to lose the chance to preach the grace of Christ. They had learned how not to say what they didn't believe but were also emphatic about what they did: that Jesus Christ came to this Earth to save sinners.

A bunch of liars? I guess it all depends how you look at it. I think they're heroes, ministering the central truths of the Bible even at the cost of inner conflict. (I expect the comments on the right-wing websites that stalk us to be positively purulent on this point.) Those who measure truthfulness only by assent to doctrines and loyalty to the organization will disagree with my high valuation of these pastors. But don't lists of doctrines voted by a group of human beings seem rather paltry next to God's grace? And, I would remind you, blind loyalty and creedal agreement are things our pioneers rejected and feared.

### Institutional Untruthfulness

Doubting pastors and laypeople, I know leaders in high places in the church who have as many questions about Adventist truths as you do. They remain quiet, even when they see people like you struggling. It's nothing personal. In fact, aside from those in high places keeping their jobs, much in the institutional milieu isn't particularly personal. From where they sit, the church is successful if the institution holds together and continues to do some good. But their conception of "some good" isn't always well-informed. You would be shocked at how little they know about the church they lead.

One of the greatest ironies is that religion is organized for the purpose of loving more effectively, but organizing religion introduces processes that set aside people and their care and happiness in favor of the authority of the organization. At their best, organized religions can be purveyors of love and light to the world. At their best, they give people like me the chance to preach the good news. But at their worst, they are big, fat businesses that put institutional survival above fairness.

Take the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC), for example. Many had great hopes that it could help the church reach a win-win solution on women's ordination. And when a majority of that committee admitted that they either favored, or at least could live with, some areas of the world church ordaining women even if all regions didn't choose to do so, many thought that it had succeeded. But that consensus was TOSC's death knell, for when the San Antonio General Conference Session came around, the General Conference (GC) leadership decided to act as if TOSC had never existed. Its findings weren't even mentioned.

No lies were told, but the process was untruthful. Can you have any doubt that if TOSC had reached the conclusion the GC leaders favored, its studies would have been the main pillar of the case against women's ordination? But because it didn't, it was ignored.

Another example: From 1901-1903, under the direction of Ellen White, a plan was adopted that gave union conferences authority that was intended to mitigate and control any tendency toward overbearing authority of the General Conference. Both the decision and the purpose of the decision are clearly and unequivocally recorded in the history of the church. Yet the General Conference leaders have chosen not to acknowledge that decision, instead pulling power to themselves. No one is telling lies about this important bit of history, but in not acknowledging it, our leaders are not being honest with the church.

This is a critical understanding: one can lead untruthfully without ever telling a lie. Call it what you will—skillful management, politics, manipulation—but it is a frequent ethical failing of religious institutions.

### Living Truthfully

So what can we, who are fragile vessels, do to live truthfully?

First, understand that though there are many spiritual truths, not all are of equal importance. It has been my observation that Adventists have a hard time prioritizing their truths. Under the principle that sin is sin and even a small one can cost you salvation, we may, for example, unreflectively regard drinking coffee as a transgression equal to lying or pride. But when everything is equally important, nothing is really important, and it is no wonder that we are a people more likely to attend to the order of end-time events and breaches of *Counsels on Diets and Foods* than we do the Golden Rule.

C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters* about the devil keeping us “in the state of mind I call ‘Christianity And.’ You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychical Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform.”

Or in our case, Christianity and the Sabbath, Christianity and Women’s Ordination, Christianity and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. We must hang our lives on one belief, without an added “and,” and the belief that occupies the huge central section of my faith is God’s love as shown in Jesus.

Second, actions are more truthful than words. I am, you will realize from reading this, unimpressed with mere doctrinal affirmations. Orthodoxy means nothing apart from orthopraxy. I’m way more impressed by the agnostic who practices the Golden Rule than I am by the True Believer who can recite word-perfect all 28 Fundamental Beliefs but is hard-headed, hard-hearted, manipulative, and unreflective. Remember “Be like Jesus, this my song, in the home and in the throng”? An important way to measure our truthfulness is by its effect on people. Do our words and actions make others happier, more hopeful, better able to handle life’s inevitable disappointments?

Or do we leave them discouraged and confused? As a church, we’ve done some of each.

### Leading Truthfully


Third, our denominational leaders must be intentional in their leadership integrity. You could take any one of those men individually and find him honest. But clump them together at the top of four layers of church bureaucracy, believing they’re collectively God’s voice on Earth, and we see them planning

**Ellen White’s statement that the General Conference is God’s highest authority on Earth has been a curse to this denomination.**

a confrontation for this autumn that may well tear the church asunder. If the General Conference wants to be God’s voice on Earth, the place to start is with an examination of what it means to seek the good of the people in this church, rather than just forcing everyone to bend their way.

Ellen White’s statement that the General Conference is God’s highest authority on Earth has been a curse to this denomination.<sup>1</sup> General Conference leaders have used it as a justification for nearly everything they decide or pressure others to decide, with too little thought for either its effect on people or the health of our mission. It has compromised their judgment and diminished their accountability. I am extraordinarily grateful for the union conference leaders in North America and Europe who have resisted this tendency to play pope.

The only way a religious organization can stay religious is by practicing intentional humility. Sanctimoniously reminding everyone that you’re speaking in God’s voice, so everyone must be united around you, isn’t intentional humility.

I believe in searching for truth and in telling the truth. But I believe in a substantive truth—one that is written on the heart, not in church policies or creeds. Truth that builds up people rather than hurting or alienating them. Both as individuals and as an organization, it’s time we practice the kind of integrity Jesus had. 

<sup>1</sup> This statement, as it is generally used by General Conference leaders, is taken out of historical context. Ellen White placed qualifications on the GC’s authority, and when leaders were unwise or unkind, she said the GC wasn’t speaking for God at all. For more information, see <https://session.adventistfaith.org/god-s-highest-authority>.



# Hell in Siberia

BY AAGE RENDALEN

BY SOME QUIRK OF NATURE OR NURTURE, I grew up with an exaggerated enjoyment of boyish pranks, and it took years of sober adulthood to purge me of this inclination. The problem was that I was good at it. I only swore off of it after it turned me into a hero in the world of urban legends. Run my name—first name spelled Åge—through a search engine, and you will see what I’m referring to. Thousands of hits identify me as the Norwegian teacher who blew the lid off the story about the Russian drilling expedition in Siberia, which drilled into hell and incited the devil to come roaring out of the 9-mile-deep hole.

It all started at the end of 1989, when there was yet no browser for the World Wide Web. I was visiting a friend who had been banished to a remote church, high up in the Mojave Desert. “You wouldn’t believe the crazy story I saw on this religion channel yesterday,” he told me as he turned on his television set to Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). And before he could say another word, I saw the rerun.

Paul Crouch, founder of the network, sat on a sofa with a press release in his hand. A newspaper called *Ammennusastia*, published by Pentecostal Christians in Western Finland, reported that a Russian expedition had drilled the world’s deepest hole in Siberia (which was loosely based on an actual event—see sidebar). The press release said that when they hit a depth of nine miles, the drill cone hit a cavity. Then, for some unexplained reason, the Russians dropped a microphone with a 9-mile-long cord down the hole and were shocked to hear human voices—hundreds, thousands, maybe millions—screaming in agony.

TBN showed its telephone number on screen, so I got my friend to call and ask for a copy of the press release, which they declined to share. It tickled my prankish

bone so much that I wrote down the TBN address and when I was back in Norway, I decided to see just how far it was possible to take such a preposterous story before the TV network decided that it was time to check the story’s veracity.

I crafted a letter to TBN, and in it I told them how I had scoffed at the TBN story during my visit to California. Knowing how much fundamentalists admire titles, I appointed myself “Special counsellor to the Minister of Justice of Norway.” I recounted my utter shock on returning to Norway to find the domestic newspapers covering this story in detail. Half of the drilling crew, including the head of drilling operations, turned out to have been Norwegian, I claimed. The story he told was so upsetting that I couldn’t sleep for days, knowing that I was destined for hell myself. But I gave in to the Lord and urged the TBN staff not to let scoffers and skeptics keep them from promoting the story.

To give credence to the story, I cut out an article from my local Norwegian newspaper featuring a retired building inspector who complained about the county administration having imposed a gag order on discussing building matters publicly. The story had absolutely nothing to do with hell, Siberia, or deep holes. I chose the article because a picture showed a man holding a finger to his lips, as though saying it had all been hushed up. I then “translated” the article into English. I described the man in the picture as the head of drilling operations in Siberia. His account of what had happened was riveting.

“What really unnerved the Soviets, apart from the voice recordings (which the Ministry spokesman dismissed as geological ‘noise distortions’), was the appearance that same night of a fountainhead of luminous gas shooting up from the drill site, and out of the midst of this incandescent cloud pillar, a brilliant

# I decided to see just how far it was possible to take such a preposterous story before the TV network decided that it was time to check the story's veracity.

being with bat wings revealed itself with the word [which in English means *I have conquered*] emblazoned against the dark Siberian sky. ‘The incident was absolutely unreal; the Soviets cried out in terror,’ says Mr. Nummedal. Later that night, he saw ambulance crews circulating in the community. A driver he knew told him that they had been told to sedate everybody with a medication known to erase short-term memory. The Soviets use this drug in the treatment of shock victims.”

In a handwritten addendum, I gave TBN the telephone number of my pastor friend in the desert and urged them to call him if they had any questions. Since he and I were just interested in seeing whether they checked the veracity of their stories, we agreed that if they did call, he would tell them the truth.

Two weeks later TBN called. A man on their staff read Norwegian, the caller said, and he couldn't match the original newspaper story I'd sent (about the building inspector) with the translation. Was there some sort of mix-up? My friend replied that no, the story was a fabrication for the above-stated purpose. We both thought that was the end of it.

It was not. TBN had gotten the



A story about building inspection, sent to Trinity Broadcasting Network from the author's hometown newspaper in Norway, was "translated" for them as a story about drilling into hell in Siberia.



original “press release” from R. W. Shambach, a famous “screaming” radio pastor operating out of Texas. After broadcasting the account, both he and TBN came under a lot of pressure from gullible fundamentalists who demanded documentation of this sensational story. The TV network apparently decided that, fake or not, the documentation I had sent them was exactly what their listeners needed. The screaming pastor and TBN

fired up their fax machines to let the faithful know that Åge Rendalen, a special counselor to the Norwegian Minister of Justice, had their back.

I had no idea about any of this before Rick Buhler, who hosted a Christian call-in show on a radio station in Los Angeles, called me in Norway and asked if I happened to know anything about this story. Of course, I did. At the end of the interview, in which I laid out the whys and

the whats of the story, he (metaphorically) shook his head and promised me that no matter what I said, this story was not going away. He was right.<sup>1</sup>

I began getting letters from organizations and individuals requesting copies of my local newspaper's story. (I had billed it as Norway's largest and most prestigious newspaper.) Many of the letters included news clippings from fundamentalist publications that had reproduced my Siberian revelation. Letters from some reputable organizations, such as the International Headquarters of the Nazarene Church, were skeptical in tone. They requested documentation, hoping to answer inquiries from fundamentalist members whom they were loathe to offend.

Others, though, threw caution to the wind.

A pastor in Australia sent me a tract on hell that included, in painful detail, my ridiculous story. He just wanted me to approve it before publication. He had called my local newspaper for a copy of their story (which, as you'll recall, was about building inspection) but said that they had not been very helpful. I can imagine their perplexity.

A representative of a creationist museum in Texas wanted documentation to be used for a museum display. Referring to the nonexistent "Dr. Azzakov" of the original Finnish Pentecostal story (which the Finns later claimed came from an American publication called *Walls of Jericho*), the representative of the Creation Evidences Museum launched into a discourse on how he integrated the pre-scientific worldview of the Siberian hell story with science.

