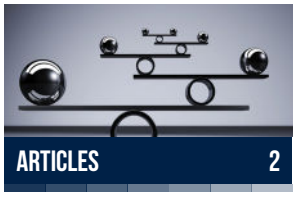
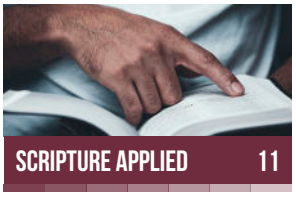
THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE BIBLICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

REFLECTIONS

REFLECTIONS #84
OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2023





Reflections explores biblical and theological questions and seeks to foster theological and doctrinal unity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Its intended audience is church administrators, church leaders, pastors, and teachers.

WWW.ADVENTISTBIBLICALRESEARCH.ORG

Striking a Balance: Adventism and the Quest for Perfection[1]

Dan-Adrian Petre

Introduction

The God of the philosophers, who has influenced the understanding of God in classical theism, is a perfect being. In this view God's perfection is a fixed and absolute state that does not accept new experiences.[2] With such a definitional assumption, it is easy to read into the Bible the same static and settled condition of perfection when, for example, Jesus Christ commands us "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48).[3] As a result, such perfection would mean attaining a definite plateau from where no change is possible.

Fortunately, the God of philosophers is not the God portrayed in the Bible. Of course, this does not mean that the biblical God is not perfect or does not desire perfection from human beings. But any claim about God should correspond to what the Bible affirms about God and His activity.[4] As such, any discussion about Christian perfection must start with the biblical testimony.

As illustrated in the second part of this article, the range of Adventist understandings of perfection today includes different views. Some interpretations align better with the biblical testimony, while others reflect human perfectionism. In a broad sense, human perfectionism refers to "any form of theological falsification or religious distortion of the biblical concept of perfection."[5] While perfection is God's plan for His people, perfectionism is a poor human substitute for the divine plan. To understand what biblical perfection is and what its role is in the great controversy between Christ and Satan, this article starts where the Bible begins, with the creation of humans and their environment. It then explores the concept of biblical perfection in the Old Testament and New Testament. A brief overview of some important views in contemporary Adventist theology follows, where we will be looking at the position of last generation theology (LGT) as an illustration of perfectionism. Only the main distinctive characteristics of the LGT position are presented without pointing to the minor variants within this position; the same applies to the non-LGT view. Finally, the article ends with a synthesis of the concept and a conclusion. Due to space constraints, the perspectives of Ellen G. White and other influential Adventist figures such as E. J. Waggoner, A. T. Jones, or M. L. Andreasen are not explored in this particular context, as they have been addressed by other authors.[6]

Imago Dei and Perfection

When God created the first human beings, they reflected the imago Dei (image of God, Gen 1:26–28), which included structural, relational, and functional aspects.[7] Humans were perfect in all aspects. Perfection was not static but dynamic: Adam and Eve were to grow in faithful obedience to God's commandments (Gen 1:28; 2:16–17). Perfection also was relative to their faithful obedience to God's commandments (Gen 1:28; 2:16–17). The entrance of sin into the human world defaced the image of God in humans but did not fully destroy it. Relationally, human beings were now separated from God (Eph 2:3; Col 1:21). Structurally, they had a sinful nature, with a bent toward evil (Ps 51:5; Rom 7:17). Functionally, they were now prone to commit sinful acts (Isa 64:6; Rom 3:9–18).

Yet, God would not abandon His creation. God's plan of restoring the *imago Dei* centered on His actions "to save humanity from inside, from within our very own genetic realm, from the strategic position of a 'Son of God' who will be born within Adam's lineage in order to redeem Adam's fall."[8] As "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), Jesus Christ is both our Savior (2 Tim 1:10; 1 John 4:14) and example (Eph 5:1–2; 1 Pet 2:21). He is the image of the new restored humanity (Col 3:9–11; 2 Cor 5:17). As the one who was made "perfect through suffering" (Heb 2:10; cf. 5:9; 7:28), Jesus is able to make us perfect (Heb 10:14; cf. 10:1). His power, as in Paul's case, "is made perfect" (2 Cor 12:9) in human weakness. Given that God's plan of restoring His *imago Dei* in human beings is closely connected to the concept of perfection, one needs to explore the idea of biblical perfection as the Bible portrays it in order to understand the divine restorative impetus.

Perfection in the Bible

Perfection in the Old Testament

Different words from the Old Testament and the New Testament reflect the concept of perfection in relation to God or humans. In the Old Testament, terms like *tāmîm* ("complete, perfect, whole, blameless, having integrity, without fault or blemish, sound"), *tām* ("decent, sound, blameless, having integrity"), and *šālēm* ("whole, fully devoted, complete, perfect") are most often used.[9] Several occurrences refer to God. In his song, Moses contrasts divine covenantal faithfulness with human corruption. God's work is "perfect [*tāmîm*], and all his ways are just," writes Moses, "a faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he" (Deut 32:4). Echoing Moses's praise of God's covenantal faithfulness, David indicates why God's "way is perfect [*tāmîm*]"; "the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him" (2 Sam 22:31; cf. Ps 18:30). God's law, reflecting His covenantal lovingkindness, "is perfect [*tāmîm*], reviving the soul" (Ps 19:7), just like the sun is all-encompassing over the earth.[10] God's perfection thus refers to His actions as they reveal His will to fulfill the covenant with Israel.[11]

The same dynamic meaning surfaces when the terms occur in reference to humans. Noah (Gen 6:9) and Abram (Gen 17:1) are "blameless [*tāmîm*]"; Job is also "blameless [*tām*]" (Job 1:1; cf. 1:8; 2:3). Israel is to "remain completely loyal [*tāmîm*]" to God (Deut 18:13), and to "serve him in sincerity [*tāmîm*] and in faithfulness" (Josh 24:14). David appeals to God for judgment, to vindicate him: "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity [*tām*], and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering" (Ps 26:1). Walking in integrity is idiomatic, describing his blameless life and motives.[12] Such a life is not a product of one's efforts. It is God's perfect (*tāmîm*) way (Ps 18:30)—that is, His dynamic and lovingkindness in covenantal actions (Ps 18:6–19)—that made David's way perfect (*tāmîm*; Ps 18:32), or secure and straightforward for battle.[13] A loving covenantal relationship with God (Ps 18:1, 50) guaranteed God's perfection in David's life. Within God's covenant, humans live a life of integrity with blameless affections and choices. Their continual desire is to have their hearts "blameless [*tāmîm*]" in God's statutes (Ps 119:80). Therefore, they aim at moral maturity by "progressive training in biblical wisdom."[14]

The *tāmîm* people are equated with the upright who will inherit the land in the book of Proverbs (Prov 2:21; 28:10). They keep their ways straight (Prov 11:5) and are a delight for the Lord (Prov 11:20). The "one who walks in integrity [*tāmîm*] will be delivered" (Prov 28:18 ESV). In the context of these proverbs, *tāmîm* characterizes a covenantal way of life, response of those who accepted God's dominion in their lives. Therefore, the foundation of covenantal life was not obedience to God's commandments but rather the method by which the covenantal blessings were preserved.[15]

In Kings and Chronicles, the term *šālēm* refers primarily to one's total commitment to God. David charged Solomon to know God "and serve him with a whole [*šālēm*] heart and with a willing mind" (1 Chr 28:9 ESV). David also prayed publicly to God to grant Solomon "a whole [*šālēm*] heart" (1 Chr 29:19 ESV) to keep God's commandments and build the temple. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon directed the people to have their hearts "fully committed [*šālēm*] to the Lord our God to live by his decrees and obey his commands" (1 Kgs 8:61 NIV). Unfortunately, he did not follow this advice, and "his heart was not fully devoted [*šālēm*] to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been" (1 Kgs 11:4 NIV). Solomon set in motion a path followed by many of his descendants who sat on Judah's throne (e.g., 1 Kgs 15:3; 2 Chr 25:2).

Looking at the above examples, we can conclude that, in the Old Testament, God's perfection refers to the dynamic covenantal relationship wherein He manifests His inner faithfulness toward His chosen people. When the terms are usually translated with "perfect" in the English versions of the Bible and they refer to humans, they encompass one's motives and an inner orientation of complete dedication to God, together with the ensuing behavior in obedience to God's law. These are part of one's covenantal relationship with God and spring from God's perfect way of interacting with His covenant people. Within the covenant, God vindicates His people, as David's example reveals.

Perfection in the New Testament

In the New Testament, terms like *teleioō* ("to complete, to finish, to bring to an end"), *teleios* ("perfect, mature, fully developed"), *epiteleō* ("to finish, to complete, to fulfill"), *teleiotēs* ("perfection, completeness, maturity"), or *amōmos* ("unblemished, blameless") are most often used to convey the concept of perfection.[16] Several occurrences refer to God. Probably the most known is in Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect [*teleios*], therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect [*teleios*]." In the context of the 5:43–48 pericope, God is merciful and compassionate (cf. Luke 6:36), manifesting kindness over the evil and the good indiscriminately (Matt 5:45). This divine lovingkindness manifests God's perfection. He sets an example for His followers, who emulate this lovingkindness––rather than any societal norms––in relation to others (Matt 5:46–47). The genuine followers of God look beyond any rules of conduct to God's character.

The concept of perfection also occurs in relation to Jesus and His activity in the books of John and Hebrews. During His earthly mission, Jesus declared that His food was to do God's will and "to complete [*teleioō*] his work"

(John 4:34). His work was fulfilled by doing "the works that the Father has given me to complete [*teleioō*]" (John 5:36). Just before His crucifixion, Christ declared that He glorified the Father "by finishing the work" (John 17:4) entrusted to him.[17]

In the book of Hebrews, the concept is applied four times to Jesus. In relation to Jesus and His activity, God made Christ "perfect [*teleioō*] through sufferings" (Heb 2:10). By using the plural ("sufferings") in Hebrews 2:10, the author reminds the readers that Christ "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). These sufferings climaxed with Christ's death. "Having been made perfect [*teleioō*]," Jesus "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:9). Jesus is presented as "the pioneer and perfecter [*teleiōtēs*] of faith" (Heb 12:2 NIV). Christ's death was the means to "destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14). In Hebrews 7:28, the writer connects Christ's perfection with His inauguration as a high priest, the "Son who has been made perfect [*teleioō*] forever." As a divine-human high priest, Jesus mediates salvation for His followers (Heb 2:14–18; 14:14–16).

The use of *teleioō* about Jesus does not imply moral-ethical imperfection, as Jesus was "without sin" (Heb 4:15) and "without blemish [*amōmos*]" (Heb 9:14; cf. 1 Pet 1:9).[18] Christ was in a filial relationship with God during the incarnation (Heb 3:6; 5:8), which is indicative of His learning to submit as a Son to His Father's discipline (Heb 5:7–8) and will (Heb 10:5–10).[19] Yet, His learning was not from disobedience to obedience; rather, He perfectly submitted to God and was obedient until death (Heb 5:7).[20] The term *teleioō* as applied to Christ refers to this dynamic experience of faithful submission (Heb 2:13; 3:2). He thus inaugurates the human faith experience and also perfects it (Heb 12:2). Furthermore, after Christ was made perfect (Heb 7:28), He was enthroned as the royal son of God, inaugurating of His heavenly ministry.[21] Due to His earthly and heavenly ministries, Christ qualifies "to save completely [*pantelēs*] those who come to God through him" (Heb 7:25 NIV), bridging the relational gap between God and humans, thus restoring the relational facet of *imago Dei* in humans.

In relation to humans, Christ's desideratum from Matthew 5:48 overshadows all other occurrences of the concept. In its context, the *teleios* from verse 48a centers on love as the orientation of one's life.[22] This orientation is not static and fixed but open to new and broader horizons. When Jesus told a wealthy young man, "If you wish to be perfect [*teleios*], go, sell . . . give . . . follow me" (Matt 19:21), He told him that perfection was beyond his fixed interpretation of God's principles. It was found in discipleship.[23]

Only in unity with Jesus can the disciples "become completely [*teleioō*] one" (John 17:23). The manifestation of divine love in one's life is experiential (i.e., law-abiding; John 14:15, 21; 15:10, 12; 1 John 2:3–4; 3:22–24), leading to perfection: "whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection [*teleioō*]" (1 John 2:5; cf. 4:12, 16–17). The love relationship with God and fellow humans results in confidence in judgment. There is no fear of judgment, as "perfect [*teleios*] love drives out fear. . . . The one who fears is not made perfect [*teleioō*] in love" (1 John 4:18 NIV).

In the Pauline epistles, the terms reflecting the concept of perfection convey spiritual maturity. Paul calls mature (*teleios*) those who spiritually discern God's wisdom (1 Cor 2:6). They manifest a mature (*teleios*) thinking in contrast to one that is childish (1 Cor 14:20). Moreover, they remove "every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect [*epiteleō*] in the fear of God" (2 Cor 7:1). The change started by the Spirit and continues under His guidance, without "trying to finish [*epiteleō*] by human effort" (Gal 3:3 NET) as some in Galatia did.

God's plan for humanity is "to be holy and blameless [*amōmos*] before him in love" (Eph 1:4). Blamelessness is possible only in Christ (Eph 1:3) and according to Christ's model. He is able to change the inner orientation from sin to righteousness, restoring the structural facet of *imago Dei* in humans. His exemplary unity of faith and knowledge is to be emulated by the body of believers on earth: "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity [*teleios*], to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:13). Christ prepares the church to "be holy and without blemish [*amōmos*]" (Eph 5:27; cf. Jude 24). While this has an apparent eschatological orientation, the church's perfection also has a present dimension.[24] It is vital to observe that, for the believers, present and future maturity results from God's work within one's life. As Paul notes in Philippians 1:6, "the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion [*epiteleō*] by the day of Jesus Christ." While "God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13), believers should "continue to work out" their present salvation (Phil 2:12 NIV), so that they "may be blameless [*amemptos*] and innocent, children of God without blemish [*amōmos*] in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (Phil 2:15; cf. Col 4:12). In this process of perfecting—or sanctifying—His followers, Christ restores the functional facet of the *imago Dei*.

