

The

Apocalyptic

VISION

and the

Neutering *of*

ADVENTISM

*Are we erasing
our relevancy?*

George R. Knight

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Contents

Thoughts on the Word “Neutering”

Chapter 1 Enough of Beastly Preaching and an Introduction to Neutering

Chapter 2 Another Look at Apocalyptic Prophecy and Adventist History

Chapter 3 But Don’t Forget the Beasts (Including the Modern Ones) and My Problem With Apocalyptic

Chapter 4 The Fallacy of Straight-line Thinking and a Most Remarkable Prophecy

Chapter 5 Living the Apocalyptic Vision in the Twenty-first Century

Chapter 6 A Glimpse of Neoapocalyptic and a Belated Foreword

Postscript to the Revised Edition

Thoughts on the Word “Neutering”

- “Neutering” is not a nice word.
- Neither is the process agreeable, whether it be physically or spiritually.
- Some will hate the metaphor,
Others will love it,
But *none will forget it.*
- If so, I have achieved the first part of my purpose in writing this brief book.

Chapter 1

Enough of Beastly Preaching and an Introduction to Neutering

Why be Adventist?

Good question. One I have struggled with during the past five decades.

For some of you the answer is simple. You can't help it. You were born that way.

For others it's an addiction. For one reason or another it "feels good" to be Adventist. You wouldn't know what to do with your lives without it.

But for me it is a serious problem. You see, I wasn't born that way. And after 47 years in the church I'm still not addicted.

There have to be good reasons for me to be an Adventist—or even remain one.

Reflecting on the Meaning of Adventism

The roots of my perspective go back to my childhood. Not only was I not born Adventist, but I didn't even profess Christianity for my first 19 years.

My cue for religion came from my father, who proclaimed that "all Christians are hypocrites" and who held with Freud that only weak people need to lean on God as a father figure. In my early-adult years he told me that his great failure in life was that all four of his children had become Christians. He has mellowed with age, but his earlier perspective shaped my own on the topic of religion.

My agnosticism came to a sudden halt at a series of evangelistic meetings in Eureka, California, in 1961. Just before I turned 20 I was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And like many new converts, I took a good long look at you Adventists and your preachers. I soon came to one solid conclusion: *What a mess!* None of you were perfect, and I knew why. You obviously hadn't tried hard enough.

I still vividly remember promising God that I would be the first perfect Christian since Jesus. *No problem*, thought I. After all, I had boundless energy and barrels of determination. And then again, I hadn't found it all that difficult to be bad. And wasn't being good just as easy in the other

direction?

Well, it wasn't. By 1969 I had three academic degrees in Adventist theology and was serving the church as a pastor. But things weren't going well. In fact, after nearly eight years of struggle I was as messed up as ever. And so were the churches I served.

One March morning I took out my ministerial credentials and put them in an envelope with a note to my conference president, resigning from the ministry.

Now, my conference president was a gracious man who wanted to "save me for the work." So he returned my credentials with a note of encouragement. He thought I was having a bad day. But I was having a bad life! All I wanted was out—out of both Adventism and Christianity. My only desire was to return to the happy hedonism I had enjoyed during my earlier years. So I again put my credentials in an envelope and sent them off a second time.

At that point the good man asked me to visit him at his home, where he prayed with me and for me and returned my credentials. But to no avail. I returned home, wrote a rather pointed letter as to what he could do with my credentials, and mailed the whole mess off a third time.

It was my first literary success. I never saw my credentials again. For the next six years I did not read my Bible, for six years I did not pray, for six years I wandered spiritually in a "far country" (Luke 15:13).

During those long years I studied philosophy for my doctorate. But by the time I received my degree I had concluded that philosophy was bankrupt in terms of answers to life's most basic questions. And that was important, since I had entered my studies hoping to find the "real meaning" of life that had eluded me in my Adventist experience.

About that time my major professor, an agnostic existentialist of Jewish heritage, told me one day that if he wasn't a Jew he'd be a nobody.

That statement from a man who routinely smashed religion in class caught me off guard. "What do you mean?" I asked. Josh's answer was as pointed as it was memorable. I still recall his passion as he proclaimed that it was his Jewishness that gave him meaning—that he wasn't just one of those millions of people out there, but a member of the community. The community, in fact, not only provided orientation for his life, but sent him all over the world as a speaker.

As he talked I reeled in astonishment, thinking to myself that Josh wasn't a Jew but an Adventist. (Of course, with a different background I could have

substituted Baptist, Methodist, or Catholic.)