He wrote: "Dr. Azzakov's conclusion in the article that the 'very center of the earth is hollow' probably is where the report will be most severely attacked. I feel he is here correlating his findings with Revelation 9:1 and 2 of the Bible which speaks of 'the bottomless pit.' The only way I can conceive of a pit

## The Science Behind the Hoax

The legend of the discovery of hell deep under Siberia was most likely inspired by the Kola Superdeep Borehole, a scientific project begun in 1979 to drill the deepest hole ever into the Earth's crust. The site chosen, because of its favorable geology, was the Kola Peninsula in the northernmost part of Russia—which is not in Siberia, or anywhere near it. The intention was to drill down 15,000 meters; however, drilling stopped at 12,262 meters (40,230 feet, or about 8 miles), a third of the way through the Baltic crust, because the temperatures became too high for the drill to work.



The purpose in drilling the Kola Superdeep Borehole was to understand the geology, thermal layers, and physical and chemical composition of the Earth's crust. One unexpected discovery was rocks at great depths that were saturated with water. (This led to another myth propounded by fundamentalist creationists: that the excess waters from Noah's flood had somehow drained into these deep levels.)

Drilling stopped in 1989, the research project closed down in 2006, and the site is now abandoned. Although longer boreholes that extend sideways have since been drilled for oil recovery, the Kola Superdeep Borehole remains the deepest artificial point ever reached on this planet.

without a bottom is a great cavity that includes the center of the earth, then in contemplating the pit from the earth's center, every direction would be the up direction and thus the entire margin of the pit would be the ceiling/top since one would have to rise up (opposing the pull of gravity) to any point on the margin: thus, there is no bottom of the pit, only top, and so it is bottomless. But, whatever the case, any appreciable cavity at nine miles' depth from the earth's surface is impossible as viewed in the context of the popular evolutionary uniformitarian theory postulating a molten stage that the earth passed gradually through. But, an instantaneous creation of the earth and hell, etc., as corroborated by the polonium halos (re: Dr. Robert Gentry's work, enclosed) explains the great cavity easily, and correctly."<sup>2</sup>

Given that nearly 149,000 Google hits still tie this crazy story to my name, it is remarkable how few people contacted me. I had signed the original letter with my own name and address, which gave it credence that urban legends normally

lack. All in all, I received 20 to 30 inquiries. I contacted everyone who wrote to me and told them the story behind it, but these were mere drops of rationality that could not put out a blaze of this size.

The story had such viability that even the prestigious German magazine *Der Spiegel* sought me out in 2011 for a story they were doing on this urban legend for their online site.<sup>3</sup> I am mentioned in Snopes, and Wikipedia still devotes a page to the Well to Hell hoax.<sup>4</sup> Google tells me that I have been named in books written on the subject,<sup>5</sup> and the myth even inspired a 2009 film called *Nine Miles Down*.

Entertaining—or disconcerting—as this account may be, it begs a serious question: How could so many Christians fall for such an outlandish story?

The answer is fundamentalism. As retired psychology professor Robert Altemeyer points out in his very insightful book, *The Authoritarians*,<sup>6</sup> "true believers" are much more inclined to submit to authority than non-fundamentalists. They are conditioned to believe and to



## When someone whom fundamentalists have invested with authority tells a tall tale that offers confirmation of what they already believe, many of them find it hard to resist the pull of a sensational story, even when it is swaddled in absurdity.

fall in line when their leaders call upon them to do so. Theirs is not to reason why. They follow the leader and the cause. Hence, they are extremely vulnerable to demagogues and charlatans who exploit their authoritarian propensities. These are good people, who take those they like and trust at face value. They are not accustomed to people who shamelessly lie to them. When someone whom fundamentalists have invested with authority tells a tall tale that offers confirmation of what they already believe, many of them find it hard to resist the pull of a sensational story, even when it is swaddled in absurdity.

Adventist history is full of examples like this. When I joined the church in 1971, older pastors were still preaching that Catholic churches had torture chambers prepared for Adventists in their subterranean dungeons. Sensational stories told of Adventist ministers disrupting spiritualist meetings by their mere presence: the evil spirits were paralyzed by God's power, and the ministers always ended up being evicted.

Stories of angelic intervention abounded. One Adventist was led by an angel who opened the gates of Auschwitz, walking out before the unseeing eyes of guards. (There was no word about why the angel did not work his magic on behalf of the hapless people left behind.) By relying on metaphysical jumper cables, a group of Adventists in danger was able to start up a car whose battery had been stolen. In another case (a story about which a book was written), a victim of a terrible car crash had a body part sheared off in the accident but was found to be whole by the time the ambulance reached the hospital.

Most of you who have been around for a while could supply examples of such Adventist legends. Just a few years ago, the president of the North American Division repeated a story about a man in the mission field who had been raised from the dead—but who apparently had chosen to remain anonymous rather than provide *Adventist Review* with the most faith-affirming story ever.

Interestingly, those who embrace such legendary stories are not uncritical. They will dismiss a ludicrous story that does not have the imprimatur of their own religious leaders or affirm their own faith. Only in specific situations are they willing to suspend disbelief. Fundamentalists are by inclination tribal, and loyalty covers mountains of incredulity. Their own leaders don't lie, even when they are not telling the truth.

When I reflect on my dubious role as a mythmaker, it strikes me how easy it would be to start your own cult, especially if you had a good portion of charisma, a pathological need for adulation, and no regard for truth. In my case, I could easily have come up with a book based on tape-recorded confessions of the doomed in hell, replete with exotic details of life in the divine crematorium, where a mere third-degree burn would be counted a blessing—and all of this accompanied by the shocking reasons why they had

ended up there, such as listening to Barry Manilow or mowing the lawn on Sabbath. If the devil had left a charred manifesto at the drill site, I could even have muscled in on Joseph Smith's territory. I could have made religion great again.

The evangelical world today is dominated, it seems, by people who betray every value associated with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Instead of taking care of the widow and orphan, they prey upon them. Their most outrageous stars fly private jets and live in palaces at the expense of people who naively accept that contributing to the lifestyle of the rich and infamous in their midst is the lottery ticket they must buy before God can bless them in the American way. Instead of fighting for social justice, they align themselves with political movements dedicated to jingoistic bellicosity and the gospel of social Darwinism.

In the lying authoritarians of the Christian world, we are seeing before our very eyes the re-emergence of the Renaissance papacy in evangelical garb. And it is all based upon a disposition to genuflect before authority and to implicitly believe your own thought leaders. If you are going to be led astray, it will be at the hands of your own heroes.

Skepticism, especially directed at your own tribe, is not a vice: it is your moral duty.

You can trust me on that. As the former special counselor to the Norwegian Minister of Justice, I would never lie to you. ☩

<sup>1</sup> Rick Buhler wrote an entertaining—and, even rarer, a correct—account of the caper for the July 16, 1990, issue of *Christianity Today*.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Watson, letter May 22, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> [www.spiegel.de/einestages/russischer-tiefendrill-hoppla-wir-haben-die-hoelle-angebohrt-a-947191.html](http://www.spiegel.de/einestages/russischer-tiefendrill-hoppla-wir-haben-die-hoelle-angebohrt-a-947191.html)

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Well\\_to\\_Hell\\_hoax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Well_to_Hell_hoax)

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Robert B. Durham, *Modern Folklore* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), pp. 418-419.

<sup>6</sup> Download the book free of charge at [theauthoritarians.org/](http://theauthoritarians.org/)

# THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE *of* COMING OUT

BY ALICIA JOHNSTON

TRUTH-TELLING IS TREACHEROUS. IT'S MUCH SAFER TO BE what people expect you to be. It's easier to be what you believe God wants you to be, what you want to be, and what the church wants you to be rather than to be who you are. Add the social expectations inherent within many communities, and truth-telling becomes painfully complicated.

For example, when I was a pastor I hid a lot of things. I didn't let myself be overly emotional or opinionated, wear jewelry, talk about sex, curse, leave Harry Potter books lying around, or talk about certain movies or TV shows around church members. I tried to appear professional, spiritual, grounded, and on the conservative side of my congregation at all times. I did this because that's how you survive as an Adventist pastor and, since I was a female pastor, I always felt that my job security was more fragile than most.

But I am also queer. And for the sake of my career, I needed to appear straight. I tried to wear feminine colors, do my makeup, curl my hair, stop wearing jeans, avoid button-ups, and wear skirts in church. I tried to change the way I walked. I talked just enough about my social life that members would know I was dating men, but not so much that they'd think I was being inappropriate as their pastor. I avoided talking about LGBT+ issues. If the topic came up, I tried not to give away how much I knew and how much I thought about it. I never went to queer spaces. I avoided queer people. I avoided music by queer artists. I avoided TV shows with queer characters. I constantly censored my appearance, my words, myself. I tried to move and live in the world as someone else—someone straight, conservative but open-minded, and always loyal to the church. I tried to give the Adventist church what it wanted.

Even worse, I lied to myself about who I was. I told myself that my attraction to women was just a feeling. I told myself that I needed to follow the teachings of the Bible, which would lead to the best life—even though that wasn't happening. I avoided studying Scripture from other viewpoints, because being truthful with an open mind is fraught with dangers. Accepting the church's conclusions without seriously exploring alternative viewpoints was the only safe option.

So I tried to ignore the part of me that knew something was seriously, desperately conflicted. My whole self-identity hung by a

thread, and touching that thread would be chancy. The truth was perilous, because I knew that if my beliefs shifted, my community would no longer accept me.

## Becoming Honest

Then one day the time came to ask the question, and I did. I questioned whether the beliefs I had been given were biblical or right. My beliefs did indeed shift, and I knew that once the community in which I had spent my whole life found out, its members would no longer fully embrace me. Yet affirming LGBT+ people publicly, and coming out personally, was my only option.

During this time, I needed to find help and encouragement. So I started attending a support group called PFLAG (originally an acronym for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) for LGBT+ people and their families. Very few people at the time knew that I was bisexual. As I parked the car and prepared to enter that first meeting, with my brother along for support, I was terrified at the thought of being honest about who I am in front of a room full of people.

"We need a plan," I told him, "in case someone recognizes me." Irrational as that was, it seemed possible that an upstanding Adventist would be present and rat me out.

"We'll just tell them I'm gay," my brother said nonchalantly. "My wife won't mind."

That's what I needed. Fearlessness and humor.

There was no reason to fear. Something about the people there made me feel at ease. When it came my turn to share, I relaxed. As my struggles and fears poured out, I was shocked at how easy it was and at how often we all laughed at shared experiences and the absurdity of it all.

As I left, I was shaking my head in amazement. After spending my entire life in Adventist spaces; after leading hundreds of small groups and participating in thousands of religious services; after having countless conversations about how we can create safe spaces; after struggling in churches, in schools, in seminary, and with my Adventist friends to find true and authentic community; here it was at long last. I was finally free to tell the truth. The healing power in one event with LGBT+ people had exceeded every Christian event I had ever attended.

At the time I couldn't have told you why. But in the last

three months, as I've crossed the country and networked with dozens of people—doing everything I can to connect with queer Christians and to experience communities that are queer-affirming, especially those with people of faith—I've begun to understand something.

## Following the Script

Most traditional Christians, Adventist or not, are concerned with biblical morality. What is the right thing to do? What is the best way to live our lives? To relate to family? To relate to the world? How can we do what is good and right?