There is a delicate balance between divine action and the human answer. Paul's example is eloquent. On the one hand, he describes himself as "blameless [*amemptos*]" (Phil 3:6). While this appears to represent a complete, perfect covenantal life, Paul acknowledges this as "a righteousness of my own that comes from the law" (Phil 3:9). Yet, he renounces his righteousness and

regards "everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ" (Phil 3:8). He further writes, "Not that I have already obtained, or have already been perfected [*teleioō*]" (Phil 3:12, personal translation). Being perfected refers to reaching his goal—that is, obtaining the complete eschatological knowledge of Christ.[25] He was willing to grow toward this goal: "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil 3:12). Paul's definition of perfection is continual growth in the experiential, personal knowledge of Christ. Including himself among the mature [*teleios*], Paul enjoins his audience to "be of the same mind" (Phil 3:15). His mission of proclamation, admonishment, and teaching is to "present everyone mature [*teleios*] in Christ" (Col 1:18; cf. 1 Thess 2:19–20; 5:23). Maturity is thus future-oriented but also present. It entails belonging to Christ and becoming more and more like Him in love, "which binds everything together in perfect harmony [*teleiotēs*]" (Col 3:14). Such love is "a covenantal commitment to one another of presence and advocacy in the journey into Christoformity."[26]

The book of Hebrews reveals the same "already/not yet" dynamic. By His blameless sacrifice, Christ "has perfected [*teleioō*] for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb 10:14). Christians are exhorted to remain faithful and persevere[27] in their current relationship with Christ. Through Christ, the functional facet of imago Dei is restored in the believers, and they are able to "go on toward perfection [*teleiotēs*]" (Heb 6:1). Hence, the believers are not yet perfect but in the process of becoming mature.[28] The maturity of the *teleioi* (Heb 5:14) is not just "an ideal or a distant goal but the norm expected of a believer,"[29] as Hebrews 11 indicates. Each person's faith reveals a mature relationship of complete obedience to God (cf. Jas 2:22). The norm expected from past believers is the same for the present believers. It is only through His grace and mercy that "God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect [*teleioō*]" (Heb 11:40 NIV). Hence, the fulfillment of God's eschatological perfection (either at the first or the second coming of Christ) does not result from human performance but is an expression of divine grace (cf. Eph 5:26–27; Rev 19:8).

In the book of Revelation, the last generation, symbolically represented by the 144,000, is described as blameless (*amōmos*) in Revelation 14:5, similar to the Lamb that they follow (cf. Heb 9:14; 1 Pet 1:19).[30] Just as the Old Testament people who walked blamelessly with God (Gen 6:9; 17:1), this group is loyal to Christ, following Him everywhere (Rev 14:4). They washed their clothes––a symbol of good deeds (Rev 19:8)—"in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:14) and are thus able to stand before the throne of God (Rev 7:15). The realization of the eschatological promise is facilitated through Christ's sacrifice, not through human effort. This does not suggest passivity among His followers; instead, they demonstrate loyalty and safeguard their faithfulness to God, even in the face of personal loss (Rev 7:14–17). Even if God may lead the last generation "to places where nobody has gone before"—thus entailing new experiences leading to a growth in faith—the faith of the last generation has the same substance as that of the previous generations.[31]

In the New Testament, God's perfection refers to the manifestation of His divine lovingkindness toward His people. In His life and death, Christ obeyed God through faith, opening the way to perfection for every human being. Perfection is thus a loving and faithful submission to God as the main orientation of one's life. Reflecting the overarching principle of love which is God's character (1 John 4:8, 16) and the basis of His law (Matt 22:37–40), perfection is found in discipleship. Those who abide in God love their fellow human beings. This reveals their spiritual maturity. Such maturity is a continual growth in the experiential, personal knowledge of Christ. It is characterized by an "already/not yet" dynamic. This dynamic has past, present, and future dimensions. Through Christ's sacrifice, all those who chose Him were made perfect. The Scripture becomes an appeal for them to persevere in their faithful relationship with Christ, as maturity is God's standard for them. Finally, the fulfillment of God's eschatological perfection is not rooted in human performance but is a manifestation of divine grace made possible solely through Christ.

Adventist Identity and Perfection

Biblical perfection is part of the Adventist doctrinal identity. Reflecting the biblical language, the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church provide several examples.[32] While the formulation of these beliefs accurately reflects the biblical text, there are various discussions within Adventism regarding perfection and perfectionism. For some, perfectionism is associated with the so-called "last generation theology,"[33] previously called "final-generation perfection."[34] The difference between LGT and non-LGT proponents hinges on three interrelated concepts: (1) the definition of sin (and, as a corollary, the nature of Christ), (2) the definition of perfection, and (3) the role the last generation plays in the great controversy between good and evil. While it is not the purpose of this paper to go into greater details about the perspectives on sin or the role of the last generation, we nevertheless have to take a closer look at the definition of perfection in order to better understand the LGT and non-LGT positions.

Two Perspectives of Sin

LGT defines sin as actual, deliberate sin[35]—that is, as sinful acts, as defined by God's commandments. Sin refers only to guilt-incurring acts resulting from personal choice. "Sins of ignorance," referring to transgressions arising from a "lack of understanding or general religious misunderstanding" that individuals are unaware of and, therefore, cannot repent, along with the effects of sin—"such as illness, physical or mental defects, and deterioration leading to death"—are covered by Christ's atonement and do not incur guilt or condemnation upon humans.[36] Furthermore, LGT theologians distinguish between tendencies to sin—"tendency is virtually equal to habit"—and promptings to sin, "the temptation that arises out of one's deformed nature."[37] Both are held under control in union with Christ.[38] Consequently, the focus is on human nature's functional and relational facets. Hence, when humans stop committing ethically or morally wrong acts, they reach the perfection required by God—the "sinless perfection of the soul."[39] Sinlessness refers here to character perfection, not to a physical state in which humans cannot sin or absolute perfection.[40]

For non-LGT theologians, sin is a broken relationship resulting from rebellion against God that leads to sinful actions confining humanity in a sinful state characterized by inclinations to evil (Matt 15:19; Rom 5:10; 7:20; Col 1:21).[41] Consequently, in addition to the functional and relational damage created by sin, human nature is structurally infected and affected by sin. In agreement with LGT, non-LGT proponents indicate that "humans are not culpable for this sinful tendency and propensity to sin rooted in their nature," but, in disagreement with LGT, "this fact places them under condemnation and alienation toward God (John 3:36; Eph. 2:1–3)."[42] In the growth process, believers discover the depths of their self-confidence and spiritual inability, becoming increasingly aware of their sinfulness yet learning "to grow in wisdom, in refinement, in humility, and in Christlikeness" until the parousia.[43] Only at the second coming of Christ will human nature be transformed and the presence of sin be removed. Meanwhile, each generation, including the last one, has a missiological role: proclaiming—through words and actions reflective of God's law and hence His character—what Christ did and does to save us and to prepare the world for the second coming.[44]

Two Perspectives on the Role of the Last Generation

Reflecting M. L. Andreasen's understanding,[45] the LGT proponents claim that the last generation reaches "perfection in a fallen nature that is still able to sin" to vindicate God's character.[46] Several key ideas are central to the LGT argument, mainly derived from selective citations of White's writings.[47] One frequently referred passage occurs in *Christ's Object Lessons*: "Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own."[48] Based on this passage and its context, Herbert E. Douglass developed the so-called "harvest principle": God delays the second coming of Christ "until the gospel seed has produced a sizable and significant group of mature Christians in the last generation."[49] If, on the one hand, "in a very basic sense, God will not require more of the final generation than of any other," on the other hand, the last generation is called to meet higher missiological and behavioral requirements in accordance with the increased light and understanding they have received, especially considering the impending crisis they will confront.[50] The demonstration of maturity takes place *after* the close of probation when the last generation will prove that they can live without sin only by God's enabling grace, thereby vindicating God from Satan's accusations that humans cannot keep God's law perfectly.[51]

Another passage cited from White's writings is from *The Great Controversy*: the last generation will "stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless, their characters must be purified from sin by the blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort they must be conquerors in the battle with evil.[52]" The proponents of LGT point to this passage and others similar to it[53] to support the idea that God expects believers to "achieve harvest-ready character perfection" that is sufficient "for translation, for standing through the time of trouble, for being alive on the earth when Jesus comes."[54] When that time arrives, "God's true followers will not need a mediator for sin anymore."[55]

Furthermore, LGT proponents indicate a third passage, from *White's Desire of Ages*. She wrote, "The very image of God is to be reproduced in humanity. The honor of God, the honor of Christ, is involved in the perfection of the character of His people."[56] In an LGT reading, the last generation will prove that humans "with fallen human nature can live without sinning. This demonstration will complete the vindication of God's character and government and will settle the question of His justice and mercy forever."[57] While this is described as a revelation of what God "can do with formerly self-centered rebels," the sinless final generation's demonstration will only take place when humans "allow God to finish His work in them."[58]

For non-LGT proponents, the perfect reflection of Christ's character in His followers indicates the personal "reproduction of Christ's character in the believer, that it may be reproduced in others,"[59] having—like the LGT position—a missiological focus. Therefore, when believers reflect the divine love in their characters, their mission is successful, and God's plan is fulfilled.[60] But this

is not a requirement for a future final generation *after* the close of probation. Instead, "perfect obedience must be demonstrated *before* probation closes and the time of trouble begins," during the investigative judgment, when God shows that His "living faithful are trusting and obedient and therefore can be sealed or certified as safe to save."[61]

Regarding the second quotation of Ellen G. White from *The Great Controversy*, the non-LGT proponents indicate that in the same book, White states, "it is needful for them [the last generation] to be placed in the furnace of fire; their earthliness must be consumed, that the image of Christ may be perfectly reflected."[62] The fact that there is "earthliness" lingering in the last generation points to a "process of development after the close of probation."[63] Consequently, one cannot describe the last generation's perfection as the culmination of a growth process before the time of trouble; rather, the focus is on the growth process itself, that continues even after the close of probation. In agreement with the LGT perspective, representatives who do not hold to LGT consider that, fundamentally, the faith of the last generation is of the same nature as the faith exhibited by previous generations. While receiving the empowering of the Holy Spirit through the latter rain, the last generation "will witness one last manifestation of satanic evil, especially as a cruel and unjust death decree spreads around the world."[64]

Nevertheless, even though there is a consensus that the last generation is destined to confront a unique crisis while being empowered by the Holy Spirit, non-LGT theologians vehemently reject that only the last generation cosmically vindicates God's character. Only "Christ's death vindicated God's character and refuted Satan's claims."[65] In their view, for White, the vindication of God's honor—in close relation to the divine law—"has always been the responsibility of God's servants on earth," not just of the last generation.[66] As Gane points out, "God vindicates Himself by what He does for us, in us, and through us."[67] Vindicating God is not a prerogative of the last generation but a privilege of all generations.

Two Perspectives on Perfection

The two views of sin and the role of the last generation find their denouement in the two views of perfection. Last generation theologians reject as misrepresentation the perfectionistic tag.[68] Instead, many theologians associated with LGT describe perfection as relative and dynamic. Herbert E. Douglass writes that perfection refers to "the dynamic life pattern of a person who reflects the life of Jesus" and not to perfectionism, which is "an absolute point beyond which there can be no further development."[69] C. Mervyn Maxwell accepts the expression "sinless perfection" but redefines it not as "absolute perfection" but as "true sinless perfection, true perfection of character."[70] This refers to perfection "that triumphs over every sinful prompting of human nature and dynamically emulates the virtues of Jesus Christ."[71] For Maxwell, character development entails "choices that involve obedience," leading to a "well-informed, well-matured spirituality that far transcends even the beautiful spirituality of the best of the Millerite Adventists."[72]

More recently, Larry Kirkpatrick distinguishes between "two different kinds of perfection: character surrender and character maturity." The latter "is attained and maintained throughout our Christian lives if we persist in character surrender."[73] He also distinguishes between perfection—which "is an unbroken exercise of faith which keeps the soul pure from every stain of sin or disloyalty to God," thus referring to "the dynamic, growing lifestyle of the person who reflects the life of Jesus"—and perfectionism, understood as "an absolute point beyond which there can be no further development."[74]

Those who reject LGT also define perfection as dynamic and relative. Edward Heppenstall agrees that perfection is attainable[75] and describes it as "the perfecting of a right relationship to God, full commitment, a mature and unshakable allegiance to Jesus Christ," arguing that "the word *perfect* does not envision sinlessness within the use of the word itself."[76] Hence, for Heppenstall, "it is spiritual maturity and stability that is possible in this life, not sinless perfection."[77] The dynamic that Heppenstall describes is complex. As Christians mature, they discover the depths of their sinful natures, with "hidden motives and self-centered intentions." Yet, this "dissatisfaction with our moral and spiritual state at any point along the way" results from "stronger aspirations and more spiritual desires." For Heppenstall, "this is the Bible position on Christian growth until Christ returns."[78]

Hans K. LaRondelle defines human perfection as a daily "religious-moral walk" with God that "is manifested in wholehearted, holy love for all fellowmen."[79] As such, humans do not have perfection in themselves. Rather, "the true Christian feels increasingly imperfect and unworthy while beholding more and more of Christ's all-sufficient glory and mercy"; as a result, "where Christ reproduces His own image in the soul" there humans walk "in true perfection" with God and other humans.[80] Hence, perfection focuses not on human nature but on humanity's "perfect relationship with God" and other humans in the present and future.[81]

Evaluating the LGT's View of Perfection

All the above definitions have several elements in common and are also reflected in the biblical canon. First, they all assume that God's plan is connected somehow to perfection. Second, they describe perfection as a dynamic growth process—character perfection—exclusive of nature perfection, recognizing that God does not

remove sinful tendencies and propensities. Third, they emphasize the divine perfection model, as Christ illustrated. Fourth, they agree that perfection is mediated by Christ and also involves human volition. Yet, there are at least two significant differences.[82]

First, for LGT representatives mentioned above, one's relationship with sin is profiled in the foreground, while in the background is one's relationship with Christ. Whereas the high regard for the divine law is commendable, the significance attributed to human obedience in vindicating God's character resulted in a concentration on overcoming sin that influenced LGT's perspective on perfection. As one representative notes, "through the same divine power used by Jesus while on earth, human beings in this life can live without sinning."[83] Although recognizing that Christian perfection is not "a static perfectionism" but a "dynamic relationship with God that will never cease developing its likeness to Jesus," LGT ambiguously presents the reaching of "a point in the growth pattern when the Christian has conquered every known sin; his behavior is predictably loving, unselfish, and Christlike."[84] Statements like this create the impression that, at least for some LGT supporters, perfection is a punctual state and focuses on human performance. However, such an approach alters the biblical testimony regarding perfection as an ongoing process that profiles divine involvement rather than human achievement in the foreground. While the LGT's stress on obedience partially mirrors the biblical emphasis, the scriptural spotlight remains on divine action rather than human effort.