Josh helped me see what I should have discovered from Matthew 13 about the various plants and fish existing in every religious community until the harvest (verses 30, 49). He had enabled me to grasp the fact that all religious communities consist of two sorts of members—believers and cultural adherents. In Josh’s case the most important thing about his religious orientation was that he had been born that way and raised in the community. His religious orientation was his life, even though he wasn’t a “believer.” It was his history, his culture, his social location, and he loved and respected it for all of those reasons.

Reflecting on my conversation with Josh many years later, I realized that if I had been born Adventist and if my father had been a pastor, my mother a church school teacher, and my grandfather a conference president, the most difficult and radical thing I could do would be to leave the church that had provided social meaning to my life. It would be easier to stay in rather than depart, even if I didn’t believe. In fact, in such a circumstance becoming a pastor, administrator, or Bible teacher would be preferable to cutting off my cultural roots and family. After all, you don’t have to believe that stuff. There is a certain level of comfort and security in “playing church.” I could finally see how Josh had arrived at his destination, even though my own experience meant an uprooting from job, friends, and family when I accepted Adventism.

You don’t have to believe that stuff. There is a certain level of comfort and security in “playing church.”

About the same time that Josh helped me to grasp the difference between cultural adherents and believers, a very bad thing happened to me, something that I never wanted to take place. My first Bible teacher “got invited” to my house for lunch. It wasn’t my idea, but I couldn’t get out of it.

It was a long day because I realized that he knew my spiritual condition. But he didn’t preach a sermon to me, counsel me, or condemn me. He merely exuded an atmosphere of calm assurance in his faith and treated me with kindness and love. That day I met Jesus in the person of Robert W. Olson. When he left, I told my wife that he had what I needed.

That day, 14 years after I had become an Adventist, I became a Christian. To put it another way, my Adventism got baptized. At that point I became spiritually active in Adventism again. It wasn't because Adventism's theology was perfect that I reconnected, but because its theology was closer to the Bible than that of any other church that I was aware of. In short, I was and am an Adventist by conviction rather than by choice.

My meandering journey might help readers understand why I used to be able to preach a sermon entitled "Why I Don't Like Adventists." And I really don't, but I finally stopped presenting it because it sounded a wee bit negative. Of course, I had no problem if they were Christian as well as Adventist. But if they were *only* Adventist, let me loose. You see, I once met a Seventh-day Adventist who was meaner than the devil. In fact, I once even met a vegan who was as vicious as the devil. To have any value, our Adventism must be immersed in Christianity. Without that immersion, it is no better than any other deluded "ism."

Not long ago I saw a bumper sticker that spoke to the point. "JESUS SAVE ME" read the large print. "From your people" declared the small. I thought the entire blurb might make a meaningful book title. And then there was the atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed the profound truth of my early years: "The best argument against Christianity is Christians." In all too many cases the same dictum would hold for the best argument against Adventism.

Well, as you can see, my mind wanders in strange directions. But the upshot of my journey has left me with three inescapable questions that have driven my life both existentially and intellectually.

What is the meaning of life both personally and universally?

Why be a Christian?

Why be a Seventh-day Adventist?

I have to admit that I am not happy with most people's (including most Adventists') answers to those all-important questions. But it's time to move beyond biography to more important issues.

Adventist or Merely Evangelical?

Early in 2007 I presented a paper entitled "The Missiological Roots of Adventist Higher Education and the Ongoing Tension Between Adventist Mission and Academic Vision"¹ to a group of Seventh-day Adventist educational leaders and the church administrators who chair their boards. The content of my talk dealt with the necessary and ongoing tension and

balance between what academics might want to see in higher education and the missiological goals of the denomination. The paper also focused on the balance between general Christian and specifically Adventist concerns.

In the question-and-answer session that followed I made the point that if Adventism loses its apocalyptic vision, it has lost its reason for existing as either a church or as a system of education.

In response, one administrator quite aggressively stated that what we needed was to get rid of apocalyptic and preach the gospel. I tried to suggest that rightly understood, apocalyptic is gospel. But he had his own views on the topic. Getting a bit excited, he pointed out that his institution was growing rapidly by emphasizing the gospel without apocalyptic. He apparently saw little connection between the two realms.

Looking back, I have wondered if he had earlier been a victim of what I will later in this chapter call beastly apocalyptic preaching or had suffered from overexposure to the ad-nauseam bickering by some Adventists over apocalyptic minutia. But he was a successful, pragmatic administrator whose nontraditional institution enrolling largely non-Adventist students was growing rapidly in spite of its lack of Adventist focus.

If Seventh-day Adventist institutions are Christian only in the sense that they have Jesus and the evangelical gospel, then any good evangelical school will do. And with that one stroke we have removed any compelling reason for Seventh-day Adventist schools to exist.