The assumption, often unstated, is that by doing good we will find joy, peace, and well-being—the kind of “abundant life” that Jesus promises in John 10:10. So the church emphasizes behavior, reasoning that if our behavior is holy, our well-being will follow. After all, the Bible says to “Delight yourself in the LORD; And He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psa. 37:4, NASB). And “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23, ESV).

There is a problem here that we may not realize. The script best serves people whose lives are already the easiest, and it fails those whose lives are the most difficult. It often leaves the vulnerable with blame when they need support, while those who could offer support are made to feel satisfied because they have followed the script so well. That's because our understanding of biblical right and wrong is skewed to work for those whose lives follow the idealized pattern of the middle-class American dream.

The script is as follows: Meet a member of the opposite gender (preferably at an Adventist college). Don't get arrested or divorced. Don't struggle with mental illness. Don't question the doctrines of the church. Pay tithe and offerings. Evangelize when you have the time. Above all, attend church.

Never mind the simple truth that humanity is diverse, and life is unpredictable. Poverty, racial inequality, disability, sexuality, gender dysphoria, intersex biology, delayed marriage, various scientific understandings, doctrinal questions, mental health problems, developmental delays, drug addiction, abuse, traumatization, divorce, and spouses who behave in ways we can't control—plus a whole host of other challenges to the Christian norm—are not taken into account.

If your religion works best for people in society whose lives are already the easiest, it's broken. That is not the hope of the gospel. Truth be told, that script is nothing like what is taught in the Bible, though it's how we've come to see Scripture. This is a choice we have made. We emphasize certain parts of the Bible over others, and we never question those parts that are destructive for people who don't fit the script. We refuse to seriously entertain

alternate understandings of Scripture. We fail to challenge the dogma. If any idea fits the script, then it feels right to those who are in charge, for whom following that script comes naturally.

If your life doesn't work out according to plan, the implication is that your principles are wrong. Or, if your principles are in line with the church and you still haven't experienced the joy, peace, and abundant life promised in Scripture, then you probably aren't spending enough time in prayer or Bible study.

We Adventists are experts at emphasizing the need for purity of belief and behavior, but we show little concern for the well-being of aching hearts. If believers are not experiencing the joy and peace and abundant life that is promised, we quote Romans 8:18 and remind them that the faithful will be happy in heaven.

**WHAT'S MISSING FROM MANY OF THESE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HOW TO MAKE CHURCHES SAFER IS THE HARD TRUTH THAT TRUTH-TELLING ITSELF COMES WITH A PRICE.**

But what if there is a better way? What if the joy of the Lord truly can be our strength? What if the peace, hope, love, and life abundant came first? What if eternity could start today? This doesn't mean a life free from suffering, but a life filled with joy despite suffering.

What I've experienced in queer Christian communities is that people are relentlessly concerned with my life. They care about how I am doing, whether I am experiencing joy and peace. I am encouraged, loved, and advised to take care of myself, to trust myself, and to listen to the voice of God, not simply the voice of church leaders. People ask me how I'm doing, and they really want to know. Messages center around caring for myself and for loving all people.

Queer people don't want to convert the world to a narrow set of life choices; they want the world to be a place where people are able to thrive. They want to encourage faith, but they understand how destructive religion can be for those who don't fit the mold. In other words, they deeply care for me and want me to experience life abundant. Then they trust me to make my own decisions about right and wrong.

It's difficult to express just how revolutionary this is. I'm unaccustomed to such care; I keep feeling like it's going to break down, and I'll again be plunged into a world of guilt trips.

Maybe that will happen, but it hasn't happened yet. Yes, people have given me advice on how best to do things, but it has been centered around care for me and my care for others, not around behavioral expectations. They make it clear that if I do things differently, that's okay. They aren't there to decide for me or to enforce the community rules.

I find that the more I am in these settings, the more I learn to listen to the voice of God and follow the principles of Scripture. These communities support my growth and integrity, not my conformity. The more I am honest and vulnerable, the more I connect with others and am cared for rather than told what I am supposed to believe and do. It takes getting used to. I have heard about queer Christian communities where this is not the case, but what I've experienced has been life-giving.

Why this difference? The biggest reason I can see is that queer people have experienced the pain of being forced into a group understanding of right and wrong that doesn't consider us. We have been told that Scripture is clear—by a church that has never even considered alternate theological perspectives. Why would they? They have a script. Then, in the face of such treatment, we found the courage to confront the damaging expectations that have been forced on us. In other words, we've come out of the closet.

### **Congruence and Mental Health**

Coming out in spite of the fact that many people will not approve is an act of radical honesty. And it's something for which we pay the price. What's missing from many of these conversations about how to make churches safer is the hard truth that truth-telling itself comes with a price.

Carl Rogers is the founder of humanistic psychology. He also attended seminary. Integral to his person-centered approach to therapy is the idea of congruence. We have two selves: one that is our reality, and one that we present to the world. The more distance there is between those two, the more psychological stress we will experience. Trying to portray an image that is what people want rather than the reality of who we are not only consumes our energy, but also creates shame, anxiety, and depression.

Why give the world an empty shell? Why project what others want instead of embodying the truth of yourself and your world? For very good reason: Conformity to the script is demanded, and honest divergence from the script is punished.

In some places, that punishment is not worth the cost. Some people live in countries where the members of their churches and communities will physically abuse and harass them if they come out. In Chechnya, LGBT+ persons are being thrown into

concentration camps, as they were in Nazi-occupied Europe. Even here in America, many queer minors can't trust their parents with the truth of who they are. For good reason they fear being kicked out of home, cut off financially, and forced into damaging treatments designed to change them. Many adults who come out could lose jobs on which they and their families depend. For some people, truth-telling is not safe and survival is the priority.

But for most of us in Western countries, the high cost of disguising ourselves outweighs the price we pay in our communities. That's certainly been true for me, even though I lost more than most by coming out. The joy it has given me to follow God with my true self is well worth the cost.

### **Authenticity in Scripture**

Central to the message of the Old Testament is the Shema Yisrael found in Deuteronomy 6:4-6. Verse 5 (NIV) reads, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." You may recognize it, since in Matthew 22:37 Jesus quoted this as the most important commandment.

I used to think of these words about loving God with our whole selves as being about dedication, and I still do. But in the past, I defined dedication as effort. Do everything you can to bring all areas of your life in line with what God expects of you. What is expected of you? You can normally find out what God desires through your faith community.

I think of these words differently now, and in a way that is more reflective of the entire Hebrew scriptures. The book of Job tells the story of a man who is falsely accused by his religious community. He is righteous, but he's called unrighteous. His friends demand that he admit his sinfulness, that he repent and declare that God is just. They say that his life is evidence that he is wicked and that he should accept the shame they are giving him. It sounds an awful lot like being ostracized for being queer.

Instead of capitulating, Job defies them. Instead of conforming to what to all appearances suggest—that he is a wicked man—Job chooses relentless honesty. He refuses shame. He loves God not with the shamed shell of what he is told to be, but with the reality of who he is. And God commends him for it, even saying that Job has declared the truth about God (Job 42:7).

Job is not alone. Moses likewise talks back to God, bargains, and even changes God's mind (Exodus 4, 32). The poetry of the Psalms unabashedly accuses God of being absent and unjust (e.g., Psalms 3, 12, 22, 74). Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prays that he wishes he didn't have to do what is commanded.

Scripture is filled with examples of people who are relentlessly willing to be themselves, willing to bring to God the reality of



who they are, and willing to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and strength, not merely with their behavior.

They don't dismiss what they believe to be true. They don't try to silence their God-given intuition or their scriptural understanding of right and wrong. They don't submit to platitudes and comfortable clichés about God and faith. They wrestle, and they screw up, and they eventually stand up (Gen. 32:22-32).

They are willing to do this even when those around them think they are blaspheming. Jesus himself is the greatest example. All the weight of the shame and hate the religious institutions could muster fell on Jesus, and he refused to relent. No wonder outsiders loved him and insiders despised him. Jesus transgressed religious dogma and transgressed the script. He challenged everything they were unwilling to question. He even boldly reinterpreted the plain meaning of Scripture (e.g., Matt. 5:38-42).

Conservative churches generally aren't comfortable with that kind of honest wrestling or these types of challenges to the way Scripture has always been read. Such behavior and such questions border on irreverent and always transgress traditional cliché answers, so wrestling is punished.

### **Paying the Price**

On the other hand, those of us in the queer community who have paid the price of honesty no longer want to impose that on others. We believe that God works through health and wholeness, not through community standards that inevitably produce conformity through social pressure rather than growth through the Spirit.

Placing behavior over wholeness doesn't work. Honesty comes when we are willing to trust people with their own lives and their own decisions, without judgment. Think of the people with whom you are transparent. They are people who are invested in your life, who want what's best for you. Hopefully they are also those who trust your ability to make your own decisions.

Seventh-day Adventists talk and talk about safe communities, but the strategy that most churches have chosen for creating such communities is to be nicer, not to give people the freedom to be honest. Niceness that ushers in social pressure sends a mixed message. It's not safe; it's treacherous.

If we want honest communities, we need people who are willing to pay the price for that honesty. And when we see others being honest, we must come to their aid, regardless of whether we agree with them or not. That's the only way change can really come.

### **Coming Out as a Spiritual Discipline**

Coming out is valuable—and not just for those of us who are being honest about our sexuality and gender identity. Coming out should

be viewed as a spiritual discipline. It's the discipline of paying the price to tell the truth, because living as the people God made us to be is better than living as the church wants us to be.

One thing I learned as a pastor, while visiting members in their homes and talking to them about their lives, is that a lot of people are hiding in church. Scratch the surface of any apparently idyllic Adventist congregation, and you will find the illusion of conformity melting away. Members who appear to be Bible-believing are atheists, and members who appear to be teetotalers have wine in their cupboards. Many people are simply not what they portray on Saturday morning.

## **WE ALL NEED TO COME OUT. WHAT ARE YOU HIDING FROM YOUR SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY?**

How can God work in our lives and communities if all we offer is a facade? Coming out isn't something that only queer people need to do, but it is an area where we have more experience. We all need to come out. What are you hiding from your spiritual community? In what area have you not been willing to pay the price of honesty? How are you allowing community expectations to hold you back from being or doing something? In what ways are you pursuing group conformity rather than pursuing the will of God? What can you do to come out for yourself?

"Coming out" is a spiritual discipline that could redeem the church. If we all had the courage to be honest about who we are and what we believe—if people stopped hiding their questions, their conflicted behaviors and beliefs—the church would be forced to become what it should be.

How can the church get there? I know who could help: the queer people who are being pushed out. We know what it takes to come out, and we know how important it is to pay the price. We also know what it takes to create safe communities, because we never want to use religion against others the way it has been used against us.

We want the type of faith communities that will hold onto us through our questions, our changes, and our disagreements. We want a church that cares more about who we are and if we are whole and joyful than about whether we have the same biblical understanding of what is right and wrong. We want a church that cares more about us pursuing God and truth than about everyone arriving at the same conclusions. We want a church that trusts us to be led by the Spirit. We are willing to pay the price. Are we the only ones? 🏳️‍🌈



# TRUTHFULNESS *and* RECOVERY

By Rebecca Murdock

“HI, MY NAME IS SARA, AND I’M AN ALCOHOLIC.”

I looked up, startled, to see who was speaking. A young woman, perhaps 19 years old, sat in the second row of the community center, introducing herself quietly but confidently. “I’ve been sober for seven days,” she continued.

Everyone in the room looked her way, and I felt my cheeks blush in embarrassment for her. As the lady seated to the left of the young woman patted her on the back, the others in the room snapped affirmingly.