The New Testament emphasizes an "already/not yet" dynamic. Given the focus on the last generation, LGT practically depicts perfection as an "already," overlooking the "not yet" facet. As a result, by making one's relationship with sin prominent, LGT tends to be one-sided in its approach to perfection. Those rejecting LGT have one's relationship with Christ in the foreground and the relationship with sin in the background. They consistently define perfection as a continuous state, centering on Christ's performance. While we can attain character perfection, "that is, a mature disposition of unselfish love for God and others," argues Peckham, "genuine obedience and the overcoming of sinful *actions* can be accomplished only by a work of God in us that we embrace by faith."[85] Such faithfulness is best described as loyalty to Christ. As Gane puts it, "all I need to do is follow Him where He wants to take me, including to perfection of character."[86]

Second, the goal of perfection for LGT is the vindication of God's character. In agreement with other LGT proponents, Dennis Priebe contends that the last generation, reflecting the image of Christ fully, "will be the wonder of the whole universe. Through them Satan will be forever defeated, and every question that could be raised against the law of God, such as whether humanity could keep it, will be forever answered."[87] This approach is rightly criticized as perfectionist by other Adventist authors.[88] They echo the biblical focus on God's faithfulness in His relationship with humans. Where humans fail, God does not. In addition, the scriptural evidence reveals that God is the active agent in vindicating His character. In the New Testament, the primary focus is on highlighting Christ's performance. However, when the attention shifts to human perfection in relation to divine vindication, it tends to diminish the significance of Christ's performance. The Bible, emphasizing human loyalty to God across past, present, and future rather than mere human achievement, does not align with the emphasis on the role of the last generation in vindicating God's character. The latter entails a double standard: one for the last generation—whose performance will supersede all previous efforts—and one for all previous ages.[89] Yet, the Bible has only one standard and repeatedly urges perfection, not in the distant future but today. As such, God's current standard is not different from the past one. And for all generations, this standard is fulfilled only in Christ and through Christ's mediation.

Conclusion

Within the spectrum of Adventist views on perfection, this paper indicates that any claim should correspond to what the Bible states about the concept. After analyzing the concept in the Old Testament and the New Testament, several aspects of perfection emerged. First, God defines perfection. In the Old Testament, His covenantal faithfulness is the model to mirror. In the New Testament, Christ models perfection through loving and faithful submission to God's plan. Second, perfection is a dynamic growth process in love and steadfast submission to God as one's primary orientation. Third, perfection is God's plan of restoring the *imago Dei* in humanity through Christ. He restores our relationship with God through His faithfulness, transforms our inner orientation toward God, and enables us to act lovingly toward others. Fourth, being a result of God's action, perfection does not result from human performance. Fifth, perfection is mediated by Christ. Sixth, perfection has an "already/not yet" character, encompassing the past, the present, and the future. As such, it is open to further developments and discoveries without being constrained to a fixed set of behavioral rules.

Examining the current discussions in Adventism benefits from the insights provided by this multifaceted perspective. In this article, LGT is highlighted due to its widespread impact. While there are some areas of agreement between those who support LGT and those who have a different understanding, we noted two significant differences between LGT and the biblically

based depiction of perfection. First, by making one's conquering of sin prominent in the last generation, some LGT representatives depict perfection as a punctual, an eschatological "already," that is relatively more static than dynamic. Second, LGT portrays the human performance of the last generation as a means of vindicating God's character to hasten the second coming of Christ. As previously indicated, these two aspects do not clearly reflect the biblical testimony, profiling human perfectionism instead of Christian perfection. Moreover, such an approach does not reflect the "already/not yet" dynamic that focuses on the continual dependence on Christ for continual character growth. As the psalmist writes, "I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad" (Ps 119:96). Truly, in the light of God's law, one discerns a depth of perfection that shatters human perfectionism.

Dan-Adrian Petre, PhD
Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Adventist Studies
Editor-in-Chief, *TheoRh*ēma
Adventus University of Cernica, Romania

Endnotes

[1]This article is a revised version of Dan-Adrian Petre, "Adventism Between Christian Perfection and Human Perfectionism," *in Affirming Our Identity: Current Theological Issues Challenging the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, ed. Dan-Adrian Petre, Joel Iparraguirre, and J. Vladimir Polanco (Madrid: Safeliz, 2023), 177–203.

[2]Yujin Nagasawa, Maximal God: *A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

[3]Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

[4]John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 27.

[5]Hans K. LaRondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism: A Dogmatic-Ethical Study of Biblical Perfection and Phenomenal Perfectionism*, Andrews University Monographs Studies in Religion 3 (1971; repr., Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1979), 246.

[6]For White's view, see Woodrow W. Whidden II, *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995). For Waggoner, see Woodrow W. Whidden II, E. J. Waggoner: *From the Physician of Good News to the Agent of Division*, Adventist Pioneer Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), esp. 345–374. For Jones, see George R. Knight, *A. T. Jones: Point Man on Adventism's Charismatic Frontier*, Adventist Pioneer Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2011). For Andreasen, see Paul M. Evans, "A Historical-Contextual Analysis of the Final-Generation Theology of M. L. Andreasen" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2010). Useful works are also Eric Claude Webster, *Crosscurrents in Adventist Christology*, (New York: Lang, 1984) and Cyril Marshall, "An Analysis of the Use of the Writings of Ellen G. White in the Views of Herbert Douglass and Woodrow Whidden on the Human Nature of Christ" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2022).

[7]Richard M. Davidson, "The Nature of the Human Being From the Beginning: Genesis 1–11," in "*What Are Human Beings That You Remember Them?*": Proceedings of the Third International Bible Conference, Nof Ginosar and Jerusalem, June 11–21, 2012, ed. Clinton Wahlen (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 22.

[8]Ty Gibson, *The Sonship of Christ: Exploring the Covenant Identity of God and Man* (2018; repr., Madrid: Safeliz, 2019), 36.

[9]For details, see David J. A. Clines, ed., *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), s.vv. "שָׁלֵם I," "תָּם I," "תָּמִים." Cf. Nola J. Opperwall, "Perfect, Make Perfect; Perfection," in I*nternational Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:764. The word *tāmîm* is mainly used in cultic settings, to describe an animal without blemish brought for sacrifice (Klaus Koch, "תמם," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni with Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997], 3:1426).

[10]Rolf A. Jacobson, "Psalm 19: Tune My Heart to Sing Your Praise," in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. Nancy Declaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth Laneel Tanner, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 210.

[11]LaRondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism*, 39.

[12]Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1 (1–41)*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2011), 611.

[13]Alison Ruth Gray, *Psalm 18 in Words and Pictures: A Reading Through Metaphor*, Biblical Interpretation Series 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 143.

[14]Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 199.

[15]Gerhard F. Hasel, "Divine Judgment," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 828.

[16]For details, see Frederick W. Danker et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.vv. "τέλειος," "τελειόω," "ἐπιτελέω," "τελειότης," "ἄμωμος." Other words also have the meaning of "perfect, complete, blameless" in certain contexts, like *agathos* (Titus 2:10), *amemptos* (e.g., Luke 1:6; Phil 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thess 3:13), *amemptōs* (1 Thess 2:10; 5:23), *amōmētos* (2 Pet 3:14), *anegklētos* (1 Cor 1:8; Col 1:22), *katartisis* (2 Cor 13:9), *katartizō* (Luke 6:40, 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 13:11; Heb 13:21; 1 Pet 5:10), *pantelēs* (Heb 7:25), *plēroō* (Rev 3:2), *teleiōsis* (Heb 7:11), or *teleiōtēs* (Heb 12:2). Cf. Opperwall, 3:764–765.

[17]D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 557, notes that Christ includes in His work His death, resurrection, and ascension. Cf. Luke 12:32, which implies that Christ's death is connected to the finishing of His work ("on the third day I finish [*teleioō*] my work").

[18]John Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 49 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 187–188.

[19]Félix H. Cortez, *Within the Veil: The Ascension of the Son in the Letter to the Hebrews*, Studies in Jewish and Christian Literature (Dallas, TX: Fontes, 2020), 179.

[20]Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 247–248.

[21]David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 329–331; Cockerill, 250; and Cortez, 216–217.

[22]Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 135; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (1988–1997; repr., London: T&T Clark, 2003–2004), 1:562–563.

[23]R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 735.

[24]Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 4–6*, Anchor Bible 34A (1974; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 628–629.

[25]Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 344–345.

[26]Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 323.

[27]Cortez, 300.

[28]Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 162–163.

[29]Cockerill, 262.