The next day in an unrelated discussion someone made the point that more and more well-heeled, highly educated Adventist parents are sending their children to non-Adventist institutions. All admitted to that truth. But why, and what could be done about it? became the focal point of discussion.

I don't think it was explicitly stated, but part of the answer is obvious. If Seventh-day Adventist institutions are Christian only in the sense that they have Jesus and the evangelical gospel, then any good evangelical school will do. And with that one stroke we have removed any compelling reason for Seventh-day Adventist schools to exist. Even though they might be good institutions, no one can say that they are necessary ones. There is a

difference between being a good school and having distinctive importance as an institution.

A few days after the conference I received an interesting letter from a participant in the meetings, who wrote that “I do understand rather well where [Dr. X] is coming from, having grown up in the era of fear mongering about the ‘time of the end’ and legalistic interpretations about how to arrive at a state where one no longer sinned (which my father and many others believed was necessary to attain so that they could ‘stand without a Mediator’ during the time of trouble), and hearing a number of older people despair that they could ever be ‘good enough for God to love me’ . . . in contrast to a more Christ-centered philosophy. However, this is a pretty radical swing of the pendulum, to dump our heritage and beliefs in eschatology/last-day events, along with the implications of our historical stance on [the] . . . prophecies, and focus only on being Christlike. So then what would be our excuse for existing as a unique denomination, and operating a school system? Granted we still have the Sabbath [and] state of the dead . . . , but if we find a group that keeps the seventh day . . . , we could join up with them (Seventh Day Baptists, anyone?) and feel perfectly at home. . . . Obviously, we’d have to downplay references that describe Ellen White as ‘inspired,’ since so much of her writings deal with last-day events. But just make her over into a ‘devotional writer’ and no problem!

Why have a Seventh-day Adventist Church? What function or use does it have? Is it important or even necessary? Is it merely another denomination that turns out to be a bit stranger than some of the others because of its “hang-up” with the seventh day and certain dietary issues?

“But why does [Dr. X] view being Christlike and holding to traditional eschatological views as being mutually exclusive?

“This whole argument is absolutely at the core of defining who we are and where we are going and deserves to be laid out in fairly stark terms in a manner that can stimulate thought and discussion in the context of Adventist . . . mission.”

Such thoughts bring us to the frontier of the issue of Why have a Seventh-

day Adventist Church? What function or use does it have? Is it important or even necessary? Is it merely another denomination that turns out to be a bit stranger than some of the others because of its “hang-up” with the seventh day and certain dietary issues?

Such questions raise complex issues related to the nature of Adventism and the proper balance between those aspects of our belief system that make us Christian and those that make us Adventist and how they fit together. Thoughtful people can hardly avoid such topics. In actuality, they ought to stand at the center of discussion.

As I have sought to demonstrate in such books as *A Search for Identity*, the struggle for a balanced Adventism has been at the center of the historical development of Seventh-day Adventist theology.² Over time we have oscillated between overemphasizing those aspects of our belief system that make us Christian and those that distinguish us as distinctively Adventist. Today we have in the church what I call the Adventist Adventists, who see everything the denomination teaches to be uniquely Adventist and groan a bit when we call ourselves evangelical. On the other extreme are those Adventists that we can describe as Christian Christians. Those at that pole of the denomination are overjoyed to be evangelical and shy away from Ellen White, the eschatological implications of the Sabbath, the heavenly sanctuary, and so on. Fortunately, in the middle we find some who might be styled as Christian Adventists, whose Adventism finds meaning in the evangelical framework that we share with other Christians.

Put in a different way, there was a time that Ellen White noted that some Adventists had been at work on the law until they had gotten to be as dry as the hills of Gilboa. Today she might say something similar about those who have focused on grace so much that they have lost sight of the law altogether. Balance is the goal, but clearly that is something difficult to discover and almost impossible to maintain in an unbalanced world. Yet that doesn't mean that we shouldn't seek to approximate it in our ministries.

The Problematic Jesus

Before I go any further, I need to point out the obvious truth that Jesus of Nazareth was not politically correct in His statements. He not only declared that there was truth and that He had the truth, but that He was *the* truth, *the* way, and *the* life, and that no one could come to the Father except by Him (John 14:6).

Jesus stood for something. Beyond that, He believed that there was error—that some people and ideas were just plain wrong.

As one who unabashedly and aggressively stood for something, Jesus would not fit well into our twenty-first-century culture (including many of our churches). Calling people, especially respected religious and intellectual leaders, hypocrites and whitewashed sepulchres full of dead men's bones is plainly not acceptable.

But making problematic statements was not Jesus' only difficulty. He was also affected with what we might call "sanctified arrogance." He so believed in Himself and His politically incorrect message that He told 12 relatively unlearned men to spread it to the entire world. That commission staggers the normal imagination. Who did He think He was? And who did they think they were? *But they did it!*

Now, you don't do those kinds of things without some firm convictions. You don't give your life and your worldly goods without *knowing* that you have the truth. If Jesus had been politically correct and had lacked sanctified arrogance, Christianity would have existed for a few years as a backwater Jewish sect and then blended back into the Near Eastern woodwork. Early Adventism suffered largely from the same "cultural defects" that Jesus did. It believed that it had *the* truth or *present* truth for its day. And it came to believe that it had a mission to all the world in spite of its smallness.

If Jesus had been politically correct and had lacked sanctified arrogance, Christianity would have existed for a few years as a backwater Jewish sect and then blended back into the Near Eastern woodwork.

Early in the twentieth century the large Protestant denominations, realizing that the mission field was just too big, decided to divide up certain areas of the world among the Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and so on. But the Adventists wanted no part of such a commonsense approach. They rejected the logic and claimed the whole world as their sphere of influence. Although a little people, they had big ideas. Why? Because they were impelled by an apocalyptic vision straight out of the heart of the book of Revelation that they believed all the world needed to hear. The Adventists notified the other denominations that they could divide things up, but that Adventists saw every nation as their mission field.

Talk about sanctified arrogance! *But they did it.* Through dedicating

lives and sacrificing means Adventism became the most widespread unified Protestant group in the history of Christianity. But undergirding that success were some politically incorrect understandings regarding *truth* and a sanctified arrogance that reflected on the shortcomings of other branches of Christianity and the importance of God's last-day message.

I think of the sacrifices of my wife's family. The Bond brothers gave their lives to establish Adventism in Spain. One would lay his bones there, a victim of poisoning, while her grandfather was at times stoned and driven from village to village. He also died an early death. Why? Why did they go? Why did they give all?

On a broader scale, why should any of us risk our life for a cause? Why live for it? Why did those early Adventists sacrifice their means and their children to mission? Only because of a deep conviction that they had a message right out of the heart of the book of Revelation that all the world needed to hear before Jesus returns in the clouds of heaven.

An Introduction to Neutering

But the "good news" is that Adventism in the early twenty-first century, especially in developed nations, has largely moved beyond such "primitive" and unsophisticated ideas. We have "gotten the victory" over standing too vigorously for the denomination's traditional perspective. Rich and increased with politically correct assumptions, we have lost that sanctified arrogance that made us believe that we had a message that the whole world *must* hear.

Why did those early Adventists sacrifice their means and their children to mission? Only because of a deep conviction that they had a message right out of the heart of the book of Revelation that all the world needed to hear before Jesus returns in the clouds of heaven.

The results? Shrinkage in the North American Division (and other developed world sectors of the church) in all four major groups—White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic. While the overall number of members is increasing, that growth is from immigration. A case in point is the fact that

both the “White” and “regional” conferences in New York City are nearly entirely populated by members of Caribbean heritage. We are largely failing in reaching native-born Whites and Blacks in that great city, and in most other parts of the developed nations. The composition of the church in Great Britain and much of Europe indicates the same pattern.

Part of the problem is that Adventism has to a large extent lost the apocalyptic foundation of its message. Some years ago I attended a symposium of Seventh-day Adventist religion scholars who addressed the issue of why they personally were Seventh-day Adventists. It was a group of presenters from across the theological spectrum, and all were very sincere in their beliefs. But their testimonies, from my perspective, shot wide of the mark. The reasons largely centered on cultural and relationship issues and the way they had been nurtured from childhood into the community—a lot of the warm fuzzies of religion.

That is OK for insiders, I thought, but as an outsider to the club of the born-in-the-church community I saw absolutely no reason to become Seventh-day Adventist from what I heard. I could find all of those things elsewhere—and often better and cheaper. After all, one tenth of my money and one seventh of my time are pretty steep dues.

When a church becomes politically correct in all its claims and when it loses a proper amount of sanctified arrogance regarding its message and mission, it manages to neuter itself, even if it continues to brag about its potency.

I personally saw nothing of a magnitude that would have led me to become an Adventist if I hadn't been one already and certainly nothing to die for or even give my life for in sacrificial service. But since I was being politically correct I kept my mouth shut and let everyone enjoy their warm fuzzies—or what I thought were relatively meaningless fuzzies—in terms of the significance of Adventism.

Meanwhile, I was wondering to myself why I personally should be a Seventh-day Adventist. *If that's all there is to it, I remember thinking, then there is no really good reason to be an Adventist unless you were born that way or are so socially and culturally impoverished that you lack*

other satisfying alternatives.

Put more bluntly, when a church becomes politically correct in all its claims and when it loses a *proper* amount of sanctified arrogance regarding its message and mission, it manages to neuter itself, even if it continues to brag about its potency.

Do you understand the concept of neutering? I must admit that I am a bit ignorant on the fine points of the project. I am neither a neuteree nor a neuterer, but I think I have the basic idea.

Neutering and even self-neutering have a long history in the biblical world and, you will be glad to know, even in Adventism. Daniel, for example, had probably suffered the operation. Potiphar, as a functionary of Pharaoh's court, may also have fit into that category, which might help explain some of his wife's actions.

Jesus noted that "there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12). Origen, the famous third-century theologian, read that text, and out came the knife. He neutered himself for the kingdom. In the made-so-by-others category are some of the choirboys of the Middle Ages. The operation apparently kept their voices higher. Every time I read such accounts I am thankful I live in the twenty-first century and can't carry a tune.

The good news is that we Seventh-day Adventists have also provided our own candidate for the neutering hall of fame. Walter Harper, a colporteur, eradicated a certain realm of temptation by the process, but then went on to marry twice, with both wives knowing the problem beforehand. The situation led to some interesting counsel from Ellen White. Meanwhile, some years ago I met a man who told me that his grandfather was Walter Harper. He was absolutely shocked that I knew who his grandfather was. As you might expect, I was a bit more than shocked myself. It came out in conversation that he was really a step grandson. That piece of information helped me sleep better that night.

Now, as noted above, I'm not certain about all the implications of neutering, but they tell me that it does seem to be one of the more effective ways to stem the tide of productivity.

The best example of religious neutering in the modern world is Protestant liberalism, which by the 1920s had divested itself of such "primitive" ideas as the virgin birth, Christ's resurrection, the substitutionary atonement, miracles, the Second Advent, creationism, and, of course, a divinely

inspired Bible in the sense that it had information from beyond the human realm that could be obtained from no other source but divine revelation.

Human reason came to the fore as the source of knowledge, doctrine became unimportant if not distasteful, and Jesus morphed from being a Savior who died in our place to being the best of good people and an example worthy of emulation. In the process, Christianity largely shifted from the realm of religion to that of ethics.

With those masterstrokes of the human intellect, Protestant liberalism effectively lost its distinctive Christian message. Or, to put it more bluntly, it had neutered itself.

The *eventual* result was shrinkage by the millions in America's mainline denominations. Between 1965 and the early 1990s, for example, Presbyterian membership plummeted from 4.2 million to 2.8 million members, a 34 percent drop. During the same period Methodism went from 11 to 8.7 million, Episcopalianism from 3.6 to 2.4 million, and the Disciples of Christ from 2 to 1 million—21 percent, 34 percent, and 50 percent declines, respectively.³

Beyond shrinkage, mainline average membership age shot up, and, of course, morale plummeted. *Newsweek* blandly reported that “the mainline denominations may be dying because they lost their theological integrity.” Duke Divinity School's Stanley Hauerwas put it more colorfully when he claimed that “God is killing mainline Protestantism in America and we [blanketyblank] well deserve it.”⁴

People are looking for a church that stands over against culture, one that is arrogant enough to believe that there is truth and error and that it has the truth.

The mainline disaster spawned a number of influential books on the topic. In *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* Thomas C. Reeves suggests that the only hope for the mainline is to recover orthodox theology, including a faith in an all-powerful God who was and is capable of the miraculous.⁵

Then there is Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney's *American Mainline Religion*, with its prediction of the continuing shrinkage of liberal

Christianity even if it manages to find some sense of theological meaning.⁶ And Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* argues the outrageous thesis that "*religious organizations are stronger to the degree that they impose significant costs in terms of sacrifice and even stigma upon their members. . . . People tend to value religion on the basis of how costly it is to belong—the more one must sacrifice in order to be in good standing, the more valuable the religion.*"⁷

Then, of course, we have the granddaddy of the study of the slow death of liberalism, Dean Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. Kelley (a United Methodist) is quite up front with the answers. *The conservative churches are growing because they stand for something*. If, he suggests, people are going to join a church at all, it is because it represents a special truth and knows it. That is, people are looking for a church that stands over against culture, one that is arrogant enough to believe that there is truth and error and that it has the truth.⁸

If there is no such special truth, why join? In fact, Kelley points out, in the case of liberal Protestantism, which by the 1970s had become merely a part of a middle-of-the-road American population, why not leave? And not finding sufficient reason for remaining, large numbers of people made sense out of their lives by exiting the mainline denominations. The same could be said today of many Adventists.

The key word for liberal Protestantism by the 1960s had been "relevance." They sought to be relevant to their culture. What they proved, however, was that the shortest road to irrelevance is *mere* relevance. After all, who needs more of what can be found in the larger culture?

Now, there is nothing wrong with being relevant from a biblical perspective, but to be *merely* relevant is the path to being acculturated or absorbed into the larger culture. A healthy Christianity must of necessity stand over against the values of the larger culture and hold truths that the surrounding culture finds distasteful. Perhaps history's most well-known countercultural document is the Sermon on the Mount. Its value system is a radical departure from that of the larger world and that of most churches.

Adventism became strong by proclaiming that it had a prophetic message for our time. And it is that message repackaged for the twenty-first century that

will give Adventism strength both in the present and the future.

Having said all those things, we should add that irrelevance is not the answer. We as Christians should be standing for things that are not only true but also important for the times in which we live. And it is at that point that Adventism can make a contribution. It became strong by proclaiming that it had a prophetic message for our time. And it is that message repackaged for the twenty-first century that will give Adventism strength in both the present and the future.

On the other hand, if we discover that Adventism does not have something unique and valuable to offer, let's be honest, fold up our tents, and find something useful to do with our lives. *Adventism cannot escape the dilemma between being meaningful or being neutered. It can't have both.*

The Neutering of Adventism

Those thoughts bring me to the neutering of Adventism. Modern Adventism, whether it likes it or not, is firmly rooted in the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation. As I look at those Bible books I see at least three ways that the movement can neuter itself. And, believe it or not, we Adventists have found all of them.

The first is “beastly preaching.” We have endured too much of that slant on the apocalypse. As I remember my own coming into the church, I realize that I knew all about the beasts but not too much about the Lord of the beasts. The beasts and the time prophecies have their place, but too much of even a good thing can turn out to be beastly. It is all too easy for us Adventist types to get off onto the fine points of apocalyptic while forgetting the *One* who makes it meaningful.

Ellen White points to the center when she writes that “the sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. . . . The Son of God uplifted on the cross. This is to be the foundation of every discourse given by our ministers.”⁸

Gospel evangelism is to get people maladjusted to a culture that stands judged by the cross and found wanting.

I must admit to having done my own share of beastly preaching. But I early learned that if I couldn't genuinely root my message in the love of God and the cross of Christ I didn't have a Christian message. It was only beastly preaching, no matter how valid the topic, without that all-important integration.

But, we need to note, both the cross of Christ and the love of God are countercultural in a world featuring "me" and "getting." Yet I have heard some Adventist leaders in one part of the world advocating the role of evangelism as that of getting people adjusted to culture.

No! was my reply. Gospel evangelism is to get people maladjusted to a culture that stands judged by the cross and found wanting; maladjusted to a culture that calls violence and illicit sex entertainment; maladjusted to a culture that pays tens of millions to ballplayers but puts elementary teachers on a starvation wage.

As alluded to earlier, even such basic Christian virtues as loving one's enemies and rewarding the meek are countercultural. Such activities are not normal. Let's face it, *Christianity is an abnormal religion. God wants us to be abnormal by this world's standards.*

While thinking of the centrality of Christ and His life, death, and resurrection, we need not avoid the apocalyptic. To the contrary, Christ is the centerfold of the apocalypse in both Daniel and Revelation. In Revelation, for example:

He is the Alpha and Omega, the one who has victory over death and holds the keys to death and the grave (Rev. 1:18).

- In chapters 1-3 He is the Lord of the church, wandering among the lampstands.
- In chapters 4 and 5 He is the Lamb found worthy because He shed His blood to ransom humans, and He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah.
- In Revelation 6 He is the Lamb opening the seven seals.
- In chapter 12 He is the Babe who grew up to be the Lamb who conquers the dragon through His blood.
- Chapter 14 pictures Him as the one coming in the clouds of heaven to reap the harvest.

- And in chapter 19 He is the King of kings and Lord of lords arriving on a white horse to bring salvation to His followers.

The first route to the neutering of Adventism in the Apocalypse is beastly preaching—preaching that fails to put Christ and the love of God at the center of every message.

In summary, let me repeat that the first route to the neutering of Adventism in the Apocalypse is beastly preaching—preaching that fails to put Christ and the love of God at the center of every message. As we move toward a less beastly approach to apocalyptic we need to keep at the forefront of our thinking the truth that biblical preaching is not gospel versus apocalyptic but gospel *and* apocalyptic. Apocalyptic rightly understood is gospel. But even in the gospel we need proper balance. Without balance we have beastly preaching.