The girl began to talk about her struggle—a lifestyle that led her to a pregnancy, which led her to decide it was time to care for her child and quit the cycle that alcohol had triggered in her life. She spoke for about five minutes before concluding her turn. I tried to decide whether I felt pity or judgment or admiration, but before I could come to a conclusion, the man to her right began his own story.

“Hi, my name is Taylor, and I’m an alcoholic.” Sober for three months, Taylor was struggling to re-establish a connection with his family, who didn’t trust him anymore. He was hoping to gain back their trust and be accepted into his home again. Members of the group listened and nodded understandingly.

Then came the next introduction. “Hi, I’m Robert...”

And the next. “Hi, I’m Luisa...”

And the next. “Hi, I’m Mark...”

Every story was prefaced with the painfully vulnerable admission: “I’m an alcoholic.”

I sat there, slouching in my seat. I had come to observe the meeting for an article I was writing, but my notepad was empty on the chair next to me. I watched, transfixed by the individuals around me, feeling a sense of shame for what was happening and feeling out of place because I didn’t have anything to contribute.

This wasn’t what I had envisioned for my first Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. I’d expected a health presentation from a social worker, maybe, or some advice from a counselor, but not so many stories with so many painful personal details. Not this level of vulnerability.

As the meeting progressed, I began to find my bearings and analyze my own thoughts.

*Why do you feel like this?* I asked myself.

*Well, because it’s embarrassing,* I answered flatly.

*But they don’t seem embarrassed to tell it,* I pushed myself. *Why are you embarrassed to hear it?*

I paused. *I don’t know...maybe because I feel like I’m different from them. I haven’t had a similar experience...and if they knew that, they might be embarrassed to say these things in front of me.*

I stopped. I felt like my smarter self was about to chastise my weaker self for thinking that way, so I decided to shut off the dialogue.

But as I listened to the group’s serenity prayer and watched the members shaking hands after the meeting and sticking around to put away chairs together, it dawned on me. I was the one who should feel embarrassed. While these AA members already knew that they were part of this vulnerable group of humanity, I somehow thought that being a non-alcoholic made me immune.

I gathered my things, helped to put some chairs away, and thanked my sponsor for allowing me to share the experience.

“Hopefully you got what you needed?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I looked down. “I think I did.”

On my way home, I kept thinking about Sara’s story, specifically. If I had gotten drunk and become pregnant at 19, the last thing I would want to do is announce it to a room full of people. Not to mention that claiming seven days of sobriety

wouldn't be seen as an accomplishment at all by my church group or family. It would be seen as a long way to go toward meeting an expected standard. Yet it seemed that at the AA meeting, in a room where everyone was aware of their weaknesses, a confession like that wasn't perceived as someone else's struggle, but as simply another voice naming their own.

I found that idea interesting as I reflected on it in church the next Sabbath. I remembered reading an excerpt from the book *Exclusion and Embrace*, in which author Miroslav Volf asserts that the church should be a place of "creating and sustaining a new kind of covenant community...characterized in a pioneering way by the practice of truthful living and straightforward, yet loving, truth speaking."

I was intrigued by this concept, because when comparing the AA meeting to the church service I was attending, I was forced

This leads me to think that maybe truth-telling isn't about calling out anyone's level of attainment toward an ideal. (Frankly, why waste our breath on pointing out the obvious: that we all have standards we're not reaching?) Maybe truth-telling is more like admitting that we need help from a trail guide to find our way along a path that someone else has already mastered. Perhaps it involves identifying which of us in the church have acquired certain experiences and skills, so that we know who to send each other to when we are struggling. Maybe it means using our church as a community of practice, to hone our collective skills in this Christian Way that we're all trying to walk.

If that happened, perhaps it would spark all of our congregations to become covenant communities where we are just as dedicated to other members' struggles as they are to ours. Where, within our church families, the real scandal would not be

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## SURELY MY CHURCH FAMILY HAD NO PROBLEM TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT OTHERS, BUT WAS IT TOLD IN LOVE? AND COULD WE MANAGE TO COMPLETE THE ACT OF COVENANT COMMUNITY BY ALSO TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT OURSELVES?

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to ask which one created and sustained "covenant community." Which one was "characterized in a pioneering way by the practice of truthful living?" Which group achieved "straightforward, yet loving, truth speaking?" Surely my church family had no problem telling the truth about others, but was it told in love? And could we manage to complete the act of covenant community by also telling the truth about ourselves?

I decided I should start with myself.

I felt uncomfortable that others were telling the truth about themselves, perhaps because they were admitting that they weren't meeting a standard. If I felt they might be uncomfortable in front of me, I must've somehow thought I *was* meeting said standard. Which meant that I esteemed myself as being the kind of person who could meet standards and the AA members as the kind of people who couldn't. Which, if I had any kind of standard for humility, would've put me on the very low end of the spectrum.

that one of us is not "up to par" but, rather, that any of us would think that we ever *could* be, without God or each other.

While I am proud to be part of a denomination that rejects complacency and encourages growth, I think that to embrace the whole truth of the gospel is to also embrace the uncomfortable parts, such as our brokenness and our insufficiency. Telling ourselves the truth about who we are involves understanding our need for "other"—both God and community—and to live in spiritual self-sufficiency only robs us of those gifts.

In an attempt to experience true spiritual community, I guess I'd like to start.

"My name is Rebecca, and I'm self-reliant and self-righteous. I've been this way for 28 years. If someone out there has been through this before, please let me know. Thanks." 📧

# The Dark Side of Repentance

BY SMUTS VAN ROOYEN

In the movie *There Will Be Blood*, which is definitely not for the squeamish, an oil baron bludgeons a slicked-down evangelist to death with a bowling pin. Before the brutal attack, the oilman (played by actor Daniel Day Lewis) coerces the pious minister (played by actor Paul Dano) to fervently and repeatedly confess in loud pulpit tones, “I am a false prophet, and God is a superstition!” He is forced to hang his false ministry naked on a cross for his own soul to see; then he is destroyed without mercy.

This coerced repentance is exacted tit for tat from the preacher as revenge for the humiliation the preacher had inflicted on the oilman in a church service years before. Back then, the evangelist manipulated the baron, who was wracked with guilt over his rejection of his deaf son, to publicly kneel on the splintered church platform and call out for forgiveness: “I want the blood...I’ve abandoned my child!” Yet there was no power in the blood that day: it did not wash his conscience clean.

Here is a titanic power struggle between two powerful men who use the dynamics of repentance and confession to control and crush an adversary in the name of God. Both men are exquisite masters at getting an opponent to look into the

very worst part of his psyche until he becomes despicable in his own eyes. They engender remorse and use it to manipulate others to get what they want. It’s a clear but instructive abuse of repentance and confession for the purpose of domination.

In its practical application, repentance sometimes has a dark, ominous side, and perceptive critics of religion have exposed it, often harshly but usually to our benefit. Take, for instance, Mark Twain’s account of the repentance and confession of his fictional Huck Finn. Twain is one of those delightful sinners who redeems the saints from their own self-righteousness with cutting sarcasm. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, young Huck has finally escaped the moralistic clutches of his keeper, Miss Watson, and fled to the vast, flowing freedom of the great Mississippi River. Water, air, motion, and life are his at last!

Down at the mysterious river, on one of its hidden islands, the boy accidentally comes across Jim, who is none other than Miss Watson’s personal human property. Jim and Huck have both eluded Miss Watson’s enslavement and share a keen yearning for freedom. Together they flee by raft to the northern horizon, led by the glorious Drinking Gourd of the night sky.

Huck soon comes to care deeply for Jim, the warm-hearted slave, but this affection tumbles him into the brambles of his own complicated conscience. He becomes consumed with guilt over enabling a fugitive slave to escape. The pious culture of his upbringing on the rigid river shore, which dictates that he return Jim to his owner, will not let him go. Huck is convinced that he is committing a mortal sin, and an unbearable crisis of conscience takes hold of him. In sheer desperation, Huck finally writes a letter of confession to Miss Watson to tell her precisely where she can recapture his beloved Jim. Thus he turns from the terrible sin that his love is driving him to commit.

The mere writing of the letter lifts an enormous weight from his desperate soul. He feels he has finally turned from sin to God in a cathartic act of repentance. “I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now.” He also grasps “how near I come to being lost and going to hell.”

But as he holds the letter of confession in his hands, his thoughts rush on willy-nilly. Huck remembers how he and Jim laughed and sang together in the moonlight. He remembers how his friend kept the long night watch over him while he slept soundly. He remembers that Jim calls him “Honey.” Suddenly his strong love for Jim plunges him into a confusion over the moral turn for the good he has taken. Should he mail this letter of repentance and destroy his friend, or tear it up and be damned? Huck finds himself shuddering on the very brink of eternity. “It was a close place. I took it up and held it in my hand. I was trembling because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself, ‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell’—and tore it up.” Courageously, Huck made his decision for damnation and for love.

## Effects of Distortion

Twain argues that Christian repentance has a dark, malicious side because it teaches believers to confess what is actually right as wrong. It exhibits a deep confusion about law and love. Using the Bible, bigoted religious groups indoctrinate a false sense of sinfulness into people so as to maintain power over them and to protect their own financial interests. Twain observes that while the only antidote to repentance is love, the price of relief is often self-condemnation.

The misuse and abuse of repentance is still alive and well. One has only to look at the scarlet letter of shame that

conservative churches attach to people for being gay. “Let us fix your pathology. You can be whole again if you will only confess and repent. You’ll see that our spiritual therapy works. God can do the impossible.” This is all said in a most loving way and given with the gentlest Judas kiss on the cheek of those who, like Huck, hold an awful letter in their shaking hands.

But distorted repentance does not stop there. An entire generation of Adventists endured countless weeks of prayer, responded to an untold number of appeals to confess their sins, and now, in my view, confuse spirituality with self-abnegation as a result. They operationalize their spiritual lives—that is, give it practical expression by confessing their sins for temporary relief. For them salvation is associated with little joy, for they have been taught that religion is primarily about what they do with their failures. They are caught in an endless cycle of cleansing from sin and relapsing back into it again. The fitting symbol of their Christianity is not the resurrection of Jesus, but a washing machine from Sears.

But then, thank God, comes the radical reframing of repentance and confession by the Christ. His paradigm moves us forward and away from the repentance preached by John the Baptist. Scripture says that the prophet came into the desert “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4, NIV), and the people flocked to confess them. John, though a good man, was an ascetic. He wandered the desert, wore clothing made from itchy camel skin, and ate locusts (verse 6). But Jesus offered more. While John baptized with water for mere cleansing, he announced one who would baptize with the power of the Holy Spirit (verses 7-8). The Baptist said he was not worthy of even stooping down to untie Jesus’ sandals. Clearly another paradigm of repentance was about to break forth.

### God’s New Possibilities

And it did. “After John was put in prison Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15, NIV). Surprisingly, Jesus offered a call to repent not because we have rubbished our lives, but because a new opportunity beckons us. A bright new vision dazzles us—the kingdom of God has arrived! Matthew expresses this notion of kingdom repentance by quoting from the marvelous words of Isaiah: “The people living in darkness have seen a great light (Matt. 4:16, NIV). Christ’s call to repentance, therefore, is not focused on the mere turning from a guilty conscience. It is, rather, the anticipation and preparation of the mind for an amazing new opportunity.

In Jesus’ view, repentance does not resonate with our failure but with God’s good news. We are called to repent not because we’re such awful wretches, but because God’s kingdom is so utterly wonderful, and we cannot afford to miss it. Positive repentance: what strange notion is this? And why should we repent when good news arrives? Because the danger is that we might discover a fabulous treasure buried in a field and just leave it there as having no value. What a frightful self-improvement that would be. Therefore, we are to dig up the kingdom treasure and do so using the shovel of joyful repentance. “Look what I’ve discovered!”