[30]Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 450.
[31]Roy E. Gane, *The Sanctuary and Salvation: The Practical Significance of Christ's Sacrifice and Priesthood*, Seeds of Hope (Madrid: Safeliz, 2019), 302.
[32]"Official Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2020, https://www.adventist.org/beliefs/ (accessed December 8, 2023). See Fundamental Beliefs 4, 8, 9, 11, 13, 17, 19, and 24.
[33]John C. Peckham, "Great Controversy Issues," in *God's Character and the Last Generation*, ed. Jiří Moskala and John C. Peckham (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018), 17. Cf. Woodrow W. Whidden II, *The Judgment and Assurance: The Dynamics of Personal Salvation*, Library of Adventist Theology (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2011), 146.
[34]Arthur Leroy Moore, *Theology in Crisis or Ellen G. White's Concept of Righteousness by Faith as It Relates to Contemporary SDA Issues* (Corpus Christi, TX: Life Seminars, 1980), 4. C. Mervyn Maxwell (1925–1999) also observed that the concept of the final generation, characterized by the perfect reproduction of Christ's character, was a prevalent topic in the 1940s and 1950s (C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment: What Really Happened in 1844 and Its Meaning for Today* [Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1994], 154).
[35]Kevin D. Paulson, *What Is . . . Last Generation Theology?* (Ukiah, CA: Last Generation for Christ, 2021), 5; Larry Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close: Last Generation Theology in Fourteen Points* (Philippians Two Five, 2019), 22–32. I used the electronic version, freely available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56a433da0e4c11b9a8d2cca3/t/5c86917d4785d32088d2745c1552322942929/Cleanse+and+Close+Text_watermark.pdf.
[36]Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close*, 27.
[37]C. Mervyn Maxwell, "Ready for His Appearing," in *Perfection: The Impossible Possibility*, by Herbert E. Douglass et al., Anvil (Nashville, TN: Southern, 1975), 167–168.
[38]Maxwell, "Ready for His Appearing," 169.
[39]Ibid., 171. Avoiding the expression "sinless perfection," Paulson, 25, calls the divine standard "sinless obedience."
[40]Maxwell, "Ready for His Appearing," 170–171.
[41]George R. Knight, *Sin and Salvation: God's Work for and in Us*, 2nd ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), 186–188; and Jiří Moskala, "Origin of Sin and Salvation According to Genesis 3: A Theology of Sin," in *Salvation: Contours of Adventist Soteriology*, ed. Martin F. Hanna, Darius W. Jankiewicz, and John W. Reeve (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2018), 127–131.
[42]Moskala, "Origin of Sin and Salvation," 130. Cf. Martin F. Hanna, "What Shall We Say About Sin? A Study of *Hamartia* in Paul's Letter to the Romans," in Moskala and Peckham, *God's Character and the Last Generation*, 50–51.
[43]Edward Heppenstall, "'Let Us Go on to Perfection,'" in Douglass et al., 80.
[44]Peckham, "Great Controversy Issues," 16.
[45]M. L. Andreasen, *The Sanctuary Service*, 2nd ed. (1947; repr., Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1969), 299, argues that humans "are to follow His [Christ's] example and prove that what God did in Christ, He can do in every human being who submits to Him. The world is awaiting this demonstration (Rom. 8:19). When it has been accomplished, the end will come. God will have fulfilled His plan. He will have shown Himself true and Satan a liar. His government will stand vindicated." For more details on Andreasen's understanding of the last generation, see Evans, 206–224.
[46]Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close*, 137. On the vindication of God's character, see ibid., 46–48 and Paulson, 35–42. Cf. Alberto R. Timm, "The Salvation Process: Diverging Emphases," in *Theology, Philosophy, Hermeneutics, and Mission: Essays in Honor of Kwabena Donkor on His Retirement*, ed. Daniel K. Bediako and Martha O. D. Duah (Accra, Ghana: Advent Press, 2022), 71.
[47]Only three popular passages are presented here. For other passages, see Douglass, "Men of Faith," in Douglass et al., 46–51. Cf. Paulson, 35–42; and Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close*, 115–119.
[48]Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1900), 69. Cf. Douglass, "Men of Faith," 14, 18, 21, 46; Paulson, 33; and Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close*, 119.
[49]Douglass, "Men of Faith," 18–19.
[50]Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment*, 155.
[51]Dennis Priebe, "God at Risk," Dennis Priebe Ministries, https://www.dennispriebe.com/free-documents/god-at-risk/ (accessed December 8, 2023).
[52]Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 425. Cf. Paulson, 33–34.
[53]E.g., Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets, or The Great Conflict Between Good and Evil as Illustrated in the Lives of Holy Men of Old* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1890), 88; and Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 671.
[54]Maxwell, "Ready for His Appearing," 193.
[55]Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment*, 117. Cf. Jerry Moon, "C. Mervyn Maxwell: An Academic Life Sketch," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, no. 1–2 (2000): 8.
[56]White, *The Desire of Ages*, 671.
[57]Douglass, "Men of Faith," 53.
[58]Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close*, 137–138.
[59]White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 67.
[60]Cf. Knight, *Sin and Salvation*, 176. Cf. John C. Peckham, "The Triumph of God's Love," in Moskala and Peckham, *God's Character and the Last Generation*, 279.
[61]Whidden, *Ellen White on Salvation*, 140, emphasis original.
[62]White, *The Great Controversy*, 621.
[63]Ranko Stefanovic, "What Is the State of the Last Generation?," in Moskala and Peckham, *God's Character and the Last Generation*, 231. Cf. Whidden, *Ellen White on Salvation*, 154–155.
[64]Whidden, *Judgment and Assurance*, 143.
[65]Jiří Moskala, "The Significance, Meaning, and Role of Christ's Atonement," in Moskala and Peckham, *God's Character and the Last Generation*, 196. Cf. Ángel M. Rodríguez, "Theology of the Last Generation and the Vindication of the Character of God: Overview and Evaluation," in *The Word: Searching, Living, Teaching*, ed. Artur A. Stele, 2 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015, 2022), 1:215–218.
[66]Rodríguez, 1:221.
[67]Gane, *Sanctuary and Salvation*, 308.
[68]Larry Kirkpatrick, "New Books, Old Error" (paper presented at the God's Character and the Last Generation Symposium, Sacramento, CA, March 22–23, 2019), 2–13, https://greatcontroversy.org/resources/gclg/newbook-solderror-ver1.09.pdf (accessed December 8, 2023).
[69]Douglass, "Men of Faith," 13n2. In a more recent book, Douglass defines perfection as "the dynamic life pattern of persons who *increasingly* reflect the life of Jesus." Herbert E. Douglass, *A Fork in the Road: "Questions on Doctrine," the Historical Adventist Divide of 1957* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant, 2008), 143, emphasis original.
[70]Maxwell, "Ready for His Appearing," 174.
[71]Ibid., 171.
[72]Maxwell, *Magnificent Disappointment*, 119¬–120.
[73]Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close*, 45.
[74]Ibid., 46.
[75]Heppenstall, "'Let Us Go on to Perfection,'" 61–62.
[76]Ibid., 64.
[77]Ibid., 67.
[78]Ibid., 81.
[79]LaRondelle, "The Biblical Idea of Perfection," in Douglass et al., 136.
[80]Ibid.
[81]LaRondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism*, 327.
[82]Only the differences revolving around the concept of perfection are analyzed here. Other differences, especially in the area of hamartiology and Christology, are not evaluated in this article.
[83]Paulson, 5.
[84]Douglass, "Men of Faith," 51.
[85]Peckham, "The Triumph of God's Love," 274, emphasis original.
[86]Gane, *Sanctuary and Salvation*, 303.
[87]Priebe, "God at Risk." Cf. Kirkpatrick, *Cleanse and Close*, 130; and Paulson, 5.
[88]In addition to Moskala and Peckham, *God's Character and the Last Generation*, see Rodríguez, 1:205–228; Reinder Bruinsma, *In All Humility: Saying No to Last Generation Theology* (Westlake Village, CA: Oak and Acorn, 2018); and George R. Knight, *End-Time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2018).
[89]Cf. Jiří Moskala, "The Significance, Meaning, and Role of Christ's Atonement," Moskala and Peckham, *God's Character and the Last Generation*, 199.

Lessons from Matthew 25

Clinton Wahlen

This chapter culminates Jesus' final discourse (Matt 23–25) and consists of three parables: The Ten Virgins (25:1–13), The Talents (25:14–30), and The Sheep and the Goats (25:31–46), each of which concludes with a final judgment scene. The first parable focuses on the difference between wise and foolish followers of Jesus, the second on how they handle the items with which they have been entrusted, and the third deals with disinterested acts of mercy and benevolence to the poor, needy, and lonely among them.

Interpretation of Matthew 25

1. Verses 1-13, Parable of the Ten Virgins

- The parable is comprised of three scenes: (1) ten girls who wait for the bridegroom fall asleep (Matt 25:1–5); (2) the bridegroom's arrival with the wise going into the wedding feast and the foolish being shut out (vv. 6–10); (3) the foolish girls' plea for entrance is refused (vv. 11–13).
- In a typical Jewish wedding, the bridegroom would leave his home (cf. Gen 2:24) and be joined to the bride at her home, followed by a celebratory procession to the wedding feast at the groom's home. The parable focuses on the wait to join this procession.
- Uncharacteristically, the verb of comparison is in the future tense ("shall be likened"), probably to underscore the prophetic nature of this parable as it concerns the judgment in connection with the second advent (cf. Matt 7:24, 26).
- Wisdom is a prized virtue in Scripture (Prov 3:15). An important characteristic of wisdom is preparedness and planning ahead so as to maximize positive outcomes (Prov 6:8; 20:18; 21:31; 24:27; 30:25; cf. Luke 14:28–32). The wise virgins were not only prepared but ready for the bridegroom's arrival; their preparation resulted in readiness for the wedding feast. Similarly, at "the time of the end," the wise are identified as those who understand the prophecies, recognize their fulfillment, and act accordingly by allowing their characters to be refined and purified (Dan 12:10; Mal 3:2–3).
- The ten girls had much in common: all were virgins, all had oil lamps that were burning and giving off light, and all became drowsy and fell asleep. Apparently, none expected such a long wait. All awoke at the call to meet the bridegroom and trimmed their lamps.
- The decisive difference was the preparation made by the wise for the unexpected. The foolish five, on the other hand, did not anticipate such a long delay and realized too late that their oil supply was insufficient. "The ten maidens have one task and one only, to be ready with lamps burning brightly when the bridegroom appears" and Matthew 5:16 illuminates "what is meant by keeping the lamp burning brightly."[1]
- The foolish are not hypocrites (cf. Matt 24:51) but are like the stony ground hearers whose experience is superficial and "endures only for a while" (13:20–21).
- The time of the bridegroom's arrival is only approximately described ("in the middle of the night"), pointing to the uncertainty of precise time of the second advent, which Jesus frequently emphasizes (Matt 24:36, 42, 44, 50; Acts 1:7). Thus, the admonition is given to "watch" and be always ready (Matt 25:13; Mark 13:35–37; cf. 1 Thess 5:6, 8).
- The finality of the judgment is underscored with the words, "the door was shut" (Matt 25:10), which no amount of pleading will alter (vv. 11–12).
- The address, "Lord, Lord," recalls Jesus' warning that doing the will of the Father is an essential element of readiness for entrance into the kingdom of heaven (Matt 7:21; cf. Luke 6:46).
- While we should avoid allegorization of the parable, many of Jesus' parables have allegorical elements. The bridegroom clearly symbolizes Jesus (Matt 9:15; cf. John 3:29), whose coming seems to be delayed. The wise and the foolish virgins, then, represent those who believe the truth received from Jesus (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 4:21) and who await His return (cf. Rev 7:1–4; 14:4).

2. Verses 14-30, Parable of the Talents

- The idea of an absentee householder who entrusts his goods to stewards while away was fairly common in the Roman world. They would have been expected to improve the means given and thus prove themselves worthy stewards of their master's wealth.
- A talent of silver weighed about seventy-five pounds and was worth six thousand denarii[2] — almost twenty years of earnings for an ordinary laborer; they were given quite large sums. The different amounts of money were distributed to each "according to his own ability" (Matt 25:15). Clearly the master knew his servants well.

- The two servants given the most both doubled their master's money, a 100% return on the initial investment. Although in burying the master's money the third servant utilized a common practice for safeguarding wealth (cf. Matt 13:44; Josh 7:21), as pointed out, even lending it to bankers (or moneychangers) could have garnered 20% interest, since they would have in turn lent it out at an even higher rate.[3]
- The master returned only "after a long time," which again emphasizes the element of waiting and apparent delay, and the calling each to account alludes to the investigative judgment in which the actions of the Lord's professed servants are assessed.
- Although the two faithful servants were given different amounts based on their different abilities and had different results, their reward was exactly the same (Matt 25:21, 23). This illustrates we are not saved by works even though we are judged according to them (2 Cor 5:10; Rev 22:12).
- The reward (entering into "the joy of your lord") applies the parable to the life to come, but the kingdom of heaven also promises joy in the present (Matt 13:44).
- The wicked servant attacks his lord's character even though from the parable it seems to have been completely exemplary. The master did "sow" by giving the man a talent to invest. Actually, the words of this servant are more a reflection of his own character; he had good reason to be afraid but that fear was not translated into worthwhile action.
- The servant is also called "lazy" because he did nothing useful with what he was given.
- Since everyone is unique, with individualized gifts and talents, and opportunities for service vary from one individual to the next, it is impossible that outcomes would be identical, which is probably why such a conception is never envisaged in Scripture.[4]

3. Verses 31–46, Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

- This third and final parable in Matthew consists of three scenes: (1) the Son of Man's separation of people into two groups; (2) the reward given to "the sheep" and their dialogue with the King about their acts of mercy; (3) the reward given to "the goats" and their dialogue with the King about what they failed to do.
- Jesus calls the sheep "blessed of My Father," those who will "inherit the kingdom" (Matt 25:34). Sheep as a symbol of Israel (Matt 9:36; 10:6; 15:24; John 10:2–4; cf. Ezek 34:11–17) and of the followers of Jesus (Matt 10:16; 26:31; John 10:15–16, 27; 21:16–17; cf. Zech 13:7) is fairly common. The right hand was a place of favor and privilege (Matt 20:21; 22:44; cf. 1 Kgs 2:19; Ps 16:11; 110:1, 5). So the sheep represent the saved of all ages.
- Jesus calls the goats "cursed" (Matt 25:41), whom He sets on His left side, which is clearly the side of shame and disapproval. Taking into consideration the parable's larger context, the goats represent the professed followers of Jesus who are lost.
- Jesus ("the Son of Man"), for the first time, speaks explicitly of Himself as "the King" (vv. 34, 40), though it was implied in earlier future-oriented parables (Matt 18:23; 22:2, 7, 11, 13). "At the completion of the work of investigative judgment, begun in 1844 . . . Jesus will receive 'His kingdom' (GC 426, 613, 614; EW 55, 280). The final coronation and enthronement of Christ as King of the universe takes place at the close of the millennium, before all men—those who are subjects of His glorious kingdom and those who have refused allegiance to Him."[5]
- All of Jesus' parables have some element of surprise, but in this parable everyone is surprised. The acts of kindness and mercy which the blessed gave to "the least of these My brethren" were credited as if they were done to Jesus. Such is the closeness with which He identifies Himself with His people (cf. Matt 10:40–42). These deeds of mercy are reminiscent of Old Testament descriptions of the righteous (Ezek 18:5–9; Isa 58:6–7).[6] This parable encourages a ministry of kindness to meet the needs of those around us. Paul says, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). Those represented by the goats feel no such obligation and fail to realize that ministering to others is ministering to Jesus.
- An important element of this ministry is hospitality, which was highly valued in both Jewish and Christian circles (e.g., Gen 18:1–16; 2 Kgs 4:8–11; Rom 12:13; Titus 1:8; Heb 13:2),[7] and is still important for us today.
- The fiery punishment allotted to the lost was never meant for human beings; it was "prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41). God desires all to be saved and does not will any to be lost (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9).
- The fire is called "everlasting" (Matt 25:41) because its effect is eternal, not because it is burning forever and ever. Sodom and Gomorrah are said to have suffered "the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7) but obviously the fire is not still burning.[8] It is also called "unquenchable" (Matt 3:12; cf. Isa 34:10; Jer 17:27) because it will continue its work until the wicked are complete burned up, leaving them "neither root nor branch" (Mal 4:1). All these images emphasize the totality and finality of sin's ultimate destruction.