The second and third ways Adventists can neuter their message are both related to that Christ who is the center of John's Apocalypse. Revelation 5, in which the apostle encounters two figures, highlights both aspects:

In verse 5 he hears about the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is able to open the scroll of world history.

But when he opens his eyes in verse 6 he sees a Lamb who had been slain.

Here we find a strange combination. Who has ever heard of a lamb that was also a lion?

We will return to that combination. But first we need to examine the second way in which Adventists can neuter their message—by removing the “lambishness” of the Lamb.

Please note the featured characteristic of the Lamb in Revelation 5:

1. Verse 6 describes it as one slain.
2. Verse 9 sets the Lamb forth as the slain one who ransomed people by His blood.
3. Verse 12 proclaims that He is worthy to receive honor because He was slain.

The same emphasis appears in Revelation 12:11, in which the saints are conquerors because of the blood of the Lamb, and in Revelation 1:5, which tells us that Christ has “freed us from our sins by his blood.” Now one doesn’t have to be a biblical genius to conclude with Ian Boxall that “though John does not spell out the mechanism by which this occurs, the reference to blood suggests sacrifice.”⁹

Sacrifice is central to both testaments. In the Old Testament we find the Passover lamb, the lamb of the daily sacrifice, and the lambs and other animals slain for individual sins. All died in the place of sinners.

The New Testament brings that picture to the fore when John the Baptist cries out, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). And Paul proclaims to the Galatians that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). He writes to the Corinthians that “Christ” is “our paschal lamb,” who “has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). Central to Paul’s description of the gospel is the fact that “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3; cf. Isa. 53:5).

On the other hand, Paul also noted that the teaching of the sacrificed Lamb was the most disgusting aspect of Christianity—a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23, 18).

We might as well face it—the message of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross is *not logical*. At the very least it sounds like utter foolishness to proclaim that the best of humans died so that a pack of criminals and rebels could get what they don’t deserve (i.e., grace). However, while human reason may continue to caricature the Bible’s clear teaching on the slain Lamb, such reason is not on a level with God’s revelation in the Bible on the topic.¹⁰

What is important at this juncture is to note the repeated proclamation of the book of Revelation that it is *only* because of what Jesus did by shedding His blood on the cross *on our behalf* that positioned Him to be victor. As George Eldon Ladd put it, Christ’s “worthiness is not based in particular on his deity, upon his relation to God, upon his incarnation, or his perfect human life, but upon his sacrificial death.”¹¹ In short, the Lamb achieved victory by being slaughtered.

It is the Lamb slain for us that is the unique element in Christianity. Ellen White points out that human effort lies at the foundation of all other approaches to God.¹² By way of contrast, at the foundation and center of Christianity stands the Lamb who died on our behalf to put God’s gift of

grace on a firm basis.

The only thing Christianity has going for it is the Lamb of God who was slain *and whose blood paves the way for salvation through a method other than human effort.* Take away the Lamb who died on our behalf, and all you have is ethics.

I would like to suggest that *the only thing Christianity has going for it is the Lamb of God who was slain and whose blood paves the way for salvation through a method other than human effort. Take away the Lamb who died on our behalf, and all you have is ethics.*

Now, I have nothing against ethics and the good life, but without the slain Lamb there is no hope. Put more bluntly: ethics without the saving work of Christ for us equals death. That point is precisely where the 1920s liberals went off the track. *They neutered the Lamb and in the process neutered themselves.* At the very center of the Apocalypse of John stands the slain or slaughtered Lamb.

That brings us to the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the third way that we Adventists can neuter our message. But before proceeding any further, we need to examine the connection between the symbols of Lamb and Lion in Revelation. Outside of the fact that they both refer to Christ, the main thing that unites them is violence. In Revelation both are violent symbols: the Lamb because it is slaughtered and the Lion because of what it does. *We find the violence of the symbols of Lamb and Lion united in the unlikely phrase “the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16).* Whoever heard of a wrathful lamb?

Wrath! Now, here is a nasty word that, coupled with violence, is politically incorrect and makes all of us good Adventists a bit nervous. I personally managed to avoid the word for two decades. But the sad truth is that just because we get rid of beastly preaching does not mean that we can be free of all difficult biblical topics.

And wrath is one topic that is impossible to dump. It may be unpopular with some theologians, but it is very popular with God. The number of Bible references to God’s wrath exceeds 580, and the Revelation of John is not least in this matter. Writers have utilized barrels of ink to explain away

God's wrath, but in the final analysis the Lion of the tribe of Judah will act to end the problem of sin.

Let's not go astray here. God's wrath is not an emotional anger comparable with human wrath. To the contrary, God's wrath is a function of His love. God hates the sin that continues to destroy the lives and happiness of His created beings. He is weary of dead babies, cancer, and blindness; rape, murder, and theft; holocausts, Rwandas, and Iraqs.

If all that Christianity has going for it is the slain Lamb, all that Adventism has going for it is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. An Adventism without the Lion is a neutered Adventism, just as a Christianity without the slaughtered Lamb is a neutered Christianity.

In His timing God will respond to the souls under the altar who cry out, "O Sovereign Lord. . . how long" before You put an end to the mess we call world history (Rev. 6:10)? As W. L. Walker puts it, God's "wrath only goes forth because God is love, and because sin is that which injures His children and is opposed to the purpose of His love."¹³ And Alan Richardson points out that "only a certain kind of degenerate Protestant theology has attempted to contrast the wrath of God with the mercy of Christ."¹⁴

God, as the Bible pictures Him, cannot and will not forever stand idly by while His creation suffers. His reaction is judgment on that sin that is destroying His people, and we should see that judgment as the real meaning of biblical wrath. God condemns sin in judgment and will eventually act to eradicate it completely.

That is where the wrath of the Lamb comes in. That is where the Lion of the tribe of Judah enters, pictured in Revelation 19 as arriving from heaven on a white horse to put an end to the sin problem and its ongoing misery.

The plain fact is that if we have only the Lamb of God, we have only half a gospel. The Lamb has been slaughtered, yet God's children continue to suffer. The climactic phase of the Lamb's work is His function as the Lion of the tribe of Judah at the end of time. Thus the wrath of the Lamb.

The apocalypse is about the end of sin and a new heaven and a new

earth. The apocalypse is what Adventism is all about. *If all that Christianity has going for it is the slain Lamb, all that Adventism has going for it is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. An Adventism without the Lion is a neutered Adventism, just as a Christianity without the slaughtered Lamb is a neutered Christianity.*

As Seventh-day Adventists God does not call us to be prophets of respectability but proclaimers of the message of the Lion and the Lamb.

And a serious message it is. That is where another unpopular word comes in—fear. “Fear God and give him glory,” we read in Revelation 14:7, “for the hour of his judgment has come.”

What a nasty thing to say about God. After all, announcing that people should “fear God” is politically incorrect in the early twenty-first century. “Certainly,” we hear some saying, “fear means respect and reverence for God.”

A neutered understanding of sin leads to a neutered Lamb and a neutered Lion. *And all put together, they add up to neutered preaching and religious meaninglessness.*

And so it does. But it also means fear in the sense of being afraid of the One who will not forever tolerate the sinful attitudes and actions that continue to destroy His children. It means fear in the sense of those who call “to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?’ ” (Rev. 6:16, 17). How blind can we get if we limit fear to reverence and respect?

Perhaps our real problem with fearing God is that too many Christians have neutered the biblical concept of sin. We have forgotten the thunderous proclamations of Paul that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). A neutered understanding of sin leads to a neutered Lamb and a neutered Lion. And all put together, they add up to neutered preaching and religious meaninglessness.

Revelation’s Wake-up Call

The Apocalypse of John is a wake-up call to both the world at large and to Adventists in particular.

The Apocalypse of John is a summons to put away our casual attitude toward God and the issues of the great controversy and to address the real issues of the space/time world in which we live.

- For too long have we sought to make God into a nice twenty-first-century gentleman on the order of an Adventist intellectual or a kindly Loma Linda physician.
- For too long have we thought of God as a toothless old grandfather or as a figment of Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories in which all who are kind and good get eternal candy. C. S. Lewis caught the point when he suggested that what most people want is "not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven"—kind of a "senile benevolence."¹⁵

The Apocalypse of John is a judgment on all such thinking.

The call is to move beyond beastly preaching and other forms of neutering the apocalyptic vision and toward a renewed examination of the apocalyptic vision in relation to Adventism and the world for the twenty-first century.

The Apocalypse of John is a judgment on the post-modern mentality that avoids any certainty in religious truth and seeks in its place a nebulous spirituality.

The Apocalypse of John is about a new heaven and a new earth.

The Apocalypse of John is about the Lamb and the Lion.

The Apocalypse of John is a call to Seventh-day Adventists to wake up not only to the beauty of the last book of the Bible, but to

- (1) its power and forcefulness and
- (2) its message for our day.

May God help us respond to the message of the book that made us a vibrant people. We have a message about the Lion and the Lamb that we are in danger of both distorting and losing.

The call is to move beyond beastly preaching and other forms of

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