Kingdom repentance enables us to see God’s new possibilities. It is the divine restoration of the dysfunctional human soul so that it is empowered to fully be itself. It is forward-looking and adventure-seeking—a journey of creative self-discovery. It is the blooming of a fresh flower. Behold, he makes all things new (Rev. 21:5)!

In Greek the word for repentance, *metanoia*, has to do with recasting the

mind in a new and positive direction. To help us understand this process, the Gospel of John tells a story about how Jesus refocused the apostle Peter toward the kingdom of God (John 21:1-19). Peter’s incredible denial of Jesus seems to have been much more than a mere failure to love in a time of crisis. It was, rather, a deeply troubling conviction that he had lost the capacity to love altogether. What he had thought was love was totally bogus. Consequently, after the cross, this man who had healed the sick and even raised the dead regressed to fishing for a living. With his colleagues he sailed out one night into a bitter and loveless futility, and in such darkness he caught nothing.

But when the morning came, Jesus stood on the shore and with cupped hands sent his voice across the water to them: “Friends, did you catch you any fish?” (verse 5, NCV).

And they called back, “No.”

“Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some” (verse 6, CEB), Jesus shouted again. And when they did so, they were not able to draw in the net for the sheer weight of the catch.

When Peter realized that it was the Lord calling to him, he plunged naked into the water and swam about a hundred yards to the beach where Jesus was waiting. Soon, sitting around a little fire, and with fish frying in a pan, the real recasting of Peter’s mind took place. Jesus did not bring up Peter’s character flaws or recount his moral collapse or even seek to engender remorse. He pursued only what was fundamentally germane, with a thrice-repeated question: “Do you love me?” Jesus asked it three times, so as to insist that Peter re-embrace his capacity to love.

That is how *metanoia* works! It redirects the mind to productive optimism, to a new day in the direction of God’s kingdom. 🇺🇸

# TRUTH AND LIES

Our brains were not designed to lie

BY JOHN BRYAN



THERE IS BEAUTY IN WORDS. A SENTENCE WELL WRITTEN—a phrase that captures a thought and holds it for a moment—these are the moments for which readers search. But the nature of a sentence is a strange thing. Words by themselves are not bound by any ethics; they are empty vessels in which nothing but a single unit of information is contained. Claiming that the words “fruit” and “tree” are true or false is meaningless. However, the moment words are grouped together into a sentence, they gain a truth value. That is to say, a sentence has the emergent property of “truthfulness” not found in the individual nouns and verbs that compose it. Take, for example, the sentence “The fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree.” It makes a claim about the state of both the fruit and the tree, which can be verified by reality.

Sentences are the smallest grammatical units that can tell truth or lies.<sup>1</sup> When the serpent spoke the phrase “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4, ESV), those words, arranged in that order, entered into the realm of meaning. They formed a proposition that could be falsified: mankind would either die or it would not. Thus, not until those handful of words were grouped into that complete and unholy sentence was the first lie ever spoken and the father of lies born.

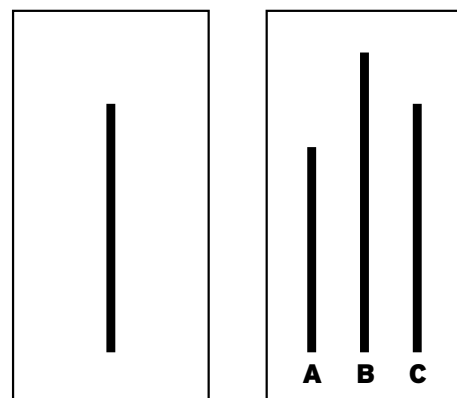
Truth and falsehoods are ships in need of a language on which to cast anchor. Without a mode of communication, it would be impossible to deceive or apprise others. Perhaps that is the reason why the serpent first spoke: because without words, he could not deceive. In the United States Constitution, fraud and libel are not protected precisely because they undermine the whole purpose of free speech, which is to “seek and share the truth.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, what about the sentences we don’t speak, those words we conceal within our minds and hide from the view of others?

## Peer Pressure

“You also were with Jesus,” said an unfamiliar voice. As those words left the young girl’s lips and landed upon the ears of Peter, they kindled fear.

It always begins that way. Fear of embarrassment, or perhaps fear of consequences—that’s why we hide the truth. What were Peter’s thoughts in that moment? Perhaps he had none. Perhaps the same fear that caused him to look at the roaring waves beneath his feet, and plunge beneath them, also prompted him to look at the roaring waves of multitudes around the Messiah, and be pulled by them.

The social world around us is like a net that drags us along the ocean floor. It causes us to choose the wrong answer when we know which is right.



For example, imagine you are in a room with your peers. A professor raises a card with a single vertical line drawn on it and

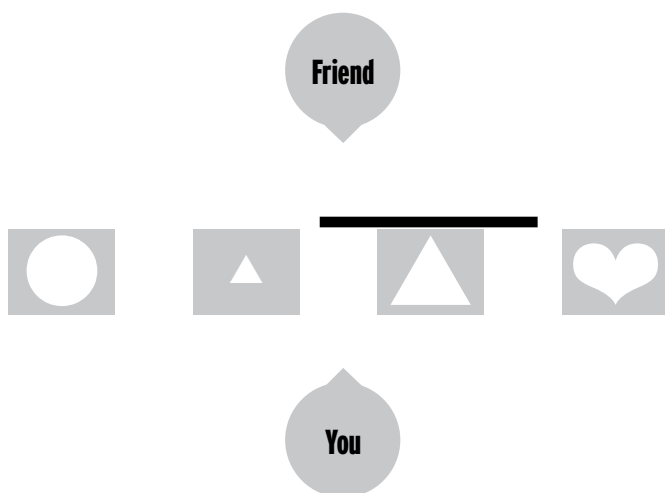


tells you it is the prototype. He raises a second card, this time with three unique lines, and asks the class which one matches the first. The answer is immediately obvious: the third line matches. What isn't obvious is that your peers are really confederates of the study, actors paid to influence you. One by one the professor goes around the room. One by one each student says the wrong answer. It's your turn. You question your sanity. How could so many be wrong? Do you trust yourself? Trust the group? Maybe you're the gullible one falling for the illusion. The uneasiness of nonconformity is not promptly digested. Solomon Asch designed this famous experiment, and his results showed that 35 percent of the time you will—like Peter—deny the truth.<sup>3</sup>

### The Urge to Disclose

“You also are one of them,” said another voice. A little time had elapsed between the first and the second accusation. Why, then, didn't Peter get away with his denial? Why did people become increasingly adamant that he knew Jesus? Simple: our brains are bad at possessing secrets. The harder we try to keep something hidden, the more likely we are to disclose it unintentionally.

Imagine sitting at a table, with a friend across from you. On the table are four cards with a specific shape on each. A circle is to your left, and a heart is on the right. The two in the middle are both triangles—one large, the other small. Only three of the shapes are visible to your friend. The fourth is visible only to you. Do you think you can keep it a secret?



When Liane Wardlow Lane and her colleagues<sup>4</sup> designed this experiment, they came up with an intuitive way to gauge when people disclosed secret information. Researchers asked

participants to describe the shapes to the person across the table—all except the hidden one. Interestingly, many described the visible triangle as the “small” triangle. Their use of the adjective “small” unnecessarily revealed important information. Two different cards show triangles, but the friend on the other side of the table doesn't know that. By calling the visible triangle small, the describer was leaking privileged information—that there was a larger triangle hidden behind the partition.

Curiously, this unintentional confession occurred more often when researchers asked participants to keep the information secret than when they didn't. It's as if an attempt to hide the truth made people more likely to tell it.

### Dangerous Dishonesty

With every denial, the thought of his relationship to Jesus pressed harder upon Peter's mind. His own neurophysiology refused to side with his crime. His voice, the words he used to betray Jesus, now betrayed him and called attention to him. In fact, research shows that people experience a rebound effect after attempting to suppress thoughts. Participants report thinking more about the thoughts they were told not to think than about those they weren't, creating a preoccupation with the suppression.<sup>5</sup>

“Certainly, this man was with him,” said a third voice. Thrice was Peter asked, and thrice did he deny it. Our brains don't like keeping secrets. Suppressing information has been shown to increase stress. For example, one study found that when participants were asked to write about a certain topic and then suppress all thoughts about it, there was a significant decrease in lymphocyte levels in their blood; in other words, their immune system was being compromised.<sup>6</sup> It's as if the stress of lying turns on the body's defense mechanisms, shutting down the immune system in the way it does when we are trying to escape from danger. Stress levels began to increase in Peter's brain, and he began to curse and aggressively deny all accusations; his fight-or-flight response had activated.

*Then the rooster crowed twice.* Some thoughts seem to just awaken in consciousness, while others seem prompted. A few hours prior, the disciples had sat together celebrating the Passover. Jesus had said something to Peter. In that moment, the sights and sounds of Jesus' words activated a chemical cascade in Peter's eyes and ears that streamed across his nerves and into his brain. Out of those perceptions a memory was formed, a memory he had subsequently forgotten, repressed by the chaos of the night.

Certain sounds and smells seem to take us back in time, to relieve forgotten memories. We return to the very place where those memories first formed. Experimentation shows that

retrieval cues aid our recollection.<sup>7</sup> *Then the rooster crowed again.* In that moment, the sight and sounds of the rooster’s crow activated another chemical cascade that rushed across Peter’s nerves and into his brain. Aided by those perceptual cues, a memory was retrieved. Peter remembered the words Jesus had

tell the truth to someone. Our story began with the first recorded sentence, which contained a lie.

I said earlier that a complete sentence, not a standalone word, is the smallest grammatical unit that holds a truth value. I lied. One exception exists. It is not a phrase, nor a sentence,

## It’s as if the stress of lying turns on the body’s defense mechanisms, shutting down the immune system in the way it does when we are trying to escape from danger.

spoken to him, warning him of this moment. Scripture tells us that Peter immediately went out and wept bitterly.

Our brains were not designed to lie. We go contrary to our nature when we suppress the truth, deny our beliefs, and reject our high calling. In the case of traumatic events, studies show that not confiding them with another person can be more emotionally damaging than the events themselves.<sup>8</sup> Ellen White paints that night of the crucifixion thus: “A tide of memories rushed over him. . . . Unable to longer endure the scene, he rushed, heart-broken, from the hall. He pressed on in solitude and darkness, he knew and cared not whither.”<sup>9</sup>

We don’t know much of what happened after Peter left. But we have reason to believe that Peter’s brain gave him no peace—that sadness and guilt continued until his brain was given the opportunity to confess the truth he had denied so adamantly. Thrice did Christ ask if Peter loved him (John 21:15-17), and thrice did the repentant disciple say yes.

Neuroscientist David Eagleman gives us the following thought: “It [the need for disclosure] may similarly explain the appeal of prayer, especially in those religions that have very personal gods, deities who lend their ears with undivided attention and infinite love.”<sup>10</sup> That hymn of old asks: “Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged, take it to the Lord in prayer.” Like Peter, we too need to confess and to

but a single word. A Word whose existence has been from the beginning. A Word that alone contains the entirety of Truth incarnate: Jesus. ✚

<sup>1</sup> Trevor A. Harley, *The Psychology of Language*, 4th ed. (London: Psychology Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Solomon E. Asch, “Effects of Group Pressure on the Modification and Distortion of Judgments,” in H. S. Guetzkow, *Groups, Leadership, and Men* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie University Press, 1951).

<sup>4</sup> Liane Wardlow Lane, Michelle Groisman, and Victor S. Ferreira, “Don’t Talk About Pink Elephants!” *Psychological Science*, April 2006, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 117-129.