Application of the Chapter

Some important lessons we may glean from Matthew 25 include:

1. Planning ahead will make a difference not only in this life but also in the life to come.[9] We are to live each day, not merely for the present, but with eternity in view.
2. The foolish five, thinking the oil they had was enough, relied on what they considered minimally necessary, whereas the wise planned also for the unexpected.
3. Preparation and readiness are related, the first being a necessary prerequisite for the second.
4. All three parables teach that so-called "little things" actually matter a lot; how one relates to them can be a barometer of one's character because they are often undervalued.
5. The parable of the talents teaches that diligence is a virtue (cf. Rom 12:11; Gal 6:9). It is commended in Scripture as an important expression of wisdom (Prov 4:23; 6:6–8; 10:4; 12:24, 27; 13:4; 14:23; 21:5), while slothfulness is unsparingly condemned (Prov 18:9; 21:25).
6. Those who follow Jesus will want to serve Him faithfully with every gift and talent entrusted to them. There is no limitation from God's side, only our willingness to be used by Him to accomplish heaven's purposes.[10]
7. Unfortunately, all who are lost will discover too late their misplaced priorities, whether it was wealth wasted on selfish pursuits and pleasures or failure to use their talents for the kingdom of heaven. It would be well for each one of us to consider from time to time how our life might be measured by the impartial heavenly Judge so as to make life course adjustments now, while we still have the opportunity to do so (2 Cor 13:5).
8. In the end, the parable of the sheep and the goats emphasizes the importance of "disinterested benevolence"—that is, finding joy and contentment in giving of ourselves to help others without expecting anything in return. Jesus is the "perfect pattern. His life was characterized by disinterested benevolence."[11] This quality will also characterize His "sheep," who follow Him and are guided by the Holy Spirit to relieve the poor and needy among us.

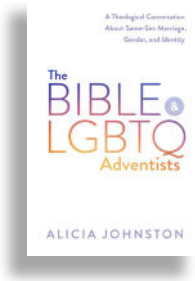
Clinton Wahlen
Associate Director of the Biblical Research Institute

Endnotes

[1]T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 243.
[2]Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 1:156.
[3]Ceslas Spicq, "κερματιστής, κολλυβιστής, τραπεζίτης," *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2:316.
[4]See, e.g., Revelation 2:17; 21:24; cf. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 677.
[5]Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 5:512.
[6]Cedric E. W. Vine, *Jesus and the Nations: Discipleship and Mission in the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 43–44, who notes the former passage's correspondence to the Ten Commandments. Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 218, says the Isaianic passage "is undoubtedly the closest" to the language of the parable.
[7]See also Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 16–51.
[8]Both passages have the same expression in Greek (*pyr aiōnion*), but the passage in Matthew has the article because it is referring to the final, ultimate destruction of the wicked.
[9]Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, September 20, 1882, para. 9, states that "the advancement made here will be ours when we enter upon the future life."
[10]See Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1900), 333–353, for its very practical application of this parable with regard to the talents of the mind, speech, influence, time, health, money, and kindly impulses and affections.
[11]Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1947), 4:218.

The Bible & LGBTQ Adventists: A Theological Conversation About Same-Sex Marriage, Gender, and Identity

Clinton Wahlen



The Bible & LGBTQ Adventists: A Theological Conversation About Same-Sex Marriage, Gender, and Identity

Alicia Johnston.
N.P.: Affirmation Collective, 2022.
358 pp.
ISBN:978-1-68489-439-0.
USD 24.95.

The new book by Alicia Johnston, *The Bible & LGBTQ Adventists*, in fourteen chapters, plus an introduction, presents the case for affirming LGBTQ people within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Johnston takes the reader through her own personal journey, going from being a conservative Adventist pastor to becoming an LGBTQ-affirming, queer, former pastor. She recounts how, at age 30, while at seminary and studying for the ministry, she "fell in love with a woman" and struggled with how to relate to such strong feelings (p. 2). Throughout the book, she includes insights into her personal struggles as she comes to terms with who she believes God has created her to be. At appropriate junctures, Johnston also shares the stories of other LGBTQ persons. In this respect, the book is helpful in providing insight into the thinking of people that have often been mischaracterized and misunderstood. Another positive feature of the book is Johnston's attempt to be fair in her description of both sides of this debate, labeling her view "affirming theology" and the official position of the church "accepted theology" (pp. 12–13). While mostly adhering to this practice, she also refers to the latter as "traditional theology" (p. 27).

Each chapter begins in a very disarming way with quotations that affirm the Adventist position, some of which Johnston has formulated and which she now takes issue with, along with a brief summary of what she used to believe on the topic. To her credit, she diligently attempts to be fair by including support for the church's position from a variety of publications and statements by Adventist theologians. Johnston then explains why she no longer agrees with it. The approach is appealing and effective, drawing readers into a conversation that the author hopes will change their minds about what the Bible actually says about homosexuality and transgenderism. Her argumentation is detailed and draws on recent theological, historical, and psychological research to present a biblical and theological case affirming the LGBTQ lifestyle. Despite the author's generally irenic tone, the book brooks no compromise. Anything short of full LGBTQ inclusion is repeatedly labeled harmful and dangerous. Johnston hopes for the day when those openly practicing the LGBTQ lifestyle can be welcomed as church members and fully integrated into church life, some even becoming "leaders and pastors" (p. 198).

Although the first chapter ("Is the Bible Clear?") would seem to be where the main treatment of hermeneutics might be found, most of it deals with trying to persuade readers that the church hasn't really given the topic a fair hearing and sharing the author's own experience in coming to terms with a different way of interpreting the Bible. Johnston claims simply to be applying more consistently the hermeneutical principles she learned during her MDiv studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University: "In my conversion to affirming theology, every principle of interpretation I used was one I learned in seminary" (p. 24). Nevertheless, each chapter, in its consideration of key passages, attempts to dismantle the Adventist Bible-based method of interpretation. Rather than review the book chapter by chapter, we will identify some of its main arguments and focus attention on the most important issues. In the process, we will look more closely at what the Bible actually teaches, because the book itself, despite

how it may appear to some readers, is less helpful in that respect.

Is Marriage Biblical or Cultural?

Johnston devotes a sizeable portion of the book to the Genesis creation account, its interpretation by Jesus in Matthew 19, and the concept of marriage more generally (pp. 35–135). She clearly recognizes her case stands or falls based on how we understand these crucial Bible chapters. But, rather than a careful study of them, Johnston takes a more combative approach, as if Adam were the model for all time: "All men were not required to live under the stars or work the land like Adam. So, can we be sure that all men are commanded to marry like Adam? We are inconsistent if some aspects of Adam's life become rules and others don't" (p. 39). Rather than inconsistency, Johnston seems not to appreciate fully the message of the creation account as a whole, based on how it unfolds.

Looking at the biblical account of Adam and Eve, Genesis 2 elaborates on the relatively brief description of human beings, both male and female, being created in God's image (Gen 1:26–29).[1] This order is then followed in chapter 2: man is created first, then woman (Gen 2:7–17, 18–22; cf. 1 Tim 2:13).[2] Interestingly, twice it is said that the woman was to be "comparable" to the man (Gen 2:18, 20), one "who corresponds to him" (NET). The Hebrew word is *kenegdo*, which combines two ideas: like (*ke*) and opposite (*neged*). The same two ideas are mentioned by Adam in verse 23: "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh [like him in being human]; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man [opposite in sex/gender]."[3] Immediately after Adam speaks, the account goes on to say, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).[4] This verse looks ahead, way beyond Eden, because Adam and Eve had not yet become parents. Its general terminology and outlook provide a definition of what marriage is to be going forward: a man leaves "his father and mother" (heterosexual, monogamous marriage) and is "joined to his wife" (another heterosexual, monogamous marriage). "This is . . . a comment of the narrator, applying the principles of the first marriage to every marriage."[5] It is not just a narrative description, but a definitive prescription for marriage.

So, although the text seems clear enough, Jesus has also given us a detailed interpretation of the passage in Matthew 19. Johnston tries to make this passage all about divorce (p. 92) because that is what the Pharisees asked Jesus about (Matt 19:3). But Jesus only addresses the issue of divorce when pressed for an answer (Matt 19:7–9). He does not answer the question initially because He first wants to clear up their misunderstanding about marriage:

> And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning '*made them male and female*,' [Gen 1:27] and said, '*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*' [Gen 2:24]? (Matt 19:4–5)

Jesus indicates marriage is between only "two," excluding polygamy, and that it was not the narrator or even Moses but God Himself who defined marriage with the words of Genesis 2:24. This interpretation explains why Jesus went on to say, "Therefore what *God* has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt 19:6, emphasis supplied).[6] Christian weddings ask God's blessing on the marriage. But how can He bless a marriage that goes directly against His divine directions for marriage in Scripture? By combining Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 and attributing them to the Creator, Jesus shows that marriage, from the beginning, was designed by God to be monogamous, heterosexual, and permanent because He is the one who joins man and woman together in marriage.

Johnston asserts that the phrase "one flesh" means kinship (pp. 108–109), but Jesus' interpretation of the passage makes it clear the phrase refers to the union (physically, mentally, and spiritually) of the man and the woman in marriage: "So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt 19:6). Johnston conflates the phrase "bone and flesh" with "one flesh,"[7] but they are not the same. "One flesh" is never used of kinship in Scripture. Instead, wherever the phrase appears it always refers to union in marriage—specifically, a heterosexual union, and the implied covenant that that union involves (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5–6; Mark 10:8; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31). Regarding 1 Corinthians 6:16 specifically, one commentator has observed, "The assumption is that every sexual act between a man and woman, whether licit or not, fuses the partners together into one flesh. There is no such thing as casual sex that has no enduring consequences, even when the partners have no intention of forming a mutual attachment."[8]

Rather than a biblical definition of marriage, Johnston offers a cultural one (pp. 118–119). But while marriage involves a civil aspect, the biblical concept of marriage is quite independent of prevailing practices in the surrounding culture. Society's values frequently conflict with biblical values and, although marriage has tended for thousands of years to be a glorious exception to that tendency, that is increasingly no longer the case. Repeatedly Johnston refers to Adam and Eve as the model for marriage (pp. 116, 120, 121) and even admits they "are the typical, normative example of marriage" (p. 123). Then she expands the definition of marriage based on how it has functioned as a social institution (pp. 118–119). She also argues that, within Scripture, it has matured beyond

what we see in Eden so that marriage has an "adaptive quality," allowing room for "exceptions" while retaining "its core meaning" (pp. 123–124). Thus, she attempts to make room for same-gender marriage.

While it is true, as we have observed, that the Bible looks well beyond Eden in defining marriage, it also defines it as monogamous, heterosexual, and permanent.[9] There are at least three essential reasons Scripture gives for this:[10] (1) procreation (Gen 1:27–28)—giving birth to children who are brought up by their father and mother "in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Exod 20:12; Eph 6:4); (2) symbolizing God's relationship to His people (Isa 54:5; Eph 5:22–33), thus communicating through this union "God's story of creation and redemption";[11] (3) companionship, which is how husband and wife, bound to each other in a "one flesh" union (Gen 2:24; Eph 5:28–33), model love to their children and to the wider community (1 Cor 13; 1 Thess 2:7; 1 John 4:7–8). These aspects are not (adequately) taken into consideration by Johnston.

Johnston also takes aim at gender roles, apparently suggesting that alleged exceptions in Scripture should disprove the rule (pp. 124–126). She rightly points out that during most of church history, gender roles mistakenly assumed the inferiority of women (pp. 126–127), [12] but connects this with the patriarchy she sees in the household codes of Peter and Paul (pp. 128–130): "Ample evidence indicates that these household codes speak to a specific cultural context that is vastly different than our own. They were doing what was right for their time and place." She further argues, based on the instructions given to slaves and masters, "the same passages that told wives to submit to their husbands told enslaved people to submit to those who enslaved them" (p. 130). While the apostolic church couldn't abolish Roman law permitting people to have slaves, they did apply principles based on the teachings of Jesus to these household relationships so that they were completely transformed, including husband-wife and master-slave relations. Hence Paul tells wives to "submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord," but he also says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Eph 5:22, 25). He told Philemon to treat Onesimus, "no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother" (Phlm 16).[13] Within the church, members were to live according to biblical principles, and not merely in accordance with what may have been acceptable for the larger society and culture.

Are Biblical Laws Flexible?

In several more chapters, Johnston takes aim at the Adventist understanding of the law (pp. 137–224). In this she relies heavily on what Roy Gane calls "judicial deliberation" (pp. 144–147),[14] though she acknowledges (correctly), "as a defender of the accepted theology, I'm sure he won't agree with the use I'm making of his approach" (p. 144).[15] She quotes twice in successive pages Gane's assertion that, "while the letter of the law was important, it was to be sensitively and contextually applied in light of the spirit of the law as a whole, recognizing that no law code can explicitly account for all the complexities of human life."[16] Johnston interprets this to mean that "the laws are not to be applied inflexibly but flexibly. When problems arise, they are to be seen 'as starting points for deliberation'" (p. 146).[17] Thus, because "transgender people often suffer terribly if they don't transition," she claims that, "even if the plain meaning of the text forbids gender transition, deliberation leads us to different conclusions. For the sake of justice and love, it shouldn't be applied that way to transgender people" (p. 146). She adds, "Gane takes a very high view of Scripture. . . . The difference in conclusions isn't because I'm approaching the text in a liberal way, and Gane is approaching it in a conservative way. The problem is that conservatives haven't been consistent on this topic" (p. 147). Actually, Johnston has not read Gane carefully on this issue. Gane only suggests flexibility is necessary in cases not covered by existing law. Otherwise, the law "stipulates obligatory norms, which carry penalties for violation to be carried out by the human community under the theocracy and/or by YHWH himself."[18] Those obligatory norms include prohibitions against same-sex relations: "homosexual activity is included in Lev. 18 and 20 among *categorically forbidden sexual behaviors*."[19] Judicial deliberation regarding a sexual offense would only be concerned with whether or not the violation occurred but would not involve any variation in the prescribed penalty.[20]

Jesus' Attitude Toward the Law

Johnston thinks Jesus was applying to new situations the principles of the law since He "was willing to modify the legal code (Matt. 5:38–48) while maintaining adamantly that He was not changing one iota of the law" (p. 148). She adds, "The Levitical law of an eye for an eye was not meant to be the final word. It improved the situation from what it had been, but it was not yet what it could be. Jesus saw what it could be. Jesus was teaching the ideal. Jesus was moving in a redemptive direction" (p. 150).[21] Johnston understands Jesus' application of the Torah's moral principles, including the Ten Commandments, as a progressive step in this "redemptive direction." But it was more than that. Jesus fulfilled the purpose of the law (cf. Matt 5:17) by establishing a universal messianic (i.e., new covenant) ethical framework. Thus He revealed the law's deeper intent (Isa 42:21; cf. Ps 119:96) and that obedience extends to motives and thoughts of the heart (cf.

Heb 4:12). Jesus did not abrogate Israel's laws, as Gane points out: "When Jesus ruled out application of the lex talionis to personal vengeance (Matt. 5:38–39), he did not revoke it as a judicial penalty administered by a court, as it is in OT law."[22] Rather, He showed His followers their personal application.

Another example of redemptive movement given by Johnston is in connection with divorce. "Jesus modified divorce laws, making them stricter than Moses had. By doing this, Jesus moved the needle in a redemptive direction." But Jesus was not modifying divorce law (see Deut 24:1); He was explaining the grounds for divorce (cf. Deut 5:32), defining the "uncleanness" (or "indecency," ESV) mentioned in that passage as "sexual immorality" (Gk. *porneia*), which was a widely debated issue in first century Israel.[23]

Transgenderism

Other applications in a modern setting are questionable, such as Deuteronomy 22:5, "A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the LORD your God." She argues, "This verse could refer to half a dozen different scenarios that have nothing to do with gender identity" (p. 143). Later, she specifies some of these: it could have referred to "pagan rituals" or related to the same taboo that prohibited "using different seeds in the same vineyard, plowing by joining different animals together, and mixing fabrics" (p. 146, citing Deut 22:9–11). But there is no reason to think this law against cross-dressing is connected with pagan rituals since nothing else in the chapter suggests this.[24] Nor does it seem to have any connection to the other prohibitions Johnston mentions.[25] The mixing of seed, animals, or fabric have nothing to do with gender or gender confusion. So, as many commentators conclude, the most likely reason for the prohibition of crossdressing is that "this injunction seeks to preserve the order built into creation, specifically the fundamental distinction between male and female. For a person to wear anything associated with the opposite gender confuses one's sexual identity and blurs established boundaries."[26] Gane adds, "The biblical value is for men and women to wear apparel that pertains to their respective genders, apparently to avoid gender-identity confusion."[27] Although biblical writers likely could not imagine the outward transformation of gender made possible today by pharmaceutical, surgical, and related interventions, the prohibition in principle undoubtedly applies to this more serious, and often permanent, twenty-first century blurring of gender distinctions as well.

What may be most surprising about Johnston's contention in this regard is her criticism of Gane for assuming "the only valid anatomy is genitalia, not neurology" (p. 146). Seventh-day Adventists have always emphasized the wholistic nature of human beings. We don't believe in a mind-body dualism.[28] The "Statement on Transgenderism," voted by the 2017 Spring Meeting of the General Conference, affirms:

> From a biblical perspective, the human being is a psychosomatic unity. . . . The Bible does not endorse dualism in the sense of a separation between one's body and one's sense of sexuality. . . . According to Scripture, our gender identity, as designed by God, is determined by our biological sex at birth (Gen 1:27; 5:1–2; Ps 139:13–14; Mark 10:6).[29]

Biblically speaking, we cannot separate gender identity from our biological sex at birth as if it were a malleable part of human nature determined only by our mind (neurologically) and completely independent of our body. At the same time, it is important to point out that all human beings are affected by sin. No one is exempt from its effects, and it affects each individual in unique ways. As pointed out in the same document,

> The fact that some individuals claim a gender identity incompatible with their biological sex reveals a serious dichotomy. This brokenness or distress, whether felt or not, is an expression of the damaging effects of sin on humans and may have a variety of causes. Although gender dysphoria is not intrinsically sinful, it may result in sinful choices.[30]

Creation Laws and Restorative Laws

In discussing the verses in Leviticus relevant to LGBTQ issues (Lev 18:22; 20:13), Johnston appeals to the distinction between "creation laws" and "restorative laws": "Restorative laws bring improvement; creation laws reflect God's moral intention and the ultimate goal of restoration" (p. 151).[31] In the former category, she seems to place "polygamy, slavery, and the legal dependence of women," but adds, "it's not always easy to tell the difference between creation law and redemptive law" (p. 156). She believes the laws in these passages are restorative because "no direct references to creation" and "no allusions or quotes from Genesis 1 and 2" appear (p. 156). Regarding Leviticus 18, Johnston counts twenty laws, fifteen of which are against incest. She counts them as restorative rather than creation laws because: (1) they do not "return the Israelite man to an exclusive relationship with one wife," but allow sex with slaves, concubines, foreigners, and sex workers; (2) they do not prohibit polygamy but only set boundaries on it; (3) "more broadly, they were restrictions on the absolute power a patriarch

exercised over those in his household"; 4) the procreation commanded Adam and Eve in the creation account (Gen 1:28) would have been impossible under these laws (p. 157). Of the five remaining laws, Johnston relates them to procreation (bestiality as not procreative and child sacrifice to Molech as destroying the progeny of procreation).[32] She also argues that making these laws universal would prohibit sexual relations during a woman's menstruation and any form of contraception (p. 158).

Regarding the laws against incest, Johnston overlooks that Paul relies on this legislation to unsparingly condemn the perpetrator in Corinth who has sexual relations with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1; cf. Lev 18:8) as well as homosexual relations (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–10).[33] We would not consider incest, bestiality, or child sacrifice as morally acceptable, so why would we exclude same-sex relations from this list of prohibitions? Furthermore, same-sex relations are condemned in the strongest possible terms as an "abomination" (*to ʿēḇāh*) and the severest possible penalty is applied—being "cut off" from the people of God (Lev 18:22, 29). It is also one of the few crimes for which Israel's judicial system required the death penalty (Lev 20:13). Johnston's complaint that there is no mention of creation in these verses is an argument from silence. Same-sex relations are categorically forbidden everywhere they are mentioned. Furthermore, from the unequivocal condemnation of same-sex relations in both the Old and New Testaments, there should be no doubt about the universal nature of this biblical prohibition. With regard to polygamy, it is hardly commended and, in fact, Mosaic regulations "mitigate some of its evil effects" (Exod 21:10–11; Lev 18:18; Deut 21:15–17).[34] In addition, according to Jesus, marriage was designed as a monogamous union ("the two shall become one flesh," Matt 19:5).

The Jerusalem Council

A related argument made by Johnston involves the significance of the Jerusalem Council's decision regarding the inclusion of Gentiles in Acts 15. She draws three parallels between Gentile believers and LGBTQ persons: (1) Gentiles were not excluded from fellowship simply because they were uncircumcised—to the contrary, they were affirmed. Similarly, the church should affirm the gender, sexual orientation, and relationships of LGBTQ people. "Behavior and identity can't always be neatly separated" (p. 181). (2) Gentiles were generally looked upon as outsiders, sinners, and separated from God. Similarly, whether "subtle or overt," there is an "othering" of LGBTQ persons, resulting in their being treated differently from other church members (pp. 181–183). (3) The theological position of the Jerusalem church that excluded Gentiles from fellowship "was grounded in Scripture and was the only viewpoint God's people held for thousands of years" (p. 183). According to Johnston, only after the prejudice against including Gentiles was removed did the theology of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews come about (p. 183). Similarly, Adventists need to learn how "to see gay, bisexual, and transgender people not as outsiders but as part of us," in order to see the Scriptures clearly, not only intellectually but through Spirit-led "love and compassion" (p. 184).

Pushing this line of argument further (pp. 184–193), Johnston suggests the church places a burden on LGBTQ people that is too heavy to bear (cf. Matt 23:4; Acts 15:10). "It matters whether theology is bearable" (p. 189). LGBTQ people whose faith leads them to reject that lifestyle bear the cross of celibacy, according to Johnston's perception of what the church expects, but it is not for everyone. It is "for those to whom 'it has been given' [Matt 19:11]" (p. 95). Thus, as she sees it, some are able to become inspiring examples to heterosexual church members, who need bear no such cross because they can marry, have children, and enjoy the approbation of the church (and, by implication, God); "the vast majority of the church that is straight and cisgender gets all the inspiration and none of the sacrifice" (p. 191). For many LGBTQ people, celibacy is a burden "packaged" as a cross: "Celibacy is no easier and no more possible for LGBTQ people than heterosexual people" (p. 192).

Johnston's argument about celibacy ignores that this is not exclusively an LGBTQ issue. What about the many celibate heterosexual people, who for various reasons do not or cannot marry? What does Johnston's view communicate to the many singles in our church to whom the gift of marriage has not yet "been given"? What message does this language communicate not just to LGBTQ people but to the whole church? Paul says the one "who does not marry . . . does better" (1 Cor 7:38) and widows will be "happier" if they do not remarry (v. 40). One reason for this is that the church is a spiritual family with God as our Heavenly Father and Jesus as our Elder Brother (Matt 12:50). Johnston's argument is similar to the question asked of a former gay-identifying Adventist, "If we tell people they must leave LGBTQ+, won't that mean they will have to live alone for the rest of their lives and feel depressed?" His answer? "I can assure you I have never been happier than in the last six years since becoming a Christian and leaving homosexuality behind. God is all I need, and my future is in His hands. He has given me many wonderful Christian friends and church family. I look forward to spending eternity with them."[35] By the same token, the church has the privilege (and responsibility) to be that family for those struggling with LGBTQ feelings.[36]

Johnston argues that just as "circumcision had no redemptive purpose," to oppose same-sex marriage is to require "suffering with no purpose. . . . There is no

real-world impact other than preserving the status quo and keeping most gay, bisexual, and transgender people out of churches" (p. 194). Disclosing her own inner turmoil, Johnston asserts, "My desires for women were not craven compulsions for sexual encounters. I wanted a life partner. . . . Why is this kind of love wicked? Why is it evil when two women choose to be life partners, but good if a woman and a man make the same choice?" (p. 195). Ultimately, Johnston came to see the LGBTQ debate as a power issue. Like Jesus and the apostles in their openness to Gentiles, she argues, "We need to tear down barriers that keep people from the gospel for no good reason, those that create division and harm among us" (p. 197). Johnston argues we need to change our beliefs "because they inform our actions" and hinder our ability to love (pp. 197–198). Alternatively, "we must learn to love despite our beliefs" even though "that's not as it should be. Our Christianity should make us love better" (p. 199).

In reply to Johnston, love does not encourage the affirmation of sinful practices (which are harmful to those practicing them whether they realize it or not). In fact, the opposite is true. Love, biblically defined, demands that we *not affirm* sinful practices because they always harm people God loves, which is why they are forbidden. As Paul says, "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13:10); it does not contravene it.

Johnston's contention regarding the Jerusalem Council does not withstand scrutiny. The Jerusalem decree (Acts 15:29) is based on the prohibitions in Leviticus 17 and 18 for the uncircumcised resident alien (Heb. *gēr*) and are even given in the same order.[37] Her argument also seems to rely on a particular interpretation of what the apostles actually decided. Some interpret the decree as bifurcating the early church: Jewish Christians could continue to circumcise their children and live as Jews, but Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised and needed only to observe the four requirements the Council laid down. Similarly today, argues Johnston, cisgender people can continue to live a heterosexual lifestyle while LGBTQ people within the church can be allowed to live and enjoy committed marriage relationships in accordance with their orientation. But there are several problems with this argument. First, many understand the Jerusalem Council decree as setting the same standards for everyone, eliminating the requirement of circumcision for all believers, whether Jew or Gentile (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). But even if there were separate standards for believers, one of the four requirements of the Council was to "abstain from . . . sexual immorality" (Acts 15:20, 29), which would include the laws against same-sex relations (Lev 18:22; 20:13). This standard of sexual propriety is upheld throughout the New Testament, beginning with Jesus (Matt 15:19). In fact, the evidence is overwhelming (1 Cor 5:11; 6:9, 18; 7:2; 10:8; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3, 5; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 4:3; 1 Tim 1:9–10; Heb 13:4; Rev 21:8; 22:15). "*Whenever* same-sex sexual relationships are mentioned in Scripture, they are always prohibited."[38] Second, God has never promised marriage and sexual fulfillment to all believers. "Imbibing certain cultural beliefs—*sex is a need, and I'll be miserable if I don't get married—will* make singleness or any sort of 'no' to sexual desires seem impossible."[39]

Often, the problem comes down to our understanding of "love." Although contemporary culture almost makes love synonymous with sex, the Bible speaks about love in much broader terms and only very rarely in terms of sexual relations, though it does describe that too. From Genesis to Revelation, it describes godly love as centered around giving rather than getting, treating others as we would want to be treated, loving the right and hating the wrong, unquenchable, unwavering, undying. Most of all, the Bible describes God loving humanity with an everlasting love, unwilling that any should perish, and desiring that everyone come to know the truth.[40]

Is Homosexuality Condemned by Paul?