<sup>5</sup> David M. Clark, S. Ball, and D. Pape, “An Experimental Investigation of Thought Suppression,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, Vol. 29, 1991, pp. 253-257.

<sup>6</sup> Keith J. Petrie, Roger J. Booth, and James W. Pennebaker, “The Immunological Effects of Thought Suppression,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 75, No. 5, November 1998, pp. 1264-1272.

<sup>7</sup> Endel Tulving and Zena Pearlstone, “Availability Versus Accessibility of Information in Memory for Words,” *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1966, pp. 381-391.

<sup>8</sup> James W. Pennebaker, “Traumatic Experience and Psychosomatic Disease: Exploring the Roles of Behavioural Inhibition, Obsession, and Confiding,” *Canadian Psychology*, Vol. 6, No. 2, April 1985, pp. 82-95.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 3 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1878), p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> David Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

# John 18:38

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

John's account of the trial of Jesus is profound and deeply philosophical. In this narrative, Jesus meets a hideous execution based on untruth: trumped up charges before the Roman authority because his interpretation of Scripture does not conform to the strict teachings and traditions of his own religion.

But the untruth reaches far deeper than the evidence given in the trial. Untruth is, in this story, the ground of a religious way of being based on ecclesiological and political power, and the self-preservation that such power demands.

Pilate's question "What is truth?" is a cliffhanger in the trial drama, concluding the first scene in the trial of Jesus of Nazareth before Pontius Pilate (one of two Roman heads of the Jewish state under Roman occupation). The question dangles unanswered in the trial scene because, in the plot of John's story, truth is an inconvenience to the religious and political power structure, and there is no willingness to encounter it.

## Truth in John's Writings

"What is truth?" is the central question of the Gospel of John. The Greek word for truth is *alētheia*, the opposite of *lēthē* (concealment or forgetfulness). So *alētheia* literally means disclosure or unconcealedness.

Of course, what makes something true among human beings isn't necessarily its veracity, but its

repetition and practice for a long enough period of time. This kind of repeated but unexamined belief can go on for generations, or it can run for the duration of a civic or ecclesiological propaganda campaign to obtain votes and win loyalty. Truth in this sense often amounts to entrenchment or indoctrination, which is, like *lēthē*, a kind of forgetfulness or concealment that pretends to be factual but works to

**Truth is an  
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cover, obscure, or squash truth.

The Johannine conversation uses other terms synonymously with *alētheia*. The words *logos* ("Word," which incarnates as Jesus the Messiah), light, life, and love all define each other from the prologue of the Gospel of John through to the Johannine epistles. Without truth, the believer and the world abide in darkness and death.

## Humanizing Love

The prologue says: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:11-12, NRSV). All may become children of God, not because of their religious or cultural heritage, but because of one infinite reality: God, and the love that is God. Here John affirms truth as rooted in the very ground of being, while at the same time condemning a failed religious institution (cf. John 10:22-42).

According to John, the truth Jesus speaks of is the truth of God's love, embodied in himself as the incarnate *logos*, and the believer's response to it, namely to love as God loves:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. . . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35, NRSV).

"Since God loved us. . . , we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11, NRSV).

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16b, NRSV).

"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light . . . Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light" (1 John 1:5; 2:10, NRSV).

"Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot

love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:20-21, NRSV).

So according to John, it isn’t the affirmation of religious creeds, the careful practice of rituals, or one’s place on the social and religious power structure that brings someone into the presence of God, but the full embrace of true humanity. The Jesus story is not only about God, but also about who we human beings truly are. This is the disclosure to which *alētheia* refers. This is this truth for which the Johannine writer contends, and for which Jesus of Nazareth meets a brutal execution.

### Disruptive Truth

Pontius Pilate’s question “What is truth?” is as cynical as Tina Turner’s “What’s love got to do with it?” The scene that follows this question begins with Pilate’s admission that he finds no case against Jesus. The Sanhedrin wants to kill the Galilean, not because they believe his teaching is untrue (John 18:19-24), but because it is inconvenient. It is disrupting the carefully laid out ecclesiological structure and political power balance (verse 14).

The Jewish religious system has seventh-day Sabbathkeeping down to a science, but Jesus disrupts it by doing merciful acts on the Sabbath (John 5:1-16). The law commands the children of Israel to stone the adulteress, but Jesus asks them to see in the adulteress their own selves (John 8:1-11). The

**‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”**

unorthodox rabbi mingles with those persons his religious tradition forbids him to mingle with (John 4:1-27). Most alarmingly, he storms the temple—the center of Judaic political and economic power—and renders it impotent to accomplish God’s eternal will and purpose (John 2:13-22), because it has become a place of alienation and economic exploitation of the leper, the woman, and the widow—individuals who must pay more to enter the temple because they need more cleansing.

To love as God loves, it seems, is disruptive to the very heart of the religious tradition, in this case the temple with its strictly layered structures and functions.

### Much to Lose

Truth is inconvenient when there is much to lose. Many Jews who initially followed Jesus were ready to kill him once the religious-political storm surrounding him gathered force. In John 8:31, Jesus says to these Jews “who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (NRSV). These defectors resort to the entrenched dogma by affirming that they are the true people of God by virtue of the Abrahamic Covenant and are thus inherently free (verse 33). They already have the truth. But Jesus replies that their actions do not demonstrate that they really grasp that truth: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me” (verse 40, NRSV), “because there is no place in you for my word” (verse 37, NRSV). He says this because Abraham represents God’s covenant of justice,<sup>1</sup> through which humanity fully embraces its common source and all humanity gather up in God, who is One (Gen. 22:18; Rom. 3:29-30; 4:11-12).

In Judaism the high priest (at that time, Caiaphas) is the ultimate ruler. He is the president of the Sanhedrin, a council of 71 members—mostly chief priests—that controls Judaic law. The drama of the trial indicates that Jesus’ teaching not only disrupts

the structure of an entire religious system, but also threatens the authority of its leader, Caiaphas. The crowd that follows Jesus hears his condemnation of a corrupt religious system. At the same time, they witness his life-giving power.

Within the time frame of the Passover, the biggest Jewish festival, Caiaphas must not lose control or lose face with the millions of Jews in Jerusalem. He fears an uprising, which could trigger the end of the Jewish nation in a Roman Empire that brutally crushes any kind of uprising.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that Caiaphas “advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people” (John 18:14, NRSV).

Pontius Pilate yields to the untruth (John 19:1-16) because he is ultimately responsible to keep the peace in his province. If he fails, Rome would depose or execute him.

### **Self-Preservation**

Religious institutions have a penchant for self-preservation by hiding behind dogma and propaganda that obscures truth. What makes people get up to sing: “*I love Thee, I love Thee, and that Thou dost know; but how much I love Thee my action will show,*” and yet feel uncomfortable having someone of a different race among them? What caused people to leave church on a Sunday and go directly to the town square to take part in a lynching? What makes a person who claims to love God walk out of a church because a woman

is its pastor? What makes someone who claims to love as Jesus loved reject people because of their sexual orientation? What makes a delegation of religious adherents ostracize and deny the livelihood of one of its members because her interpretation of Scripture questions long-held beliefs?

## **The opposite of love is not hate. It is fear: fear of the truth of who we really are.**

It is not hate. It is entrenched indoctrination invoked in service of self-preservation.

The opposite of love is not hate. It is fear: fear of the truth of who we really are. Fear metastasizes into hate and violence. And this is the story of the cross. When an institution embraces doctrines or policies that overtly or covertly disempower, dehumanize, and separate people into categories, and then struggles to maintain such at all cost, it is practicing something other than truth. It has forgotten

the meaning of its own existence. It is yet to bring its adherents into an encounter with *alētheia*, which would be to remember our common humanity.

Jesus’ teaching was a disclosure, an *alētheia*, of the divine love that sets a people free, unearthed from layers of religious dogma, ritualistic obsession, and hierarchical power structure. ☩

<sup>1</sup> The word rendered “righteousness” in the New Testament actually means “justice,” as in delivering justice or delivering love.

<sup>2</sup> Emperor Augustus in 31 BCE established the *Pax Romana*, thus beginning a period of peace that allowed for the development of Roman civilization. This peace was brutally maintained through the “ruthless suppression of revolt.” See Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), pp. 110-111.



# Aletha

BY MAYLAN SCHURCH

Last Sabbath Molly and I got up to potluck a little late. We were just peeling apart a couple of paper plates when a young woman with wet hair hurried into the fellowship room after us. Reaching into the fridge, she brought out a dish and carefully placed it on the counter in front of us.

"Hi, Alicia," I said. "I enjoyed your baptism. Welcome to the family."

"It's Aletha," she giggled apologetically. Her eyes were wet with tears. "Sorry I'm late. A lot of people were talking to me downstairs. This is the happiest day of my life. I learned so much about Jesus during the prophecy seminar."

"I'm Nick," I said. "This is my wife, Molly."

Molly gave Aletha a hug, then glanced at the dish. "You didn't have to bring potluck food," she said. "This is your special day!"

"I wanted to," Aletha replied. "It's my favorite recipe."

Several young adults called her name from a nearby table. "Sorry," she said to us. "I'll be right back. Try it, and tell me what you think." She darted away, and the young adults pulled her down into an empty chair.

Molly opened a drawer and handed me a serving spoon. "Looks good. I wonder what it is."

I scooped a large portion onto my plate, dug my fork into it, and tasted it. "Molly."

"What?"

"This is chicken salad."

Molly's eyes widened. "*Nick. No.*"

"What's more," I said, munching another forkful, "it's *good* chicken salad. Almost better than my mom used to make."

She lowered her voice. "Don't eat any more. You'll get sick. Your tummy isn't used to that now."

I put a little more on my fork and offered it to her. "Try it. Just a little bit. She's going to ask."

"Nick, you know I've never eaten meat."

I sighed. "Poor Aletha. The prophecy seminar never mentioned veggie potlucks, and if the pastor tipped her off, it must not have registered." I glanced over at the young adult table, where Aletha was still the delighted center of attention. "What do we do?"

"I don't know," Molly said. "But pretty soon, somebody's going to come back for seconds, and they'll spot Aletha's dish and try it out."

I sank my voice to a whisper. "And they'll let out a yell: *Hey! This one has meat in it!*"

Molly's eyes darted hither and thither. "We can't just stick it back in the fridge."

"Nope." I glanced around the room. "Where's the pastor? Want me to get him?"

Molly shook her head. "No. We've got to think of something." Suddenly she hiccupped and gripped my arm just above the elbow, hard.

"Owww! What's wrong?"

Still gripping, she steered me out into the hall.

"Molly, what's wrong?"

"*Charlie*," she hissed.

My face tingled, and I stared feverishly around me. "Charlie. Where is he?"

"Downstairs, I guess," she said. "You know how gabby he is. But it won't be long and he'll be coming up here. When he spots that chicken salad, he'll eat Aletha alive."

I tried to be positive. "Maybe he won't be too hard on her."

"Oh, yes, he will," Molly said grimly. "I've seen him in action. Remember that visitor Debbie, a few months back? The one who brought a 2-liter jug of Dr. Pepper to potluck? Charlie made a beeline for her with that iron Pharisee smile of his and that gentle, persistent voice."

I rolled my eyes. "*Oh yeah*. That gentle, persistent voice. But didn't Debbie talk right back at him?"

Molly nodded. “Good for her. They got into a spicy little debate about the theology of caffeine. And that’s when we discovered that Charlie also has a *non-gentle* voice.” She glanced fearfully down the hall. “So as soon as he spots that chicken salad, he’ll lead

**Aletha’s mouth dropped open. “I am so embarrassed!” she gasped. “On the day I’m baptized, I bring a chicken salad to a veggie potluck!”**

precious Aletha over to a corner. He’ll pat her hand, and talk gently to her about Leviticus 11—”

“Chicken’s kosher, Molly. I looked it up once.”

“Okay, then he’ll talk about how in these last days we need to be pure in body, mind, and spirit. And she’ll sit there with a trembly smile. He’ll talk about how veggies move through the digestive system in six hours, and how meat takes thirty-one.”

“Yuck,” I said. “So let’s figure out—”

“And 20 minutes later, Aletha’s eyes will be brimming with tears. And as soon as she can escape from Charlie, she’ll scoop up her little dish, stumble out to her car, and sob her eyes out. And since she knows that Charlie’s a member here, she’ll never darken our door again.”

“Okay, but what do we *do*?” I asked. “Charlie might be on his way up.”

“Get back in there and put the chicken salad back behind some other dishes or something,” she told me. “And guard it.”

“What are *you* going to do?”

“I’ll think of something. Maybe I’ll try to find the pastor.” She headed for the stairs.

Back in the fellowship hall, I saw that the young adult group was breaking up. I went over to the chicken salad and tipped a whole lot more onto my plate. *Behave yourself*, I told my digestive system. *It’s all for a good cause*. I chewed every chicken piece as thoroughly as I could.

Finally Aletha came over to me.

“This chicken salad is stupendous,” I told her. “Almost better than my mom used to make.”

“You liked it?”

“Yup. But *you’d* better get something to eat. Those folks grabbed you as soon as you came in. There’s still some food left,” I said, and added casually, “and it’s all vegetarian.”

She stared at me. “It’s all *what*?”

I grinned the cheerfullest grin I could. “Vegetarian.”

“Wait a minute,” she said.

“Adventists are vegetarians?”

“About half of them are,” I said. “I grew up eating meat, but I switched over years ago. But Sabbath potlucks are always veggie.”

Aletha’s mouth dropped open. “I am so embarrassed!” she gasped. “On the day I’m baptized, I bring a chicken salad to a veggie potluck!”

“A *good* chicken salad. Brought back happy memories.”

“You *ate* it?”

“I sure did,” I said.

“I guess I need to learn some vegetarian recipes.”

“Molly’s got some good ones,” I said. “She’ll be back soon. She had to go take care of something.” *And Charlie*, I thought grimly, *if you walk through that door, you’d better be on your best behavior*.

Molly showed up about 10 seconds later. Her eyes were dangerously bright.

“Hi, Molly,” Aletha said. “Nick was a good sport. He ate my chicken salad even though he’s a vegetarian!”

Molly’s eyes became high-intensity LED flashlight beams, searching my face. The beams asked, *Nick, did you treat her right?*

“Sure,” I answered, and Aletha looked at me, puzzled.

“Molly, where’s Charlie?” I asked. “Is he on his way up?”

Molly smiled a dangerous smile. “Charlie won’t be joining us,” she said crisply. “He and I chatted a bit, and now he’s on his way home.”

“Ol’ Charlie, he’s quite a character,” I told Aletha. “Can’t take ol’ Charlie too seriously. Good guy. Means well.”

“Aletha,” said Molly, “I am going to try just a bit of your chicken salad. Nick says it’s wonderful. I’ve never actually eaten a piece of meat in my life, so this is going to be Piece Number One.”

“But—are you sure?”

“Sure. One little bit of chicken isn’t going to hurt me.”

“Nick said you have a lot of good vegetarian recipes,” Aletha said hopefully.

Molly smiled bravely and raised the piece of chicken to her lips. “I’ll be glad to share.” 🍴



## Thou Shalt Not Hurt Thy Neighbor—With Lies or With the Truth

By Alden Thompson

William Blake offers a sobering starting point for this article on truth-telling: “A truth that’s told with bad intent,” he wrote, “beats all the lies you can invent.”

From a biblical perspective, our discussion begins with the ninth commandment: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour” (Ex. 20:16, KJV). Note that the mandate does not say: “Thou shalt not tell lies.” Additional Mosaic legislation clarifies the commandment’s meaning by stating the penalty due to the one bearing false witness: “Then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother” (Deut. 19:19, RSV). In short, the statute refers to the telling of falsehoods with the intent to injure innocent people. Falsehoods intended to help an innocent person are not directly covered in the command.

I have found two phrases helpful in exploring the full meaning of each of the Ten Commandments: “narrowing the letter” and “broadening the spirit.”<sup>1</sup> The first phrase refers to the process of pinpointing the precise meaning of each command in its Old Testament context; the second broadens the application of each law in the light of the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5).

I have just illustrated the process of “narrowing the letter” when interpreting the command against false witness. Perhaps an even clearer example is provided by the command “Thou shalt not kill” (Ex. 20:13, KJV). The NRSV is typical of many modern translations that read “You shall not murder,” moving from the broader term “kill” to the narrower “murder.”

This change was triggered by the “modern” awareness that Old Testament laws clearly command at least three kinds of killing:

1. *The civil death penalty.* While the Decalogue itself includes no penalties, thus preserving its more universal appeal and application, additional Mosaic legislation specifies the death penalty for breaking each of the Ten Commandments, except the one against coveting.

2. *Killing in war* (Deut. 20:10-18).

3. *Killing in self-defense* (Ex. 22:2-3). The passage allows the killing of a thief at the point of break-in, but not later in the day after the thief has escaped.

In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus provides a sobering illustration of what it means to move from the narrow letter of the law to the true spirit of the law, hence the phrase “broadening the spirit.”

Jesus does not negate the letter of “Thou shalt not kill,” but he broadens it to include anger, murderous thoughts, and vengeful words. Another painful broadening of the Spirit involves the law against adultery. In Matthew 5:27-28, Jesus moves from a narrow definition of an external physical act to a much wider definition that includes even internal, private lustful thoughts.

### What Would Jesus Say?

Jesus gives us six comparisons between old and new in Matthew 5, each beginning with “You have heard...But I say” (or nearly identical wording). A good friend of mine who is a New Testament scholar feels that both the context and the Greek word used suggest that the English translation “but” is too strong. Perhaps we could move it closer to “and.” Yet I have found no modern English translation that has been brave enough to use “and” instead of “but,” even though Jesus clearly intends to affirm the Old Testament when he declares that he has not come to destroy but to fulfill. Here “fulfill” is the opposite of “destroy.” In other words, Jesus is filling the law full of new meaning, which is exactly what he proceeds to do in the rest of the Sermon.

None of Jesus’ six comparisons between old and new directly addresses the ninth command, the one forbidding false witness. We can easily “narrow the letter,” but how would Jesus “broaden the spirit”? Do we know what Jesus would say about truth-telling?

Not directly. But a number of years ago I learned something really important when I wrote an article on the ninth commandment for *Signs of the Times*.<sup>2</sup> When I first submitted the article to the editors, I suspected that they would send it back for revision, and indeed they did. I had come very close to saying that it is all right to tell lies. I knew that such a conclusion would not look good in print, and I was hoping (and praying!) that the editors would help me. They did. And when I worked it over again, I glimpsed a fresh perspective that is reflected in the article title. It is a truth that is closely linked with Jesus’ summary of his message in Matthew 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (NRSV).

What follows is a slightly modified version of the article, which shares the light I discovered as I worked my way through the issues involved with truth-telling.

## Story #1

Louise was a gentle child and beautiful—at least, she was at the moment.

Her father was a violent and unpredictable man. More than once the girl had borne the brunt of his outbursts. The telltale marks were on her arms and face. A pretty dress covered the ones on her back.

Three houses down lived the Martins, a retired pastor and his wife. Devout and gentle Christians, the Martins had struck up a friendship with Louise. When the violence in the child's home became unbearable, she would slip over to theirs.

Now Louise's dad stood at the Martin's door, fists clenched, eyes blazing. "Is my daughter here?" he shouted.

She was. How should Pastor Martin respond?

## Story #2

As John Wilcox drove home, he pondered the bad news from the mechanic. John's sleek little car, just 3,000 miles out of warranty, looked like it was headed for a major engine overhaul. A casual observer wouldn't notice—not yet. But the mechanic was a man of integrity and experience. John knew that the repair would cost big bucks.

Another option would be to sell. Hardly a week went by without someone asking John if he would part with his car. It was a popular model, in spotless condition, pampered and polished both inside and out. Furthermore, John could flash a meticulous service record. He had followed the manufacturer's recommendations to a fault.

What should John tell a prospective buyer?

## Story #3

Carmen had just returned to the dorm from a shopping trip in town. She had stumbled across a couple of real bargains and could scarcely wait to share her elation with friends on her hall.

"Friends" might not be quite the right word, for Carmen didn't fit in all that well. In polite language, one would say she lacked social graces. She was something of a master at breaking into conversations at the wrong moment and showing up when she was neither invited nor wanted.

As she rushed into the hall with her purchases in hand, Carmen met Debbie, a vivacious and popular girl on campus

who was also caring and sensitive. "Look at my new dress," bubbled Carmen. Debbie's heart sank. The fabric was good quality, but the style was dated and the design would hardly complement Carmen's figure.

Debbie struggled with her feelings about Carmen. She wanted to be helpful; she wanted to be nice. What should she say?

## The Real Focus of the Commandments

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Ex. 20:16, KJV). How does this ninth command help us respond to these three incidents?

Is God telling us in the command simply to love the truth and hate lies? That's part of the story, to be sure. Scripture is uncommonly blunt in that respect. Two of the seven abominations the Lord hates are "a lying tongue" and "a false witness who breathes out lies" (Prov. 6:16-19, RSV). The father of lies is the devil (John 8:44). By contrast, Jesus came "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), admonishing us to worship God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24, RSV) and promising that "the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32, KJV).

But simply talking about truth and lies captures neither the full thrust of the ninth command nor the spirit of the Decalogue as a whole. When we listen to Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, it becomes clear that the *real* focus of the commandments is on the neighbor. Jesus put it this way: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12, RSV). Here is Jesus' one-verse summary of the Old Testament, the guiding principle for Pastor Martin, John Wilcox, and Debbie—and for us.

Elsewhere Jesus spoke of two great commands upon which all of the others depend: loving God wholeheartedly and loving your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37-40). Paul claims that the whole law (including the decree not to bear false witness) is summed up in that mandate to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom. 13:9, RSV).

The second table of the Decalogue does give us a string of commands dealing with specific wrong acts: killing, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness. But the common thread uniting them all is the focus on the *neighbor*—indeed, on the very *person* of the neighbor. Many biblical scholars believe that even the eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," refers

in the first instance to the crime of kidnapping (cf. Ex. 21:16), a sin against the *person* of the neighbor rather than simply against his *property*. The seriousness of crimes against the person (murder, adultery, kidnapping, bearing false witness) is underscored by the fact that Old Testament law decreed the death penalty against them.

Jesus summarized the second table of the Decalogue positively: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Negatively spoken, it would be simply: “Don’t hurt your neighbor.” Suddenly a new and more penetrating light shines on the command against false witness. Here is a prohibition, not just against lies but against even using the truth in such a way as to hurt a neighbor. Whatever we do or say should be *for*, not *against*, our fellow men. And from the perspective of Scripture, the most horrifying sin would be to use truth to gain unjust personal advantage at the cost of our neighbor.

A revealing commentary on the ninth command is provided in Deuteronomy 19:15-21, a passage spelling out with painful clarity the penalty for bearing false witness: “Then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother” (verse 19, RSV).