Several chapters of the book address passages in the Pauline Epistles that throughout church history have been understood as condemning homosexuality. Johnston begins by pointing out that the term "homosexuals" did not appear in English Bibles until the Revised Standard Version (RSV) employed it in 1946 to translate the word *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (pp. 228–229) and she is unsure of what it means here (p. 231).[41] She asserts that the related word preceding it (*malakoi*, "soft") refers not to sexual relations but, more broadly, to effeminate men (pp. 236–237)[42] and attributes the language to Roman same-sex eroticism, which she says was characterized "by institutionalized dominance and power" and "rooted in misogyny" (p. 240). Without question, relationships based on sexual domination were common in Rome but they were by no means the only ones. Some same-sex relationships were mutual and consensual,[43] and Paul would not distinguish these because Scripture does not distinguish them, but rather categorically and unequivocally condemns them (Lev 18:22; 20:13).[44]

Regarding the meaning of these two Greek words Paul uses, the word *arsenokoitai* literally means "bedding [i.e., having sexual intercourse] with males" and is so translated in most modern English translations of the verse: "those who participate in homosexuality" (AMP), "participants in same-sex intercourse" (CEB), "homosexuals" (ISV, JUB, LSB, MEV, NAS95, WEB), "sodomites" (NCB, NKJV, NRSV, YLT), "practicing homosexuals" (NET), "people who do sex sins with their own sex" (NLV), "those who . . . practice homosexuality" (NLT). Even the fourteenth-century Wycliffe translation is quaint but clear: "they that do lechery with men." Therefore, it is

demonstrably not the case that understanding the verse in reference to homosexual practice was introduced by the RSV. There is a widespread consensus among interpreters that Paul (or, perhaps, a Hellenistic Jew) coined the word *arsenokoitai* based on Leviticus 20:13 (LXX, *arsenos koitēn*).[45] The Hebrew text says quite directly, "If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them." Since Paul had already used the exact language of this passage in condemning the man who had sexual relations with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1; cf. Lev 20:11),[46] it should be no surprise that he employs terminology from two verses later in that same passage. In addition, it is important to point out that this term cannot be considered in isolation since it is linked with the term preceding it—*malakoi* (lit., "soft/effeminate men"). Taken together, *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* refer respectively to the active and passive partners in a homosexual relationship.[47] Confirming this observation is Paul's references in the same verse to "fornicators" and "adulterers," both of which refer to consensual, but sinful, heterosexual relationships. There is no indication in this or other relevant passages (Rom 1:24–27; 1 Tim 1:10) that the sexual relations referred to are limited to those who are coerced.[48] Furthermore, if Paul refers to both active and passive homosexual partners, the text cannot be limited to coercion; such an argument would make no sense.

The most extensive Pauline critique of same-sex relations appears in Romans 1:18–32. Johnston restricts the lesson Gentiles were to understand from creation, summarizing it as, "there is a God who made the world" (p. 251); their rejection of this fact resulted in "destructive sexual behavior" (p. 252). She thereby eliminates consensual, faithful same-sex relationships from consideration. Paul's reference to nature, according to Johnston, is an appeal to "what makes sense," especially as it pertains to one's "personal conviction" which can change over time (pp. 259–260). Johnston attempts to illustrate this by appealing to Paul's argument from nature in 1 Corinthians 11 that women should wear head coverings (pp. 257–259). Based on her understanding of the Roman concept of masculinity and self-control, Johnston describes Paul's argument in Romans 1 as follows: "'Natural' sex is controlled, follows rules of dominance and submission, and is never mutual. 'Unnatural' sex is uncontrolled, burning with lust, destructive, and mutual" (p. 274). In contrast to "the mutuality of love" that exists today between same-sex couples, what Paul condemns is the "mutual desire to exploit one another" (p. 277). Thus, his underlying argument, she asserts, is a cultural one, "much like assuming long hair was shameful on men because of what it signified. Paul moved with the cultural values in both cases, making arguments based on the underlying moral reasoning. . . . But he didn't describe gay people who were asking for the blessing of marriage. He didn't describe mutual love, commitment, and sacrifice" (p. 278; cf. 286).

Regarding Paul's reference to same-sex relations between women, Johnston is aware that dominance and exploitation seems to have been absent, so she suggests it refers to "non-vaginal sex . . . fueled by destructive lust" (p. 279). She then argues, "It would be strange for Paul to describe women having unnatural sex and not at least in part be referring to non-vaginal sexual practices with men, practices intended to experience sexual pleasure without risking pregnancy." From this premise, Johnston concludes that those who want a universal interpretation of the passage should be consistent: "Married heterosexuals should never engage in sexual behavior that isn't vaginal sex. . . . Consistency demands heterosexuals who oppose same-sex marriage at least wrestle with the implication that birth control and non-vaginal sex is off-limits for heterosexuals" (p. 279). But there is no hint that Paul is referring to women having sex with men in Romans 1:26, non-vaginal or otherwise. Johnston is misinterpreting what Paul means by women exchanging the "natural use" or "natural relations" (ESV) "for what is against nature," as we shall see.

Johnston further argues that, in Romans 1, Paul doesn't just condemn same-sex practice but the evil desires themselves resulting from idolatry, whereas in Romans 2, "Paul describes 'good' Gentiles as having pure desires and hearts (Rom. 2:12–16). . . . He doesn't describe people with desires that were no fault of their own. . . . Paul also makes no separation between desire and action" (p. 283). In other words, she argues, Romans makes no distinction between same-sex orientation and same-sex practice. Therefore, "there isn't any advice in this passage about what Christians should do should they find themselves doing their best to follow God, yet also wanting a life partner of the same gender" (p. 284).

In response to this interpretation of Romans 1 and 2, several observations are important. First, while it is true that most Gentiles were ignorant of the Genesis creation account, Paul's argument in this passage is not based on that but on what Gentiles should know—God's existence and power as manifest through what He has made and how He has made it. But, rather than recognize this, they have suppressed the truth and turned to idols (Rom 1:18–23), which ultimately leads to the moral breakdown of society and of healthy human relations (Rom 1:24–32). Having rejected the truth, God gives them up to impurity (*akatharsia*) and lust (*pathos*), terms frequently used by Paul of sexual sin (2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 4:5, 7).[49] Their rejection of the facts of creation results in distorted views of sexuality (Rom 1:26–27). Women "exchanged" or substituted[50] "natural relations for those that are contrary to nature" (Rom 1:26, ESV),

and men did "likewise," by abandoning[51] "natural relations with women" (Rom 1:28, ESV). Paul reasons along lines similar to that of many Greco-Roman writers: same-sex sexual relationships are "against nature" (*para physin*) because the complementary design of the male and the female sex has fitted them biologically for each other.[52] There is no hint of domination or coercion in these relations, contrary to what Johnston asserts. Quite the opposite seems to be the case—they appear to be mutual, consensual, and pleasurable.[53]

There is no need to resort to a cultural interpretation of the passage, either in Romans 1 or in 1 Corinthians 11. Although in both passages Paul appeals to creation, unlike the Gentiles referred to in Romans 1, the Corinthian believers are expected to be very familiar with the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2. God created human beings in His image to reflect His glory (Gen 1:26–28). This first comes to fruition in the creation of the man (Gen 2:7–17), while the creation of the woman "from man" and "for the man" is his counterpart without which God's creation would not be complete (1 Cor 11:7–9; cf. Gen 2:18–24). She is similar, yet different, a fact of creation that is to be symbolized in the way man and woman relate to God in worship, with the woman's longer hair given her by God as a covering (1 Cor 11:15). Paul's wording in this passage "underscores the underlying principle that both men and women are to preserve the male-female gender distinction by their outward appearance and decorum in worship (cf. Deut 22:5)."[54] Paul's description of what is honorable or shameful is based on how one relates to God and His creation, rather than to what the culture may deem appropriate or inappropriate (which clarifies the allusion to angelic worship in 1 Cor 11:10; cf. Isa 6:2–3). Thus, both Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 11 revolve around how people relate to God and His creation, which is revealed by whether their actions are in harmony with His will. Johnston's cultural reading of both passages, while convenient for dismissing their universal application, misunderstands what they have in common and why they differ.

In fact, it is this consistent cultural reading throughout the book that results in distorted interpretations of the passages considered, which in turn lead to conclusions that are unreliable, as illustrated by the last main chapter of the book. Johnston asks an important question: "How do we move forward to make consequential moral decisions in areas not directly addressed in the Bible?" (p. 290). Unfortunately, the answer she gives misses the mark. Claiming the Bible is silent about same-sex marriage and gender transitioning (p. 292; cf. 300), she argues against "literalistic interpretations" that, historically, have resulted in the church being on the wrong side "again and again" and having to change its view "on many topics," including cosmology, gender roles, anti-Semitism, and slavery (pp. 293–294). This last issue, in particular, is singled out as an example of "the trajectory approach to Scripture. The Bible constantly moved away from slavery and toward abolition." But, Johnston argues, "the explanation I loved so much doesn't hold up well to scrutiny" (p. 295). With regard to slavery, "Israel was better in some ways but worse in others" and "the New Testament brought no improvement to the Hebrew Bible." In fact, she argues, slavery "was even expanded. . . . Christians enslaved one another in perpetuity" (p. 295). "Never was slavery categorically immoral" (p. 298). Johnston argues that it was only through the adoption of a broader hermeneutic that Christians became abolitionists—based on "universal human value and the Golden Rule" (p. 302, cf. 307), as well as "the highest Christian principle of love," citing Matthew 22:40 (p. 309). Love, she argues, doesn't compromise the law but clarifies it (p. 318). "Love is love" (p. 319).

While it is widely agreed that the principles of human value and dignity, the Golden Rule, and God's character of love are central to the message of the Bible, the question, as Johnston has accurately articulated it, is how to apply these principles "to make consequential moral decisions in areas not directly addressed in the Bible" (p. 290). Clearly, these values are exemplified in the life of Jesus. He was criticized for welcoming "tax collectors and sinners" and having table fellowship with them (Luke 5:30). But, rather than defending them as innocent, He described them as "sick" and in "need of a physician," saying, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32). Jesus also faced the accusers of the woman caught in adultery and defended her, but said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (John 8:11). Jesus consistently upheld the validity of the law and the inviolability of the Scriptures. He never relativized them or modified them but clarified them in order to show their continuing and universal applicability. Johnston clearly wrestles with the Bible text but the interpretative method she uses and the conclusions she draws as a result ultimately undermine its integrity, relativize its continuing authority, and radically alter its applicability to the present day. The book illustrates well that, in order to find support in Scripture for an LGBTQ lifestyle, major adjustments must be made as to how we read the Bible.

The book closes with a rather selective historical sketch of how the church has dealt with LGBTQ issues (pp. 322–326) and the "institutional barriers" that prevent Adventists, particularly those employed by the church, from fully affirming LGBTQ persons (pp. 326–329). She concludes with an appeal to various groups within the church to fight for change, especially church members, because "power ultimately comes from members who change rules and change officers in their conference

constituency meetings" (p. 330). She suggests church members use her book's thirteen chapters for Sabbath School classes, ask their pastors to read it, share it with friends and family, "ask LGBTQ people to share their stories," and utilize social media to "spread the word" (pp. 330–331). She reassures readers, "No matter how vocal you are, you're unlikely to lose church membership. Recognize your freedom and be bold" (p. 331). To church employees, including pastors and teachers, she encourages them to "work as quiet allies." Interestingly, she says, "I used to feel conflicted about anyone who was affirming [of LGBTQ people] and working for the Adventist system despite seeing the harm done. How can they support a system that causes so much pain." But she came to the conclusion that "pastors, administrators, and university professors" are helping make the church "much safer" (p. 332). Some pastors, she says, "just have to do that baptism, perform that marriage, or speak out about affirming theology so that it can't be ignored" (p. 333). She concludes the book the way she began, sharing more details about her personal journey in hopes it will be of encouragement to other LGBTQ people and their families in the church who struggle with what to do (pp. 333–338).

Summary

This book presents an unapologetic case for full LGBTQ inclusion—not only as church members, but as leaders and pastors. It labels the present Adventist position harmful and dangerous. The book's interpretation of the Bible passages relies on a cultural hermeneutic that prioritizes experience and scientific findings over Scripture. Genesis 2:24 defines what God designed marriage to be: heterosexual, monogamous, and permanent (cf. Matt 19:4–6). The biblical references to "one flesh" mean more than kinship; they always point to a heterosexual union and the marriage covenant implied by that union. In place of the biblical understanding of marriage which is independent of time and culture, this book offers a purely cultural definition. According to Scripture marriage has three purposes: (1) procreation, (2) symbolizing God's relationship to His people, and (3) companionship. But same-sex marriage at best can only fulfill one of the three.

Whenever the Old and New Testaments mention same-sex relations, there is no hint that coercion is involved; they are always unequivocally condemned. In Leviticus, the immediate context also forbids incest, bestiality, and child sacrifice (Lev 18:6–23), the universal applicability of which is not in doubt, so why should its prohibitions against same-sex relations be any different? In fact, the severest possible penalty is applied to all these offenses, and they are among the few crimes for which the death penalty was required. Same-sex relations are "against nature" because the complementary design of male and female has biologically fitted them for each other. Although the book suggests Paul's condemnation of homosexual practice should be read in connection with the misogyny and sexual domination so common in Rome, mutual and consensual same-sex relationships were not uncommon; nor would Paul need to qualify his condemnation of the practice because Scripture univocally condemns them. Rather, Paul classes those involved with same-sex relationships with those engaging in sinful heterosexual relationships (1 Cor 6:10). Regarding transgenderism, the biblical prohibition of cross-dressing to preserve gender distinction and prevent the blurring of boundaries is also clear (Deut 22:5). According to Scripture, gender identity is the same as one's biological sex (Gen 1:27; 2:23–24). Gender dysphoria, while not in itself sinful, is a manifestation of the effects of sin and may lead to sinful choices. Love, biblically defined, cannot affirm sinful practices because they are always harmful. That is why they are forbidden. As Paul says, "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13:10); it does not contravene it.