Here is an important clue that could guide the key actors in our stories. Pastor Martin should imagine himself in the place of Louise, and indeed, in the place of Louise’s angry father. John Wilcox should put himself in the shoes of a prospective car buyer. Debbie should imagine herself in Carmen’s place.

Next let them hear the command: “Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor.” And finally, let them act accordingly, doing or saying nothing that would hurt another to their own advantage.

For John Wilcox, the answer is straightforward: the truth will be momentarily costly to him personally, but his responsibility to God and his neighbor is clear. His is not an “intellectual” difficulty but, rather, the “practical” problem of struggling with human selfishness. That is precisely the point of the command and also where we stumble most often. It is a sobering commentary on human existence that clear-cut circumstances are often the ones that most easily tempt us to sin.

Turning to Debbie and Carmen, we find a story that illustrates the potential of using the “truth” against a neighbor. Debbie could easily wound Carmen with a blunt rendition of the facts. But not to tell the truth could leave a struggling human being to make the same mistakes again and again. For Debbie to know how much to tell—and when—demands a double portion of God’s grace.

If we tell the truth with evil intent and acid tongue, and thereby destroy a person, we most certainly have broken the ninth command, even though we are “telling the truth.”

Invoking the penalty clause from Deuteronomy 19:19 clarifies our thinking marvelously: Are we ready for others to treat us as we have treated them?

Of our three stories, the one involving Pastor Martin is the most difficult. I know of no easy answers for him. Yet faithful Christians constantly face such situations in this sin-twisted world. Where do they go for an answer?

Typically, Christians have appealed to the story of Rahab, the town prostitute in Jericho who provided cover for the Israelite spies (see Joshua 2). But Rahab was a Canaanite and a prostitute. Is she a reliable witness and example?

Fortunately, other examples in Scripture reveal how God’s people have sought to fulfill the spirit of the ninth commandment in the face of difficult circumstances. These examples can provide guidance for us. But in all circumstances, we must allow the key summary statements from Scripture to reverberate through our minds: Love your neighbor as yourself; treat him as you would want to be treated. In short, don’t hurt your neighbor.

Now let’s take a closer look at some Old Testament incidents that illustrate how God’s people understood the limits and proper application of the ninth command.

1. *Samuel and King Saul* (1 Sam. 16:1-3). When God told Samuel to go anoint one of Jesse’s sons as successor to Saul, Samuel spoke frankly to the Lord: “If Saul hears of it, he will kill me” (verse 2a, NRSV). The Lord responded: “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD’” (verse 2b, NRSV).

Samuel did as the Lord instructed, telling the truth, though not all of it. Because Saul was under demonic influence, the Lord directed Samuel to be very careful with his words. The result: innocent lives were preserved, and Saul was spared the additional crime of shedding innocent blood.

2. *David and Absalom* (2 Sam. 15-18). When David’s renegade son Absalom seized the throne, David sent back a trusted counselor, Hushai, to counteract the advice of Ahithophel. Ahithophel was another of David’s counselors, but one who had joined with Absalom in the rebellion. Hushai claimed to be Absalom’s friend, but he deliberately countered Ahithophel’s wise counsel with words that ensured Absalom’s defeat.

How does Scripture interpret such a story? The fact that Absalom was a usurper and an enemy of right and justice led the inspired writer to make the following statement: “The LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring evil upon Absalom” (2 Sam. 17:14, RSV).



As in the case of Samuel and Saul, so here: God acted to save innocent lives.

3. *The Shunammite Woman and Elisha* (2 Kings 4:8-37). Here is a tender story with delicate insight. The Shunammite woman had received the gift of a miracle son, only to lose him again as a result of a sunstroke. She saddled her ass and headed full speed for Elisha. He saw her coming and sent his servant Gehazi to greet her and to ask if all was well on the home front.

Gehazi met her and asked his questions, as Elisha had requested. “Everything’s fine,” she responded (see verse 26). Only when she came to the man she trusted, Elisha, did she unburden her heart. Gehazi didn’t need to know her agony of heart. Elisha was the one who could help.

Is it possible that when our lives are in turmoil and someone asks how things are, a cheerful-sounding “Everything’s fine” may be the best way to love our neighbor—until we arrive at the feet of someone who knows and understands?

4. *Elisha and the King of Syria* (2 Kings 6:11-23). In a story both frightful and delightful, we find a biblical precedent for “surprise” parties. The king of Syria set out to capture Elisha, because the prophet’s revelations to the king of Israel kept giving away the secrets of war. When the Syrian army surrounded the town (much to the dismay of Elisha’s servant), Elisha asked the Lord to strike the army with blindness. Then the prophet told the Syrians: “This isn’t the place. Come. I’ll take you to the man you want” (2 Kings 7:19).

Surprise. The army opened its eyes in Samaria, in the presence of the Israelite king. “Shall I smite them?” he asked. “Of course not,” returned Elisha. “Throw a feast for them and send them home.”

As a result of Elisha’s playful trick, “the Syrians came no more on raids into the land of Israel” (2 Kings 6:23, RSV). Two nations were saved from further bloodshed.

But, you say, couldn’t these stories result in a dangerous carelessness with the truth? Indeed. That is a frightening possibility. While it may be *right* to withhold the truth for the purpose of saving innocent lives (or even to throw a surprise party!), a great danger lurks therein. Telling the truth is habit-forming. So is telling lies. In God’s new kingdom will be only truth and full disclosure—always. I want neighbors of integrity, ones I can trust. Don’t you?

And that is precisely the problem in this sinful world, for, with our twisted minds, we may whittle away the principle of truth until nothing remains. Light and darkness blend into a hazy twilight, and we no longer are capable of distinguishing right from wrong. That is why it is so important to make telling the truth a habit.

Langdon Gilkey, in his insightful commentary on a World War II Asian internment camp,<sup>3</sup> describes a tragic case where a father proudly touted his son’s ability to work the black market with the Chinese farmers outside the camp. Black marketing was forbidden by the captors but was deemed acceptable by the captives. One day the father discovered, to his horror, that his boy had lost the ability to tell the difference between captors and captives. He no longer told the truth to anyone. Something insidious begins to happen when we shade the truth, even for good cause, and no one knows where it will end.

So in our dilemmas, we must constantly seek God’s guidance. Jesus’ summary statements of the law can help us keep first things first. Indeed, stating the ninth command as “Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor” is in keeping with the context of the Decalogue and the Old Testament and in harmony with the spirit of the law as expressed by Jesus.

And with that in mind, let’s return to Pastor Martin, John Wilcox, and Debbie and ask what counsel we might have for them in light of a command that reads: “Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor.”

Pastor Martin, we have no clear counsel for you. Whatever you say could be catastrophic. May your relationship with God and your understanding of his word be your guide in that terrible moment when you must say something. And may God grant you grace to love your neighbor—both innocent Louise and her violent father—as yourself.

John Wilcox, put yourself in your neighbor’s shoes. Sell the car if you must, but don’t do anything that would hurt your neighbor.

Debbie, you know the frustrations you have had with Carmen over many months. On the one hand, you could be mightily tempted to tell the “truth” in a such a way as to injure her. On the other hand, you could avoid the problem and pass her by with a superficial greeting. But that would not give her the help she needs. Quick, pleasant words now could ultimately bring her misery. So love her as you would want to be loved. Jesus would like that.

Thou shalt not hurt thy neighbor—with lies or with the truth. That’s the way it is in God’s kingdom. Deep inside, we all know that is the way it should be. ☩

<sup>1</sup> See discussion in Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), pp. 117-118; (Cantonment, FL: Energion, 2016), pp. 137-139.

<sup>2</sup> Alden Thompson, “Thou Shalt Not Hurt Thy Neighbor with Lies or with the Truth: That’s the Way It Is in God’s Kingdom,” *Signs of the Times*, November 1988, pp. 20-22.

<sup>3</sup> Langdon Brown Gilkey, *Shantung Compound* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 145-147.

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## EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or the editorial board. One of the purposes of this magazine is to encourage dialogue between those of differing viewpoints within the Adventist Church. Thus, we will publish articles ranging throughout the conservative-liberal continuum.

# NEWS BRIEFS



## Adventist Church Declared “Most Organized Religion”

The Guinness World Records organization has named the Seventh-day Adventist Church the most organized religion worldwide. Not even the Roman Catholic Church was able to beat Adventists’ ability to “create endless layers of bureaucracy and micromanage every facet of church life and truth discovery,” said Guinness judges. A statement announcing the record says that for a movement that started off with a deep distaste for elaborate creeds and top-heavy church structures, the Adventist Church has come a long way.

## Report: Sabbath Potluck Better Than Sleeping Pills

A report from the National Institute of Sleep Medicine (NISM) claims that Adventist fellowship hall potlucks, served immediately after a tedious sermon, function better than sleeping pills to induce napping. “The drowsiness hits almost immediately,” said NISM spokesperson Kiero Doarmihir. “We don’t know what Adventists put in their veggie potluck dishes, but after two or three plates of the stuff, all you want to do is find a sofa and crash.”

## GC Buys Blackout Drapes to Block Unwanted Light

Leaders at the General Conference have purchased blackout drapes for the offices of every major executive. They hope the drapes will

effectively block new light from illuminating any of the thorny policy issues that senior leaders are struggling to defend. Top denominational officials agree that little progress can be made in enforcing arbitrary policy particulars if you must stay open to the illuminating promptings of the Holy Spirit.

## Praying Man in Pew Steals Preacher’s Thunder

A man sitting halfway down the aisle at the Parkline Adventist Church had impressed much of the congregation with what appeared to be a marathon prayer session—until he started snoring. The sounds emitted from the man, who had his head planted firmly on the pew in front of him, began softly. As the service continued, however, his snoring gained traction, creating a widespread disturbance. Before the benediction, the thunderous sounds had sent three parents with crying babies running for the lobby.

## Pennypincher Perfects Post-offering Appearance

A lifelong Adventist known for being penurious has found yet another way to save money, even on Sabbath. Simon Cheeseparing has taken to arriving fashionably late for services so that he makes an appearance immediately

after the offering plate has been passed around. If, for any reason, his timing is off, Cheeseparing has been known to loiter in the lobby and make half-distracted small talk with door greeters until he sees deacons file out of the sanctuary.

## Red Bull Sponsors Hospital’s Anti-caffeine Campaign

Organizers of an anti-caffeine drive hosted by St. Helena Hospital in California are celebrating a lucrative sponsorship that promises record profits for both the event and the ailing institution. Some have criticized the decision to accept sponsorship dollars from a corporation that profits from selling a product that is completely at odds with the Adventist health message. Hospital administrators brushed off the criticism, saying that they had successfully made that leap of faith with Napa Valley wineries decades ago.

*BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don’t mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.*



# Adventist Today Lifeline

She grew up Adventist. Her interest in science led her to attend medical school. After residency, she felt called to serve in a rural health clinic. She and her husband and their young son went to the local Adventist church soon after they moved.

While they loved their new community, the congregation they went to seemed like visiting another country where the conversations were strange to them and the leadership almost seemed desperate that they solve the church's financial challenges.

Their experience was repugnant to them. They wondered if they were alone with their thoughts and feelings about Adventism. They really didn't want to stop attending church, but they knew they could not remain in this toxic congregation.

Fortunately, a family member of theirs introduced them to Adventist Today (AT):

- They were given a few past magazines, which they really enjoyed reading
- Soon after, the physician signed up for the FREE weekly email AT Update
- The couple told their friends from medical school who are now serving around the world about AT's Facebook and Twitter presence
- They invited a few newfound friends to their home on a Friday night to watch AT's author interviews or live chat, and then used the presentations as conversation starters to change hearts and minds toward more progressive goals
- They became Advising Members because they wanted access to the webinars, research reports, and inside stories

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