Concluding Remarks

The book is challenging because it takes positions at odds with clear biblical statements and also with several Adventist fundamental beliefs.[55] Despite the positions it takes, the book's approach is surprisingly disarming, because it appears Johnston has tried to be fair. This is, no doubt, due to her having previously held the biblical views with which she now disagrees. The main difference between her views and the Adventist position appears to be the result of employing a different hermeneutical method and to what extent those methods are being consistently and reliably employed. Her use of a cultural hermeneutic and the notion of a trajectory that extends beyond Scripture are methods that are out of harmony with a strict, Bible-based approach.

Even if Johnston is correct in her claim to be applying more consistently the "redemptive-movement hermeneutic,"[56] the scriptural criteria this method employs, as one researcher has trenchantly observed, "is only as persuasive as the exegesis of all the other texts relating to the issue debated."[57] As we have seen in the course of this review, at many points Johnston's interpretations fail to persuade, distorted as they are by her use of a cultural hermeneutic. Consequently, many of the conclusions she draws from the texts she examines are questionable, to say the least, and often unreliable. An even more serious problem with the method employed is its undermining of the Bible's continuing relevance and authority by relativizing its message at crucial points as culturally conditioned and thereby excluding many passages of Scripture from speaking to current issues.

One valuable contribution the book makes is its transparency on many fronts, enabling readers to

understand the struggles Johnston and others experience on the path to "coming out" publicly as an LGBTQ person.[58] It is important for all of us, however, to realize that when we start our investigation with the moving experiences of people and only then approach the Bible, it will quickly lead to biblical reinterpretations in order to legitimize such experiences. As Seventh-day Adventists we need to start with a careful and faithful investigation of the biblical text and from there shed light on how to deal with such challenging questions.[59] Church members, and particularly Adventist pastors and administrators, need to be aware not only of the issues this book raises but also should know its hermeneutical deficiencies and should understand how to respond to hermeneutical reinterpretations such as are presented in this book. It is hoped that this review will contribute to a better understanding in that regard.

Clinton Wahlen
Associate Director of the
Biblical Research Institute

Endnotes

[1]As Elias Brasil de Souza and Larry Lichtenwalter, "Transgenderism: Reflections From a Biblical Perspective," in *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues From a Biblical Perspective*, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2022), 467–468, explain, the graphic Hebrew terminology used for male and female in this passage likely refer to the male and female sexual organs, which underscores "the anatomic complementarity created by God" (468).

[2]On the reasons for rejecting the idea advanced by some that "Adam" was originally an androgynous being from whom the female aspect was separated, see Brasil de Souza and Lichtenwalter, 469–470.

[3]Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the NKJV.

[4]Similarly, Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 68.

[5]Ibid., 70.

[6]For a more detailed explanation of this passage, see Clinton Wahlen, "Lessons From Matthew 19," *Reflections* 78 (April–June 2022): 8–9, https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/Reflections-78-April-June-2022.pdf (accessed November 20, 2023).

[7]On this and other points, Johnston relies on the tendential interpretation of James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

[8]David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 234.

[9]See also Frank M. Hasel, "The Biblical Concept of Marriage," in *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 25–48.

[10]See Preston Sprinkle, *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage? 21 Conversations From a Historically Christian View* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2023), 52–61.

[11]Ibid., 54.

[12]Here Johnston relies heavily on Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021).

[13]Further, see Clinton Wahlen and Wagner Kuhn, "Culture, Hermeneutics, and Scripture: Discerning What Is Universal," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach*, ed. Frank M. Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 165–168.

[14]Citing Roy Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 30–34.

[15]This was confirmed in a private conversation with Roy Gane, November 15, 2023, in San Antonio, Texas.

[16]Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 34 (Johnston quotes this statement with more context on pp. 146 and 147, not completely accurately in either case, the first time misciting the reference as 32–33 when it should be 33–34).

[17]Quoting Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 33.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 363.

[20]Roy Gane, private correspondence, November 27, 2023. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 131, cites the case of adultery, which is also "an absolute wrong that requires capital punishment for both parties (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), with no variations in penalties due to different kinds of intention."

[21]Here and throughout the book (e.g., pp. 90–91, 294–296), Johnston generally employs a modified form of the "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" of William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001). While Webb tries to argue against homosexuality based on this hermeneutic, he only grudgingly admits the *possibility* that the Genesis creation account influenced Paul's condemnation of homosexuality in Romans 1 (131 and n. 15).

[22]Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 325n45.

[23]See Ekkehardt Mueller, "*Porneia*: Sexual Immorality," in Mueller and de Souza, *Sexuality*, 28–30; and Wahlen, "Lessons From Matthew 19," 8–9.

[24]As P. J. Harland, "Menswear and Womenswear: A Study of Deuteronomy 22:5," *Expository Times* 110, no. 3 (1998): 74–75 has shown. Similarly, John H. Walton et al., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 194.

[25]Harland, 73, says this verse "seems to be set on its own in a context of laws about various subjects, but has no clear link to 22:1–4 or 22:6ff."

[26]Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 512.

[27]Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 187; cf. 271.

[28]Interestingly, Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions About Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), makes a compelling case that transgenderism largely depends on a false dualism between mind and body. Although not fully subscribing to a strict monism, she does argue for a kind of unity that excludes transgenderism.

[29]"Statement on Transgenderism," Seventh-day Adventist Church, https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/statement-on-transgenderism/ (accessed November 20, 2023).

[30]Ibid.

[31]Johnston indicates indebtedness to her Old Testament seminary professors for understanding this distinction, though they would no doubt disagree with her use of it and the conclusions she draws thereby in support of LGBTQ people.

[32]This suggestion is also made by Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1567.

[33]Ekkehardt Mueller, "Homosexuality and Scripture," in Mueller and de Souza, *Sexuality*, 430; and Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 151: "The term *porneia* [in 1 Cor 5:1] clearly stands for incestuous relations and may include all unlawful sexual activities spelled out in Leviticus 18—that is, different forms of incest, sexual relations with a woman during her period, sexual relations with the wife of another man, homosexuality, and

sexual relations with animals." Cf. Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 327–330.
[34]Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 324.
[35]Gina Wahlen, "When the Son Sets You Free: Finding Freedom from Homosexuality," *General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter* (July–September 2023), 15 (sidebar).
[36]See Sprinkle, *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?*, 232 (referring to "gay and same-sex attracted Christians"): "They've quite literally left the hope of having a biological family (and in some cases have been kicked out of their own families) in order to pursue Jesus. And Jesus promises them a reward. A reward of a spiritual family [Mark 10:29–30]. Jesus has given them *your* home, *your* mother, *your* children and sisters and brothers and fields (economic security in the ancient world). When the church fails to embody the reward Jesus promises to celibate gay Christians, we undercut the sexual ethic we say we endorse."
[37]Richard Bauckham, "James and the Gentiles (Acts 15.13–21)," in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996),172–178. The decree requires Christians to "abstain from things offered to idols [Lev 17:7–9], from blood [Lev 17:10–12], from things strangled [i.e., not immediately drained of its blood, Lev 17:13–16], and from sexual immorality [Lev 18]" (Acts 15:29). See also Clinton Wahlen, "Peter's Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity," *New Testament Studies* 51 (2004): 517–518.
[38]Sprinkle, *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?*, 44.
[39]Ibid., 184.
[40]See, e.g., Genesis 29:20; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; 7:7–9; Psalms 45:7; 86:15; 91:14; 119:97, 165; Proverbs 4:5–6; 8:17; Song of Songs 8:7; Jeremiah 31:3; Hosea 14:4; Micah 6:8; Zephaniah 3:17; Matthew 5:43–44; Luke 16:13; John 3:16; 13:34–35; 14:15; 15:10–13, 19; 17:26; Romans 5:5, 8; 8:28; 12:9–10; 1 Corinthians 13; 16:14; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 3:17–19; 4:2, 15; 5:2, 25, 33; Philippians 1:9; 2:1–2; Colossians 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; 3:5; 1 Timothy 1:5; 4:12; 2 Timothy 1:7; 2:22; Titus 2:4; 3:4–5; Hebrews 10:24; James 1:12; 1 John 2:5, 15; 3:1, 16–18; 4:7–11, 18–20; 5:2–3; and Revelation 3:19.
41 A film has even been produced to argue this point: *1946: The Mistranslation That Shifted Culture*. On this issue of Bible translation and making the important distinction between homosexual attraction (uncondemned in Scripture) and homosexual practice (consistently condemned in Scripture), see Sprinkle, *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?*, 127–132.
[42]Following Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 44–45.
[43]Robert A. J. Gagnon, "The Scriptural Case for a Male-Female Prerequisite for Sexual Relations: A Critique of the Arguments of Two Adventist Scholars," in *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church*, 113–117; and N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part One* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 22. Preston Sprinkle, *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 62: "There is at least some evidence for consensual 'peer' same-sex relations. That is, there were men and women who engaged in same-sex relations that were mutual, consensual, interdependent, loving, and committed. These were the minority, but they certainly existed."
[44]Gordon J. Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude To Homosexuality," *Expository Times* 102 (1991): 359–363.
[45]See the informative discussion in Anthony C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 440–452.
[46]The legal terminology is deliberately broader than "his mother" (identical wording appears in Lev 18:8; Deut 27:20).
[47] So a wide range of commentators on 1 Corinthians have concluded: Garland, 214; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975), 106; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 269; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pelican New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 242; Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina 7 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 236; Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 96; and David W. J. Gill, "1 Corinthians," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 3:133. See Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 306–332, esp. 330: "The combination of terms, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, are correctly understood in our contemporary context when they are applied to every conceivable type of same-sex intercourse."
[48]Robert A. J. Gagnon, "A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, Part 2," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 25 (2003): 230–234; and Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 312–336; cf. 83–88.
[49]Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 93.
[50]Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1113.
[51]Frederick W. Danker et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 156.
[52]See the examples given in Gagnon, "A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay," 110–112.
[53]For a more detailed discussion of a hermeneutical method using a "gay lens" for the interpretation of this passage, see Wahlen and Kuhn, 148–151.
[54]Ibid., 144, also pointing out the lack of evidence for women having separate head coverings.
[55]These include: 1. The Holy Scriptures; 7. The Nature of Humanity; 10. The Experience of Salvation; 19. The Law of God; 22. Christian Behavior; and 23. Marriage and the Family.
[56]Interestingly, Johnston's book reflects a use of this hermeneutic that its main proponent rejects. See William Webb, "A Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic: Encouraging Dialogue Among Four Evangelical Views," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 2 (June 2005): 331–149, esp. 336–337. Despite Webb's qualifications about relying on "isolated words," it does seem to be similar to Johnston's eschewal of a "surface" reading of the text. It is helpful to ponder the usefulness of a hermeneutic that is flexible enough to yield such divergent conclusions. See the detailed description and critique of this method in Benjamin Reaoch, *Women, Slaves, and the Gender Debate: A Complementarian Response to the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).
[57]Thomas R. Schreiner, "William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*: A Review Article," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (2002): 56.
[58]Johnston also acknowledges valuable assistance from Randi Robertson for the content dealing with transgender and intersex issues ([340]). Since the acknowledgements and endnotes pages are unnumbered, these have been supplied in square brackets.
[59]See Robert A. J. Gagnon, "Why the Disagreement Over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice? A Response to Myers and Scanzoni, *What Has God Joined Together?*," *Reformed Review 59*, no. 1 (2006), https://repository.westernsem.edu/pkp/index.php/rr/article/view/1548/1885 (accessed November 29, 2023), on contrasting "hermeneutical scales"; and Clinton Wahlen, "Don't Do What We've Done," Reflections 29 (2010): 2.

The Origin of Life Videos

Long Story Short

Looking for some short, witty, family-friendly, science-based videos that reveal the hand of God? Look no further than "Long Story Short" which is based on the recent findings in the origin of life field of research. Modern biochemical research reveals impressive evidence about the technology inside all life that is out of this world! A handful of God-fearing scientists have teamed up with amazing animators to simplify and illustrate these new findings. Freely available on YouTube at **https://www.youtube.com/@LongStoryShortVideos**

Subscribe to the YouTube channel and feel free to share the link and the videos where appropriate.They are highly recommended by the BRI.

Index to Reflections

The first issue of *Reflections* was published in January 2003. Since then, we've published many articles. While it's possible to use Acrobat to simultaneously search all past issues of *Reflections* for one word or phrase, some readers have asked for a formal index. From now on, you will find a pdf index at the end of each newsletter that you can download.

If you wish to search simultaneously all past issues of the newsletter for one word or phrase in Acrobat, you must download all of the *Reflections* issues PDFs to one folder from the BRI website:

adventistbiblicalresearch.org/newsletters

Open any issue in Acrobat, and then press Shift + Command + F (Shift + Ctrl + F on Windows). In the Search window that appears, be sure that you click the radio button that says, "All PDF Documents in," and in the dropdown menu below that, choose the folder in which you placed your *Reflections* issues.

Click here to download the Index

Editor: Frank M. Hasel
Production Manager: Donna Rodill
Editorial Committee:
Elias Brasil de Souza, Clinton Wahlen, Daniel Bediako, Alberto Timm

Manuscript Policy

Articles important for Adventist theology are written at the invitation of BRI and should be sent by email attachment to the editor at brinewsletter@gc.adventist.org

Permissions

Material may be used for preaching and public presentations and may be reprinted by official entities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church if the Biblical Research Institute is indicated as the source. Translated articles should be reviewed by the appropriate Biblical Research Committee prior to publication.

12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA
Phone: 301.680.6790
Fax: 301.680.6788
adventistbiblicalresearch.org

Subscribe to Reflections to receive the latest issues of the BRI Newsletter!

SUBSCRIBE

Let's Connect!

ADVENTISTBIBLICALRESEARCH
ADVENTISTBIBLICALRESEARCH
TWITTER.COM/BRI_GC
BIBLICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE