

***Good Word* Schedule**
“Oneness in Christ”
October, November, December 2018

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Theme: Creation and Fall.

Leading Question: Why should one little sin in the Garden of Eden Leave such a huge imprint on the human family?

Our topic this quarter is “Oneness in Christ,” suggesting that without Christ there is no “oneness.” Our first lesson focuses on “Creation and Fall.” Scripture makes it clear that a great gulf is fixed between Creation and the Fall. The reasons for that gulf are something we must explore in this lesson.

1. Question: In Genesis 1-2, is there any hint of the coming storm that will engulf God’s creation? Does the complete absence of evil in these first two chapters of Genesis make it unique in the Bible?

Comment: A phrase that crops up again and again in Genesis 1 is “it was very good.” and Genesis 2 closes with the words: “The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” If one knows the rest of the biblical story, those lines reverberate with meaning. But taken by themselves, these two chapters are the very picture of innocence.

2. Question: How does the balance between good and evil fare in Genesis 3 to 11? Does one see more good or more evil?

Comment: Bible believers have great difficulty in taking seriously the impact of sin on the world. The list of bad news items in Genesis 3 to 11 is sobering: Disobedience in the garden, Cain and Abel, Flood, Babel. A flood of evil has overwhelmed God’s good creation.

3. Question: If we take Joshua 24:2 seriously as indicating that Abraham’s own family served other gods, what are the implications for the history of God’s people that occupies the rest of the Bible?

Comment: Devout conservatives, for good reason, want to emphasize the positive in Scripture, and thus often overlook the dramatic impact of sin, even on our interpretation of Scripture. A “high road” approach to Scripture emphasizes the good and leaves us unprepared for the record of evil that stands out so glaringly, for example, in the life of Abraham. He took a second wife and did not consider it wrong! A “low road” approach forces us to see how far humans have fallen and how God has attempted to reach them. See discussion of “High Road” and “Low Road” in Alden Thompson, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?*, Chapter 1, “Don’t let the New Testament get in the way of your Old Testament.” In short, Oneness can only come “in Christ,” and until we get there, trouble will be everywhere present:

Appendix to Lesson 1
Chapter 2, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?*
By Alden Thompson
[Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2011]

**Behold it was very good and then
it all turned sour**

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good. – Genesis 1:31

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth.... – Genesis 6:5

When I step back and try to picture the sweep of the entire Old Testament, and, in fact, of the whole Bible, I see something very similar to the scene suggested by the chapter title: a glorious idea that has somehow gone terribly wrong. I would hasten to add, however, that for all the wrongness and evil to which the Bible testifies, a generous portion of good still remains. And what is more, out of the wreckage of this beautiful creation God has conceived something even more beautiful and awe-inspiring: a plan of redemption, a theme that we shall look at more closely in chapter 7.

Because the Bible presents such an intricate tapestry, woven with the evil as well as the good, the horrible as well as the magnificent, a distorted view of the whole is quite possible. In fact, Christians have often shown a tendency to focus on one element or the other. Some have so greatly praised their Maker that they have neglected to take seriously the tragic consequences of sin. On the other hand, some have been so deeply scarred by sorrow and tragedy, that even the glories of a this-worldly sunset can scarcely quench the longing for a better world. The difference between these two emphases can be clearly seen in the contrasting hymn titles: “This is my Father’s world” yet “I’m but a stranger here, heaven is my home.”

Any alert citizen of planet earth can testify that life is composed of the bitter and the sweet, the good and the bad, but it is a rarer gift to be able to enjoy this world while longing for a better one. To claim that this world is absolutely filthy is false. Nor can any sober person say that this little corner of the universe is a beauty spot which has no rival. For the Christian, a balanced view is vital: the thorns must not be allowed to ruin the roses, nor should the roses obscure the thorns. That is a principle which is significant not only for daily living, but equally for understanding the Old Testament.

In Chapter 1, I noted briefly that one can use two rather different emphases in interpreting the Old Testament: the “high road” approach and the “low road.” “High road” refers to an emphasis on the “goodness” in the Old Testament, particularly in the lives of the men of God. The most straightforward example of this approach is found in Hebrews 11 where men of great variety and diverse experiences are all marked with the label “faith.” By contrast, “low road” refers to the approach which calls attention to the great depths to which humans had fallen, including those people that God claimed as his own.

Because the “low road” approach has been so helpful in enabling me to come to grips with the Old Testament, I tend to emphasize that way of reading the biblical accounts. The “high

road” has marvelous potential for immediate inspiration, and perhaps that is why it has tended to predominate in Christian circles. But such an approach does not really prepare one for actually reading the Old Testament stories. In other words, one could become so accustomed to a “high road” diet that reading the Old Testament itself could lead to indigestion! I think that both approaches are possible and useful, yet in actual practice it is difficult to follow them both with equal enthusiasm.

Perhaps one reason why the “low road” approach has been neglected stems from the recognition that the discovery of the shadow side of the Old Testament characters has not always produced positive results. In fact, the sins of the saints have often been turned against Scripture and its God and have been used as weapons to attack the authority of the Word of God. Nevertheless, the “low road” approach is in some ways a two-edged sword which can cut either way. For example, one could turn to any nineteenth century devotional writer who is defending the Bible against its detractors. To the statement, “If your God condones things like that, then I want no part of your religion,” he can answer, “But it is precisely that point that vindicates the word of God, for here we have a realistic picture of fallen humanity accompanied by a picture of a God who stoops to help.” So what is taken as a great hindrance to faith by one man is seen as a pillar of faith by another. The psychological and sociological reasons behind those two opposite reactions to the same evidence are undoubtedly complex and cannot be explored here. But I do think it is important to recognize that there is much in the Old Testament that offends refined tastes. When we ignore those aspects, we lay the groundwork for the loss of faith. We must take them seriously and show how God can bring about his purposes even out of that kind of situation.

The “high road” approach has often led to the aggravation of one more point of tension in the interpretation of the Old Testament, namely, that between those who see the religious experience of the Old Testament as evolving naturally, and those who see it as stemming from divine revelation. Much of the modern scholarly study of the Old Testament is based on the assumption that every aspect of man’s experience is evolving, following principles of natural development. In such circles, then, it has become quite standard procedure to describe Old Testament people as developing from the primitive towards the sophisticated, from superstitious beliefs to a mature, intelligent faith. In accordance with such a scheme, those parts of the Old Testament judged to be primitive are said to be most ancient, whereas the more “developed” parts of scripture are said to be of later origin. Thus the stories of Genesis 2 and 3, for example, are said to be early and primitive because God is depicted very much like a man: he walks in the garden, forms man of the dust of the earth, he operates on Adam and builds Eve. By contrast, Genesis 1 is said to be the very latest (and greatest) theology in the Old Testament, written towards the end of the Old Testament period, because God is depicted as transcendent, quite removed from the mundane affairs of life; he creates by his word and does not get his “hands” dirty with the dust of man’s creation.

A PARTIAL REVELATION OF GOD

Such an approach to the Old Testament has often been so completely foreign to conservative Christians that we have failed to take it as a serious effort to explain some difficult aspects of the Old Testament. Conservative Christians have often tended simply to quote the

New Testament view of the Old Testament and to use the “high road” approach for purposes of affirming faith in God and in his word without seriously attempting to explain the Old Testament. The specter of an evolutionary approach to the Old Testament has often made it impossible for conservative Christians even to listen to scholarly discussions about the Old Testament, to say nothing of actually participating in the dialogue.

At the risk of sounding terribly conservative to some of my scholarly friends and dangerously liberal to some of my conservative friends, I would like to propose, as a first step towards understanding the Old Testament, that we simply accept the scheme of “history” which the Old Testament itself suggests. I don’t think that is asking too much, regardless of whether one assumes a scholarly or a devotional approach to the Old Testament, or whether one happens to be liberal or conservative.

Now if we do let the Old Testament speak for itself, a rather surprising picture emerges; surprising, at least, for one who has been accustomed to taking an exclusively “high road” approach to the Old Testament. Perhaps a brief summary can serve as an outline of the discussion which follows:

1. God creates a perfect world and calls it good (Genesis 1).
2. Man exercises his free will to turn against God. (Genesis 2-3).
3. After the “fall,” God’s beautiful world is marred by repeated outbreaks of sin and tragedy:
 - A. Cain murders his brother (Gen. 4:1-16)
 - B. Cain’s line develops into a hateful and hated race (Gen. 4:17-24)
 - C. Noah’s generation rebels, leading to the Flood (Gen. 6-8)
 - D. Noah’s son Ham mocks his father (Gen. 9:20-28)
 - E. The Tower of Babel shows humanity as still being rebellious (Gen. 11).
 - F. Abraham’s own family worships other gods (Josh. 24:2)
4. With Abraham, God begins a fresh attempt to reveal himself to mankind, to people who now know very little of God’s plan (Genesis 12).

This prologue to the Old Testament is extremely important for understanding what follows, for it sets the stage for all the degenerate and “primitive” acts which follow. Beginning with Abraham, God seeks to reestablish his way in human hearts, hearts which have fallen far from the natural purity and knowledge of the first human pair.

Now right at this point I would like to note a more serious problem that arises out of the “high road” emphasis, namely, the assumption that virtually the full content of the “gospel” was both known and essentially preserved from the time of creation through the line of the “sons of God” (the patriarchal line). Whatever the reasons for that view, it causes real problems when one observes the behavior and ethical standards held at various points throughout the Old Testament period. Christians have always claimed that what one believes about God has a direct impact on the way one lives. In other words, good theology leads to a noble life. If that principle holds true, as I think it must if Christian theology is to make any sense at all, then how could it be that the Old Testament saints had in their possession virtually the complete “gospel” while their behavior

falls far short of such a theology? All the evidence from Genesis suggests that Abraham did not consider it wrong to take a second wife. His loss of faith was wrong, something that he himself came to realize according to the Genesis story. But the principle of polygamy is never discussed. In the Jacob story it is even more evident that polygamy is an accepted way of life. By reading between the lines in the light of later Christian standards we can certainly surmise the tragedies caused by polygamy, but Genesis does not moralize about it. To cite further examples, Exodus does not moralize about slavery, nor does the Old Testament grant an “enlightened” status to women.

This tension between theology and ethics evaporates if we read the Old Testament in its original setting and do not insist on finding full-blown New Testament standards everywhere in the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament itself contrasts the many and various ways of the Old Testament with the way of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2) and speaks of the shadow pointing to the reality (Heb. 10:1). Perhaps we could even borrow another famous New Testament phrase: “seeing through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). A type is never as clear as the reality, nor is the shadow as clear as the subject itself. Why then should we insist that the Old Testament be as clear as the New in its picture of God? For all practical purposes, the New Testament contradicts the claim of a complete Old Testament revelation while confirming that the Old Testament believer had quite adequate evidence on which to base faith (cf. John 5:46-47).

The point of all this is to emphasize that if one is going to understand the Old Testament, one must let the Old Testament speak for itself, something which conservative Christians have had considerable difficulty in doing.

Returning then to our survey of the Old Testament story, I would like to suggest, in keeping with the evidence from Genesis, that Abraham’s actual knowledge about God was most likely quite limited. He was a great man of faith who acted on the evidence which he had. And though his knowledge of God was limited, and though he was occasionally unfaithful to that knowledge, he rightly stands as one of the great heroes of faith. The story in Genesis 22 of his willingness to offer up Isaac, the son of promise, stands out as one of the great testimonies to his relationship with his God. Yet right here within this great story of Abraham’s faith lies a problem for us if we take the “high road” approach. Biblical narratives detailing the later history of God’s people clearly establish that human sacrifice was forbidden. If Abraham already knew that such “killing” was wrong, then why should we commend his faith for his willingness to do what he believed to be wrong? Such an approach puts Abraham and us in an inconsistent position. What would hinder God from coming to me now and asking me to “sacrifice” my child? And how would I know that it was the voice of God if he had clearly indicated to me by other means that such sacrifice was wrong? Would he expect me to disobey him in order to obey him? Not at all.

The explanation lies in the recognition that Abraham was most likely surrounded by a culture which assumed that the sacrifice of the heir was the highest possible gift that one could offer to the gods. It was only that cultural background which made that particular test possible. But interestingly enough, if we interpret the story rather freely, we find in it the very heart of the gospel story, for, in effect, God comes to Abraham and tells him: “Abraham, I appreciate your willingness, but you really cannot offer your son. Only I can offer my son. I will provide the sacrifice – there it is behind you.” Is that not what God says at the cross? “No merely human sacrifice can ever be adequate – I will provide the gift that brings peace.” Did Abraham see the full story? Through a glass darkly, yes, but probably not in detail. I think that is the message of

Genesis 22.

A great number of perplexities that crop up in connection with the patriarchs simply vanish when we recognize that these men had entered a world that had been greatly distorted by sin so much so that the truths which God had originally entrusted to the human family had disappeared or had become greatly distorted by contact with pagan culture. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how an original promise of a Messiah who must die for our sins could have become distorted into the practice of human sacrifice. No proof can be cited for such a development, of course, but such a possibility would certainly be in keeping with the known human tendency to transform the gift of God into a matter of our own works and pride.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD: RISE AND FALL

If we follow the Old Testament story further, we note that the period of drastic loss of the knowledge of God highlighted in Genesis 3-11 is not the only one of decline and degeneracy. The descendants of Jacob migrated to Egypt where they became enslaved for hundreds of years. The biblical account makes it clear that when the time came for God to deliver “his” people, their spiritual condition was low indeed. While the knowledge of God had not been completely lost, the book of Exodus does suggest that most of the people had virtually lost sight of the God who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No wonder Moses’ position as leader of these people was often quite tenuous; they were always on the verge of deserting this “new” God for the old ones of Egypt. And when this rough lot of ex-slaves finally arrived at Sinai, the laws which God gave through Moses provide clear evidence that these people, cowering in mixed fear and awe about the mountain, were so deeply involved with cruel customs that instant abolition of such customs was out of the question. The best that could be done in some instances was a slight “humanizing” of some of the more barbaric aspects. And I use the term “humanizing” intentionally, for I think the laws of the Pentateuch must be seen, in the first instance, as revealing the kind of people God was dealing with, and then only in the second instance, as revealing the character of the God who had chosen these people. The thunder and smoke, the heavy hand, and the strange customs seen at Sinai, are often cited by God’s detractors as evidence against him. Because of the “high road” approach, many Christians also find these aspects troublesome even though they choose for other reasons to remain within the community of faith.

Later Old Testament writers make it clear that when human beings forget God, they also forget their fellow creatures, sinking to cruelty and abuse. So when God seeks to awaken a knowledge of himself in the hearts of people thus degraded and alienated from him, he does not seek simply to make them more “religious,” but also to make them more human. Judged by the cultures around ancient Israel, the laws given to Israel show remarkable signs of “humanization.” God took this people, in spite of the many barbaric and cruel customs which they had adopted and began to draw them to him. He wished to show them a better way. But if human beings are to be treated as real human beings who possess the power of choice, then the “better way” must come gradually. Otherwise, they will exercise their freedom of choice and turn away from that which they do not understand. I shall return to this point later, for it is a crucial one, but now I simply want to make clear the “rise and fall” of God’s people as the Old Testament itself describes it. Up to the time of the Exodus, it is mostly “fall,” and that is why the “low road”

approach can be so helpful.

Before taking up the question as to why God allowed man to fall so low, I should perhaps draw attention briefly to some other “low” points in the progression of the Old Testament narrative. Have you read the book of Judges lately? Maybe you haven’t been brave enough. In chapter 6 we will discuss in some detail one of the frightful stories at the end of the book of Judges, but the whole of that period is one of apostasy, rebellion, and degeneration with very few glimmers of light. If unstable characters such as Samson and Jephthah were the best that God could find for his judges, you can imagine the condition of the rest of the people. At the beginning of the settlement period, even that fine young man Joshua, one who generally occupies a position of honor on the “high road,” sometimes acts in a shocking manner, at least when judged by our standards of right and wrong. Take the story in Joshua 10 as an example. When five Canaanite kings had been captured, Joshua commanded his men of war: “Put your feet on the necks of these kings.” With a few words about the Lord’s continuing presence and assistance, he then killed the kings and hung the corpses on five trees until sundown (Josh. 10:22-27). What would a modern Christian church do with a military leader who treated his enemies in such a way? Reflection on such questions simply emphasizes how far these great men of ages past were from holding the kinds of standards that we would consider right. Yet these were God’s men and God chose to use them. What does that tell us about God? Either that God is very cruel – or that he is very patient. I much prefer the latter alternative, for that is the kind of God I find revealed in Jesus Christ. With that deep Christian bias which I readily admit, I choose the alternative which best fits the larger picture.

Glimpses of two other periods in the history of Israel should be sufficient to give at least the flavor of the Old Testament story. The key names are Hezekiah and Josiah during the period of the monarchy, and Ezra and Nehemiah from the post-exilic period. During the approximately four hundred years of Israel’s monarchy, her religious experience was wildly erratic. Some great and good names do stand out, including those of Hezekiah and Josiah, both of whom initiated great religious reforms. Hezekiah’s reform and Passover preceded Josiah’s by about eighty years and are described at some length in 2 Chronicles 29-31. Why does the Chronicler give this story so much space? Perhaps because in Hezekiah’s day, the Passover was quite a novel idea, so novel, in fact, that the priests could not consecrate themselves in time. Levites had to be drafted to help administer the sacrifices (2 Chron. 29:34). The Passover itself had to be delayed for a month so that everything could be done as the law required. The people were so taken with this “new” thing that everyone agreed to extend the feast for another seven days (2 Chron. 30:23).

Now one might think that such a glorious Passover would establish the pattern for generations to come, but how does the biblical record describe conditions when Josiah came to power a few decades later? The Chronicler’s detailing of Josiah’s own development is most illuminating and deserves a closer look.

As told in 2 Chronicles 34, Josiah’s religious experience grew as follows: he was only a lad of eight when he began to reign (v. 1), but he apparently did not begin to “seek the God of David” until he was sixteen (v. 3). What had he been doing for religion before this? Use your imagination. The Bible doesn’t say. After *beginning* to seek the God of David at the age of sixteen, he finally decided to do something concrete to establish the faith; he began to break down the idols and destroy the pagan altars, but that didn’t actually take place until he was twenty (vv. 3-7). One would think that by now he must have been a devout worshiper of the true

God and would have had most aspects of the faith firmly under control. Not quite, for it was only when he was twenty-four years of age that he decided to restore the temple, the official place of worship (v. 8). While the temple renewal was underway, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law (v. 14). The Bible itself does not clearly identify the book that was found, but many scholars think it was the book of Deuteronomy or at least part of it. In any event, Hilkiah brought the book to the king's secretary who in turn rushed it to the king. Whatever the precise contents may have been, the king was greatly surprised and shocked (v. 19). Can you imagine both the priest and the king being ignorant of the book of the law – and that so soon after Hezekiah's great reform? And if the king and priest were ignorant, what was the condition of the average citizen?

I can well remember my reaction when the events of 2 Chronicles 34 finally made an impression on my mind. My "high road" picture of faithful kings, priests, and prophets, who held high the "banner of truth," needed to be remodeled to fit the picture that the Old Testament itself gives. What a struggle it was for God to reveal himself to those people, people who so easily and so quickly fell so far.

Our last snapshot picture from the Old Testament comes after Israel had been dragged into Babylonian captivity, the just reward for her sins as the biblical account so dearly states. Nebuchadnezzar's final capture and destruction of Jerusalem is usually dated at 586; the first feeble group of returning exiles apparently headed back for Judah in 536, but morale was a problem. After a half-hearted attempt to rebuild the city and the temple, local opposition discouraged the people and they simply let the temple remain in ruins. Finally, around 520, under the inspiration provided by the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, a drive was begun which resulted in the completion of the temple.

We have no biblical narrative which describes what took place during the next few decades. All we know from the biblical account is that when Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458/57, the state of religion was appalling. He and Nehemiah worked together to restore the city walls and the faith of the people. But a most sobering insight is provided by the last chapter of Nehemiah. Ezra had now passed from the scene and Nehemiah has had to return to the court of the Persian king, though the biblical account does not explain why. Upon his return to Jerusalem some twelve years later, which would probably be no earlier than 425, Nehemiah was appalled by the conditions he found. Some of the very reforms that he and Ezra had established earlier had been reversed entirely. Read the story yourself in Nehemiah 13 and you will discover further evidence of the "low road" on which Israel so often traveled! In Nehemiah's absence, the people had given over part of the temple to one of Israel's avowed enemies, Tobiah the Ammonite; the priests and Levites had simply been left to fend for themselves; the Sabbath had been disregarded; and the Israelites were still marrying foreign wives, contrary to God's law. That last point was precisely one that Ezra and Nehemiah had "reformed" earlier.

Nehemiah's response to this multiple threat was vigorous and passionate. In his own words: "I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God" (Neh. 13:25). Tough lines, but perhaps not too surprising considering the circumstances.

Descriptions of the history of Israel often suggest that the Babylonian captivity cured Israel once and for all of the worship of pagan deities and turned her to the religion of law, an emphasis that is altogether too clear by New Testament times. But even that religion of law was not easy to come by. The evidence from the Old Testament suggests that virtually throughout her

history, even after the exile, God's people were mostly traveling the "low road." One could hardly accuse Israel of worshiping God wrongly when she was not even worshiping Him at all! But that must have been the case more often than we have been inclined to admit.

After tracing the above scenario, we must now ask the question as to why God would allow such frightful degeneration. Why would he create a world and then let it slide away from him? Why would he choose a people and then not keep them close to him? Those questions have often been asked and they are the right ones to ask. The problem of evil and sin is an ominous cloud over our world. When God's children either cannot recognize or cannot understand his activity among men, they turn away from him. I do not presume to know the full answer, but I would like to suggest a way of interpreting God's activity that has helped me to see the Old Testament and the New Testament as part of a consistent revelation of a good God.

A COSMIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

The claim of both the Old Testament and of the New is that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and the source of everything good. How could such a God be the architect of this world with its sin and tragedy? The Bible does not really attempt to answer that question in a philosophical manner, but there are some hints in Scripture that point in the direction of a possible explanation of the course that this world has taken. When these hints are drawn together, a picture of a great cosmic drama begins to emerge. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is perhaps the best known popularization of this drama, but the elements are present in Scripture, and Milton himself draws heavily on scriptural imagery. As the writings of C.S. Lewis attest, the motif is still popular in our modern era.

The drama centers on the great struggle between good and evil, between God and the Enemy of the good. The Old Testament treatment of this drama will be discussed more specifically in the next chapter, but the hints appear very early in the biblical narrative. The serpent of Genesis 3, although more crafty than any of God's other creatures, is somehow also God's opponent, raising questions about God's manner of dealing with man. He claims that God arbitrarily has withheld something good from man. Traditional Christianity has attributed personal qualities to this serpent and has depicted him as the Great Opponent of God, usually under the name of Satan or simply the Devil.

The suggestion of a great cosmic struggle between this Adversary and God is further amplified in the book of Job. The Adversary accuses God of favoritism, implying that God virtually has bribed Job to serve him; remove the hedge and Job's allegiance would simply evaporate. In short, the book of Job sets a drama in which the Adversary attacks the very heart of God's ways with man. If God is to prove his case, he must throw his man Job to the lions, so to speak. Job suffers, argues, talks back to a silent God, but never abandons his faith in God's justice. Thus, through Job's endurance, God's character stands vindicated.

Two additional Old Testament passages, Isaiah 14: 12-15, the famous "Lucifer" passage, and Ezekiel 28:11-19, both suggest further elements in the traditional Christian interpretation of the cosmic struggle. In particular, the aspect of selfish pride is prominent in both of these passages. It requires only a small step to arrive at the two great points of tension in this cosmic drama: the selfishness and pride of the Adversary over against God's self-sacrificing love, a contrast that has been much developed in the Christian understanding of the mission of Jesus.

The New Testament intensifies the focus on this cosmic drama. When the “seventy” returned from their successful mission, Luke records that Jesus exclaimed: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). In addition, both Matthew and Luke record the personal confrontation between Jesus and the Adversary (Matthew 4; Luke 4). Both accounts hint at a cosmic significance when the devil offers the world to Jesus if he will fall down and worship him.

Much additional New Testament evidence could be cited, but for purposes of defining the cosmic struggle, the final book of the New Testament is one of the more important New Testament points of reference. Revelation 12-14, and 20, in particular, throw the struggle into bold relief; the dragon and Michael are at war (Rev. 12:7). The dragon is defeated and cast to earth where he pursues those who are faithful to God’s commands (Rev. 12:17). The dragon carries on his warfare through the beast of Revelation 13. The beast and his allies attack virtually every part of God’s realm. As the struggle climaxes, its religious character becomes more evident, for another beast follows in the authority of the first, demanding that all should *worship* the image of the beast or be killed (Rev. 13:15). Thus the human family is inevitably drawn into the struggle. Those who refuse the demands of the beast are described as saints who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12).

Throughout the book of Revelation the theme of judgment is prominent, a judgment which is ultimately for God and his holy ones and against the dragon and his demons. Revelation 14:6 declares that the hour of judgment has come and in the chapter which describes the final demise of the devil and his angels, Revelation 20, judgment is committed to the saints (Rev. 20:4). The language of confrontation simply dominates the book.

Now it is perhaps noteworthy that where this cosmic struggle is given any kind of content, the enemy accuses God of being arbitrary: in Genesis 3, God is accused of arbitrarily withholding something good from man. In Job, God is accused of arbitrarily favoring Job. Yet interestingly enough, these same passages suggest that God actually grants remarkable freedom: in Genesis, the power of choice and the right to rebel; in Job, the right of the Adversary to viciously attack Job, Job’s family, and Job’s possessions. In short, the biblical writers seem to present the evidence for a freedom-loving God who has no fears of granting freedom also to his creatures and even to the Adversary himself. But in the context of the great cosmic struggle, when the Adversary accuses God of being arbitrary, the only possible way of putting the accusation to rest is for God to do precisely what he did in Job’s case: he must throw Job to the lions. Refusal to let Satan attack Job would simply have left the accusation all the more believable, and the reputation of God’s government all the more in doubt. But now let us apply the above suggestions to the interpretation of biblical history as a whole. If the course of history can be seen to be taking place within a great cosmic struggle in which God is accused of governing in an arbitrary manner, then we have a hint as to how we might understand his willingness to create a good world – but then watch it fall into serious decay. Who would be the mastermind of that decay? The Adversary.

The suggestion that the Adversary is in some sense the master of this world as well as the mastermind behind its pain and agony, appears in the book of Job. At least when the sons of God gathered together, the Adversary reported that he had come from the earth. This may also be the origin of the references in the gospels to “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). The devil’s willingness to “concede” rulership to Jesus (for a price!) as noted in the temptation accounts also

implies a certain demonic lordship over creation. Placing this demonic control in a framework similar to that provided by the book of Job, we can imagine that a good world has been thrown to the lions. Thus, the entire creation must endure a Job-like experience at the hands of the Adversary.

If God's ultimate authority is to be established, then the full impact of demonic rule must be allowed to develop. The "benefits" and "blessings" of demonic rule must be allowed to develop for all to see, if God's lordship is to be finally regained. So just as God had to remain silent during Job's agony, just as he allowed Satan to destroy Job's innocent children, just as God allowed circumstances to deteriorate to the point where Job's wife could say: "Curse God and die," so it is with the world which God has created. Demonic forces must be granted the right to rule. Man must be granted the right to rebel without the threat of immediate and sudden punishment. And so we have the tragic sequence of Genesis 3-11, a somber reminder of the devastation caused by rebellion, but at the same time, a testimony to a God who loves freedom so much that he even grants us the privilege of ruining our lives and the lives of others.

Yet God has not abdicated completely his responsibilities and control. Just as he set limits on Satan's attack on Job, so he has put some limits on the spread of evil. And just as God finally broke his silence with Job, so he also came in a special way to Abraham to renew the knowledge of God and to lead Abraham into a new relationship as an example of what a divine-human relationship could mean. But if God is the kind of God who loves freedom, then he cannot force us to grow towards him. Growth can come only as we choose to respond to the divine invitation. That is why the Old Testament stories provide such a mysterious blending of good and evil. In some of the narratives the distinction between good and evil is clear enough: human beings simply failed, revolting against what they knew to be right. But in other cases, divine wisdom apparently saw that man was not yet ready for the next step upward. Reforms cannot be hasty, otherwise all can be lost, For freedom's sake, God had been willing to let the demons have a fair crack at his creation; now God must defeat the demons, the false deities who had inundated the earth.

If we apply this suggested interpretative framework to Abraham's situation, we can see that if God had moved too quickly in his attempt to win the heart of Abraham, Abraham would have had plenty of other "gods" to choose from. He was by no means bound to serve the God who had called him from Ur of the Chaldees. There must have been many things that God desperately wanted to tell Abraham, but he didn't dare. Abraham was not yet ready to move from milk to meat!

Thus when the larger picture of a cosmic struggle forms the background of the Old Testament, I find it much easier to understand the activities of God. It now seems strange to me that the Old Testament God has the reputation of having a short fuse. A God of incredible patience is a much more accurate description. Judged by New Testament standards, life in the Old Testament was often at a very low ebb. Yet God was there – working, inviting, winning.

We must not assume, however, that the upward path was a continuous one once God had come to Abraham. The graph actually looks much more like a roller-coaster ride! Freedom means we may grow or fall, depending on whether we respond to the divine invitation or turn from it. When one of God's children chooses to turn away, the memory of the divine presence can very easily fade completely. Very little time is required to obliterate even important traditions from the human experience. I have known families who have become alienated from the Christian

community and have turned away, taking their children with them into isolation. Given a few years of such isolation, the children have no memory of that which had at one time been so important to their parents. So it is with the rebellions and apostasies in the Old Testament. The example cited earlier of the loss of the knowledge of God between Hezekiah and Josiah is almost the rule rather than the exception, more typical than remarkable, though still very much a tragedy.

To summarize the argument of this chapter, we can say that God did create a good world. In this world he placed free creatures. They chose to rebel and align themselves with the Adversary. His attacks on God set the stage for demonic rule, a rule which a freedom-loving God chose to allow as necessary evidence in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The Old Testament gives ample evidence of the impact of the demonic rule. At the same time, however, it testifies to God's patient interest in his own people, a people through whom he hoped to demonstrate to the world that there is a God in heaven who is the source of everything good. God had much that he wanted to show and tell his people. As soon as they were ready, he passed on the good news. The tragedy was that they were so seldom ready. Yet God was still willing to watch and wait. That is the glory of the Old Testament and the glory of our God.

Theme: Causes of Disunity

Leading Question: If Paul admonishes us to think on what is true, honorable, just, and pure (Phil. 4:8), are we justified in focusing on the causes of disunity?

This week's lesson covers some of the most troubling incidents in the history of God's people. Even though Paul admonishes us to think on the good things, when there is an illness, one needs to spend some time on the illness if there is to be a cure. The solution to our disunity can be found in Jesus, but diagnosing the disease is an important part of finding its cure.

1. Question: When Deuteronomy 28 lists the blessings that come from obedience and the curses that come as a result of disobedience, is he talking about "natural" results or "imposed" results?

Comment: If one pours grape juice into the gas tank of an internal combustion engine, the "natural" results will be catastrophic. If one breaks the law of gravity, the results are inevitable. In part, God's ideal law is like that. Author Tim Jennings uses a label that is helpful: God's law as "design" law. But there are a host of biblical laws and secular laws that have been added to help us live our lives. What happens when we break those?

2. Question: The last two stories in the book of Judges are horrific, and both include the phrase, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Why does doing what is right in one's own eyes cause disunity?

Comment: For additional discussion of the stories in Judges, see Chapter 6 in *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* "The worst story in the Old Testament: Judges 19-21." The last story, in particular, puts a whole new light on the institution of the monarchy in Israel. The key phrase in the last verse in the book (Judges 21:25) is "there was no king in Israel." In short, the author wants to say that when there is no good king in the land, chaos is the result. That may be true in a sinful world, but would it be the same in the ideal world?

3. Question: The story of Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12, illustrates the great danger of relying on raw authority. Rehoboam tried to bully the people by threatening them with force – "my little finger is heavier than my father's loins" (1 Kings 12:10, NRSV). How does his approach illustrate the danger of appeal to authority, especially when it includes the threat of violent force?

Comment: Ellen White's comment on Rehoboam's course of action points to the great danger of the authoritarian approach:

Had Rehoboam and his inexperienced counselors understood the divine will concerning Israel, they would have listened to the request of the people for decided

reforms in the administration of the government. But in the hour of opportunity that came to them during the meeting in Shechem, they failed to reason from cause to effect, and thus forever weakened their influence over a large number of the people. Their expressed determination to perpetuate and add to the oppression introduced during Solomon's reign was in direct conflict with God's plan for Israel, and gave the people ample occasion to doubt the sincerity of their motives. In this unwise and unfeeling attempt to exercise power, the king and his chosen counselors revealed the pride of position and authority. {PK 90.1}

4. Question: Is Jeremiah 3:16 another Old Testament reference to a “new covenant” with the law written on the heart?

And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the Lord, they shall no longer say, “The ark of the covenant of the Lord.” It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made. – Jer. 3:16, NRSV

Comment: The ark was *the* symbol of God’s presence. But here that symbol will no longer be needed and won’t even come to mind! That’s what happens when God’s people are right with God. Here it is a statement of the ideal which was theoretically possible in the OT, but more fully realized in Jesus.

5. Question: Why is choosing up sides behind our favorite preacher both natural and dangerous, according to 1 Corinthians 1:10-17?

Comment: Diversity is unavoidable within the human family, indeed, it is a great advantage when people learn the value of working together. The model of the “body of Christ” is seen most vividly in 1 Cor. 12 where it is clearly an ideal toward which we should move “in Christ.”

Theme: “That They All May Be One”

Leading Question: Is oneness (in Christ) so important that we should seek unity at any price?

In his famous “unity” prayer, Jesus asked that his disciples be “one,” just as Jesus and his Father are one. The unity of the Godhead looms large in Jesus’ prayer, and he uses that unity as a model for his disciples, a tall order, given the natural tendencies of human beings.

1. Question: In John 13, the chapter immediately preceding Jesus’ famous dialogue with his disciples (John 14-17). Jesus predicted Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial. Were these predictions locked in stone, or could either of them have been overturned if the people involved had chosen otherwise?

Comment: One of the most challenging issues for devout conservatives is “conditional” prophecy. If, to borrow Ellen White’s words, “The promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional” (1 SM 67), perhaps one could see both Judas’ fate and Peter’s denial as “conditional.” After all, Jonah preached an absolute message – “Forty days and Ninevah shall be destroyed” – that turned out to be conditional when the people repented.

2. Question: Is the washing of one another’s feet (John 13) the result of unity in Christ? Or is it potentially a first step toward unity?

Comment: Washing of the feet is certainly not one of the more alluring features of the Christian life. Perhaps it should always happen with plenty of advance warning as its fulfillment requires the preparation of the heart and soul ahead of time.

3. Question: Is the thrust of John 14-17, namely, the picture of Jesus presenting the Father to us (subjective atonement) rather than the Pauline picture of Jesus presenting us to the Father (objective atonement), a picture that trumps all other “pictures” in Scripture, or is simply one of several pictures that can open God’s will to us?

Comment: The doctrine of the atonement is certainly one of the most divisive issues in the church. In John 15:15, the key passage for devotees of the “subjective” atonement, Jesus declares, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” Yet other passages in the Gospels clearly call Jesus’ followers “servants” or even slaves. Luke 17:10-17 is one of the most vivid:

“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? 8 Would you not

rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? 9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’” (NRSV)

4. Question: Should our concern for “Oneness in Christ” focus solely on our own faith community or include others as well? If it is to be inclusive, on what basis do we make such a decision? Would Mark 9:38-41 and John 10:16 play an important role?

Mark 9:38-41: John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” 39 But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

John 10:16: I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Comment: Ellen White’s comment in her interpretation of the parable of the sheep and goats offers an astonishingly inclusive perspective. Remarkably, this passage was published in *The Desire of Ages* in 1898. There is nothing in her earlier writings that comes even remotely close to its inclusive thrust:

Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have **known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles.** Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have **cherished the spirit of kindness;** before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. **Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish.** Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. (*Desire of Ages*, 638)

It would seem that we could conclude that Ellen White became increasingly inclusive in her mature years.

Theme: The Key to Unity

Leading Question: Among believers today, does being “in Christ” transform everything?

The vision in the book of Ephesians is incredibly expansive, the memory text for this week makes this bold assertion: “And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth” (Eph. 1:10, NLT). Could one make an argument for universalism on the basis of this passage?

1. Question: According to the first chapter of Ephesians, God has a plan to bring *all* things together in him. Is that hyperbole, fantasy, or genuine hope?

Comment: Universalism has never found wide acceptance in Christian circles because it seems to fly in the face of a number of passages in Scripture and quite apart from the explicit statements of Scripture, the idea of promising rewards without the need of choice seems impractical. But can one make an argument for universalism based on the expansive statements from Ephesians? At the same time, one must tussle with the issue of predestination which also seems to be implied in the following verses:

Ephesians 1:3-14 (NRSV): Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

2. Question: Galatians 3:28 declares that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female.” But what does the New Testament tell us about those divisions? Does the New Testament itself testify to the fulfillment of that “promise”?

Comment: Of the three great subjugations noted in Galatians 3:28, the New Testament effectively addressed only the Jew/Greek issue, and that was with blood, sweat, and tears. Other divisions (racist, sexist) are still with us today. Even slavery was not addressed until nearly 2000 years after Christ.

3. Question: When Paul talks about breaking down the dividing wall (perhaps thinking of the walls that separated Jews and Gentiles at the temple), was he casting a vision that far transcended the actual reality in the New Testament Church? Note his line of reasoning in Ephesians 2:

Ephesians 2:11 - 22 (NRSV): 11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

4 Question: In each of the following areas that call for unity, how does the Pauline ideal match up with the reality in the church?

a. Unity as a whole.

Eph. 4:1-6 (NRSV): I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Comment: As the remainder of the book clearly indicates, Paul is not calling for lock-step uniformity, but a unity in diversity, as the next passage indicates with its description of a diversity of gifts:

b. Unity of gifts.

Ephesians 4:11-16 (NRSV): 11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. 14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Comment: If God doesn't give the same gifts to everyone, then we should realize that each of us will make unique and specialized contributions to the body of Christ, a theme that Paul develops further in 1 Corinthians 12.

c. Unity within the family.

Ephesians 5:21-33 (NRSV). 21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. 24 Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32 This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. 33 Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Comment: In some Bibles it is not clear that Ephesians 5:21 should be seen as a heading that applies to both husband and wife: “Be subject to one another.” When seen in that way, it should be difficult for Christian husbands to insist on “submission” or “obedience” from their spouses.

Summary: The book of Ephesians casts a wonderful vision of the whole creation united as one in Christ. That includes Jews and Gentiles, gifted leaders, and families. Tragically, the church often finds the fulfillment of that vision falling far short of the ideal.

Theme: The Experience of Unity in the Christian Church

Leading Question: With reference to unity, how should one assess the NT evidence: Positively? Negatively? Or as a toss-up?

In light of what one finds in the New Testament and in the history of Adventism, I have found one line to be both truthful and helpful: “God’s people have never had their act together for more than a few minutes at a time.”

1. Question: If one considers just Acts 1 and 2, what adjectives might one think appropriate for describing what these chapters depict?

Comment: Words like tumultuous, intense, and marvelous, come to mind as being appropriate for Acts 1 and 2. One moves from the intense spiritual preparation leading up to the Pentecost experience, to the startling gift of tongues, to the conflict with the authorities, to the miracles of healing, to the heart-warming conversion experiences and the egalitarian unity of the community. The record of astonishing events continues through Acts 4, climaxing in a report of the body as “being of one heart and soul” and being “without a needy person among them.”

Bur then comes the cold shower of Acts 5 and the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

2. Question: How should one respond to the criticism that God was overly harsh in his judgment on Ananias and Sapphira?

Comment: Whatever uneasiness moderns might experience with the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, the young Christian community was not deterred. Not only did the community grow, but miracles of healing multiplied. Acts 5 witnesses to the first of the New Testament prison deliverances. The Jewish authorities wanted to be much more severe with the disciples, but Gamaliel intervened. The disciples were flogged and released.

3. Question: After the selection of the deacons and their efforts to restore egalitarian sharing, what triggered the persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem?

Comment: The strong reaction against the preaching of one of the deacons triggered a wave of persecution. “All except the apostles were scattered through the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Thus evangelism continued to nurture the growth of the community, but over a much broader geographical basis.

4. Question: Is it puzzling and/or encouraging to note that the Jew/Gentile tensions that arose over the ministry to the Hebrew and Greek widows as recorded in Acts 6, did not erupt into a full-blown division between the Jewish and Gentile believers?

Comment: The official study guide lists a series of passages that document how the churches in Macedonia and Achaia ministered to the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem: Acts 11:27-30, Gal. 2:10, Rom. 15:26, 1 Cor. 16:1-4.

Summary: Despite apparent setbacks and what would seem like an inevitable division between the Jewish and Gentile believers, it was the Gentile churches who took the initiative to minister to their poor brethren in Jerusalem, a testimony to the leading and healing power of the Spirit in the early Christian community.

Theme: Images of Unity

Leading Question: How does the New Testament build on an Old Testament foundation when it comes to illustrating the idea of unity?

Although our overall theme of “Oneness in Christ” could be taken to suggest that one doesn’t really find oneness and unity until the appearance of the Incarnate God in the New Testament, some remarkable images in the Old Testament provide a bridge between the Testaments.

1. Question: To what extent are the images given in 1 Peter 2:9 (“chosen race,” “royal priesthood,” “holy nation,” “God’s own people”) rooted in the Old Testament?

Comment: In Exodus 19:5-6 one finds a list that could have easily been a major source of the images which are mentioned in 1 Peter 2:9: “my treasured possession,” “a priestly kingdom,” and “a holy nation.”

Even though the New Testament provides of a capstone revelation, indeed the clearest revelation of God, it is well for us to remember that the Old Testament was Jesus’ Bible and the Bible of the first Christian believers. The New Testament canon as we have it today was not fully settled until well into the fourth Christian century. Indeed, the first list of New Testament books that contains no more and no less than the 27 books in our canon is found in an Easter Letter from Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, to the churches under his jurisdiction.

The idea of a “people of God” is solidly rooted in the Old Testament. The New Testament builds on that foundation, illustrating it with further images, the most important being “the body of Christ.”

2. Question: In John 10:1-10, Jesus tells a story about sheep that leads to the idea of one sheepfold and one shepherd. Indeed, the idea of only one door to the sheepfold is part of the narrative. To what extent is that image inclusive and unifying or exclusive and divisive?

Comment: While some biblical images are more inclusive than others – the “body of Christ,” for example – the idea of community suggests a certain exclusiveness. In our world, a community that includes everyone would seem to counteract the very idea of community. “Family” is both inclusive and exclusive. In the end, however, the New Testament points in the direction a great *inclusive* through which cannot be numbered:

Revelation 5:13 (NRSV): Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

Revelation 7:9-10 (NRSV): After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no

one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

3. Question: Would it have been more persuasive for Paul to give us his “unity” metaphors in connection with a relatively trouble-free church like Philippians? Instead, his richest catalog of unity metaphors comes from correspondence with his most troubled church, the one at Corinth.

Comment: From Corinthians 3 and 12 come these four metaphors for unity, some of them overlapping with each other:

Agricultural metaphor: 3:6-9: 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. 9 For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

Comment: Both Paul and Apollos were the favorite preachers of different factions at Corinth (see 1 Cor. 1). But Paul saw himself as the front-line evangelist (the one who sowed) while Apollos was the pastor/nurturer (the one who watered). But God worked with both of them to give the growth.

Building metaphor: 3:9-15: 9 For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building. 10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. 14 If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15 If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

Comment: Paul slips directly from his agricultural metaphor (“God’s field”) to the building metaphor (“God’s building”). Both metaphors involve the use of a variety of God’s “servants” who employ differing talents. He picks up this theme again in chapter 12.

Temple Metaphor: 3:16-17: 16 Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? 17 If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Comment: This passage is not a health reform passage. The “you” here is plural, something that is not found in standard American English. In the American South, however, “Y’all” works quite well. But Paul slips from the building metaphor into

one that envisions the ultimate building, God's temple. And the community together is what makes God's temple.

Body Metaphor: 12:4-30: 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Comment: For Paul, diversity within the church is the essential element in establishing the unity of the church. Even the smallest member plays a key role.

Theme: When Conflicts Arise

Leading Question: How does a community, or an individual, know when a conflict is one that needs to be solved by firm confrontation, or by finding a way to allow both views to exist or co-exist within the community?

This week’s lesson addresses three specific instances when the early Christian community faced conflict, and worked their way through to a solution. These are represented by the narratives in Acts 6, 10, and 15.

1. Question: When it came to the distribution of food and other supplies to Jewish and Greek widows, the Greek widows claimed that they were not being treated fairly. Is the method that the church to address this issue (Acts 6) one that can benefit the church today?

Comment: The early Christians had apparently decided at this point that people of a non-Jewish origin could now be a part of the community, though the tension between the two seems to lurk in many parts of the New Testament. This approach of learning to live together stands in sharp contrast with the “solution” used at the time of Ezra/Nehemiah. In Ezra’s day, the women of foreign extraction were sent away with their children (see Nehemiah 13).

2. Question: In Acts 10, God used the image of eating unclean meat to teach Peter that he should call no *person* common or unclean (Acts 10:28). How could Peter safely come to this conclusion when there was no clear OT precedent for such an action?

Comment: Eating with Gentiles was something that Peter had never done before and he clearly was petrified at the prospect of doing what God had commanded him to do (cf. 10:28-29). Nothing in the Old Testament legal code could be seen as paving the way for this change, yet in the name of Jesus he vowed to move ahead, which he did. Acts indicates that it was the outpouring of the Spirit that was a convincing factor for Peter’s six Jewish companions. When they saw the Spirit being poured out on the Gentiles, Acts says that they were “astounded” (Acts 10:45). But there is more to the story in Acts 15.

3. Question: How does the method used in Acts 15 (“It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” 15:28), differ from the decision-making procedures in the Old Testament?

Comment: Decision-making in the Old Testament typically was authoritarian and top down. A possible exception could be seen in the days of Moses when, on the advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, Moses improved the decision-making process by the appointment of “able men” to help him and to decide minor cases (Exodus 18:21). But in the days of Joshua, to disagree with the

leader, Joshua, marked a person for execution (Josh 1:18), though the circumstances surrounding that fate is described more in terms of outright rebellion and disobedience, rather than mere disagreement.

The following article, originally published in the NPUC *Gleaner* in 1992, uses the model of a castle to illustrate the issues discussed in Acts 15.

“Pictures to Help You Study Your Bible: **THE CASTLE**”

By Alden Thompson

cf. *Gleaner*, August 3, 1992

The Castle is a picture to help you know who the true Adventists are. It's a picture about drawing lines and building boundaries. Sounds ominous, doesn't it? Given our Adventist tendency to stand off on a holy hill by ourselves, away from the troubled world, some will wince at what might appear to be an attempt to isolate us even further.

But not so fast. I believe our failure to talk candidly about boundaries is part of the reason why some Adventists are isolating themselves from the world at the same time that others are disappearing into it. And let's remember that even when we talk about boundaries, indeed, *especially* when we talk about boundaries, we must test everything by the Two great commands: Are we making it easier for us and for others to love God and each other?

But now to the Castle and its three important parts:

1. The Keep. This is the inner fortress, the safest and most secure part of the Castle. Here we find the core beliefs accepted by all. The first Adventists to organize a local conference (Michigan) put a simple church covenant in the Keep: "We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name of Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ" (M. E. Olsen, *The Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* [Takoma Park: Review and Herald, 1925 (3rd edition: 1932)], 251. That was it. Simple, clear, straightforward.

2. The Courtyard. Although not as safe as the Keep, the Courtyard still enjoys the security of the Castle complex. It allows more freedom than the Keep. The air is fresh; there's room to run, jump, and shout. The Courtyard is where Adventists discuss the meaning of what is in the Keep and ponder whether or not to put in something new or take out something old. Yet all such discussions are still within the Castle. You can be a good Adventist and run, jump, and shout in the Courtyard. Example? Belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ is in the Keep. But we discuss his divine/human nature in the Courtyard.

3. The Outer Wall. This is the great boundary that separates the church from the world and marks the Adventist position among Christians. Adventists who go beyond the Outer Wall can't enjoy the security of the Castle. They are no longer part of the community. Example? The Sabbath is in the Keep; but what it means and how one celebrates its sacred hours are matters for the Courtyard. If, however, someone no longer believes that the day is blessed by God, that person has moved beyond the Outer Wall.

The Castle picture won't please everyone. Conservatives would prefer one boundary, not two. The Keep would take over the Courtyard. But that's a recipe for splintering the church.

Liberals are tempted to move in the opposite direction and drop all boundaries. But is there any difference then between the church and the world? With nothing to join, no one would.

But now let's apply The Castle to Acts 15, the story of the Jerusalem Council. The Castle helps us visualize the difference between the "covenant" (Decalogue) which went *inside* the ark and the "statutes and ordinances" which went into a book *beside* the ark (Exod. 25:16; Deut. 4:13-14; 31:26).

"Covenant" God spoke to all from Sinai and wrote with His own finger on two stone tables. The church can't touch it. Ever. But Acts 15 shows how the church, under the guidance of the Spirit, can and must "touch" the other laws, moving them in and out of the keep and preserving unity through a certain diversity.

At the Council, circumcision was the issue: Must converts from a non-Jewish background be circumcised? Some believers, reflecting codebook-type thinking, argued that circumcision was still binding on all. Both Peter and Paul took the opposing view, however, arguing that non-Jews should be exempt.

After vigorous discussion and much prayer the Council came to some remarkable conclusions. The "official" preface indicates that it was a Church decision, guided by the Spirit: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28, NRSV). The Castle can help us visualize the four major results of the Council's action. I'll summarize them briefly here. (For further discussion see Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* [Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1991], 147-50; second edition, [Energion, 2016], 177-181)

1. An Old Testament law, circumcision, was taken from the Keep and put into the Courtyard. The Old Testament gives no hint that circumcision would cease. But the church concluded that it was indeed one of those divine laws that were only *temporary* applications of God's greater law of love.

2. A new law, prohibition of food offered to idols, was put into the Keep. Just as the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk (cf. Ex. 24:36) apparently addressed dangers raised by Canaanite fertility rites, so the prohibition against food offered to idols was significant in the emperor-worshiping Greco-Roman world. Moses didn't face this issue. The apostles did. That's why they put the prohibition into the Keep.

3. For practical reasons, Paul still circumcised Timothy, even though the Council had moved circumcision out of the Keep into the Courtyard. In order to be all things to all people, Paul still followed Jewish practice with Timothy, circumcising him so that he could work effectively among Jews (Acts 16:3).

4. Even though the Council had just put the prohibition against food offered to idols into the Keep, Paul was laying the groundwork for taking it out again. In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 Paul says that food offered to idols is only a problem to those who think it is. Today in North America Adventists don't check labels to see if the food was offered to idols. It's not an issue for us.

Adventists have always said that the One principle of Love, the Two great commands, and the Ten are in the Keep. But it's been harder to admit that not all God's commands stay in the Keep forever. I believe being honest with Scripture would help us identify other areas where we simply need to agree to disagree. Not all Adventists would be ready to say amen to that, at least not yet. But that's a topic for our next picture, the Pie.

In the meantime, the Castle reminds us that a few important things belong in the Keep. That's where we come together and say amen. But as a world church, we also need a Courtyard with fresh air, with room to run, jump and shout. May God grant us a safe Keep, a spacious Courtyard, and a solid Outer Wall. That will make His church strong until He comes to take us home.

Theme: Unity in Faith

Leading Question: Does a faith community decide issues of belief by democratic vote?

This week's lesson focuses on particular beliefs that are important to Seventh-day Adventists. They sometimes come under the heading of "landmarks."

The companion term to "landmark" is "present truth," truth that is cutting edge, new for the "present" time.

Adventism has always experienced a certain tension between those who want to call everything "landmark," even the smallest point, and those who are eager to explore the new. Ellen White fully affirmed the landmarks, but she opposed the impulse to call everything a landmark. In the great Righteousness by Faith General Conference in 1888, the two great issues that divided the delegates was whether the 10th horn in Daniel 7 was the Huns or the Alemanni, and whether the law in Galatians was the moral or ceremonial law.

While Ellen White affirmed the landmarks, her strongest words focused on the non-Christian spirit which was driving the delegates. The following two quotes vividly express her concerns:

The remark was made, "If our views of Galatians are not correct, then we have not the third angel's message and our position goes by the board; there is nothing to our faith." I said, "Brethren, here is the very thing I have been telling you. This statement is not true. It is an extravagant, exaggerated statement. If it is made in the discussion of this question I shall feel it my duty to set this matter before all that are assembled, and whether they hear or forbear, tell them the statement is incorrect. The question at issue is not a vital question and should not be treated as such. The wonderful importance and magnitude of this subject has been exaggerated. For this reason--through misconception and perverted ideas--we see the spirit that prevails at this meeting, which is unchristlike, and which we should never see exhibited among brethren. There has been a spirit of Pharisaism coming in among us which I shall lift my voice against wherever it may be revealed.... [221] And for the first time I began to think it might be we did not hold the correct views after all upon the law in Galatians, for the truth required no such spirit to sustain it. (EGW MS 24, 1888 [EGW1888 1:220-221])

I returned to my room questioning what was the best course for me to pursue. Many hours that night were spent in prayer in regard to the law in Galatians. This was a mere mote. Whichever way was in accordance with a "Thus saith the Lord," my soul would say, Amen, and Amen. But the spirit that was controlling our brethren was so unlike the spirit of Jesus, so contrary to the spirit that should be exercised toward each other, it filled my soul with anguish. (EGW MS 24, 1888 [EGW1888 1:223])

Question: Is it more important to know what our significant beliefs are or how we arrived at

those beliefs? Can we do both? These two questions give us our starting point for our lesson.

Comment: In 1889 when the issue of landmarks was being agitated by those who wanted a longer list, Ellen White described the experience of those formative years and concisely summarized the landmarks. The very point she was trying to get across was how *short* the list of landmarks actually was:

The passing of the time in 1844 was a period of great events, opening to our astonished eyes the cleansing of the sanctuary transpiring in heaven, and having decided relation to God's people upon the earth, [also] the first and second angels' messages and the third, unfurling the banner on which was inscribed, "The commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." One of the landmarks under this message was the temple of God, seen by His truth-loving people in heaven, and the ark containing the law of God. The light of the Sabbath of the fourth commandment flashed its strong rays in the pathway of the transgressors of God's law. The nonimmortality of the wicked is an old landmark. I can call to mind nothing more that can come under the head of the old landmarks. All this cry about changing the old landmarks is all imaginary. – Ms 13, 1889 (*Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 30-31)

Obviously, the 1844 experience was crucial, especially its link with the Adventist understanding of what was happening in the heavenly sanctuary. She cited Revelation 11:19: “And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.” The three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 also loomed large, especially the last line of the third angel’s message that refers to the “commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.”

The sanctuary doctrine was crucial because it highlighted the ark of God in heaven and the three angels’ messages seem to have been most important because of its reference to the “commandments” and the “faith of Jesus.”

Also intriguing is her phrase, “nonimmortality of the wicked,” not the more generic “immortality of the soul.” Her rationale is reflected in two vivid quotes from *The Great Controversy*, namely a concern for the reputation of a God would burn people forever:

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

“How repugnant to every emotion of love and mercy, and even to our sense of justice, is the doctrine that the wicked dead are tormented with fire and brimstone in an eternally burning hell; that for the sins of a brief earthly life they are to suffer torture as long as God shall live.” – GC 335

When the early Adventists selected a formal name, they chose to focus on Sabbath and Advent as a way of distinguishing themselves from other Christians. And the simplicity of their belief structure is reflected in the covenant they used when they began to organize their first churches in 1861:

“We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ [Rev. 14:12].” – published in *Review and Herald*, October 8, 1861 (*SDAE* [1996] 416)

The next to last lesson in this quarter will bring us back to the question of *how* we arrive at these beliefs as the theme is “Church Organization.” But for purposes of discussion, we can note the beliefs that are listed as important in the official study guide, under these major headings:

Salvation in Jesus

Second Coming of Christ

Jesus’ Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary

Sabbath

Death and Resurrection

In short, the lesson seeks to give a list of important Adventist beliefs, not a list of landmarks as originally understood by our Adventist pioneers. I would heartily agree that those beliefs are important, but they are formulated in a way that meets the needs of modern Adventists. Thus one finds a clearer focus on Salvation and Jesus’ ministry on our behalf. Could one say that the Adventist interest in “present truth” is reflected in the official study guide? That’s good. But we also need to remember the historical origins of our key beliefs.

Theme: The Most Convincing Proof

Leading Question: What thought immediately comes to mind when one hears the theme of our lesson for this week, “The Most Convincing Proof?”

For those who are familiar with the writings of Ellen White, Adventism’s charismatic founder, a well-known quote immediately comes to mind: “The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian” – *Ministry of Healing* (1905), 470.

In the published writings of Ellen White, the first recorded use of the phrase “loving and lovable” with reference to the believer’s behavior is this one: “God would have us more kind, more loving and lovable, less critical and suspicious. O that we all might have the Spirit of Christ, and know how to deal with our brethren and neighbors! – *Review and Herald*, February 24, 1891. Why did it take her so long in coming to that sharp focus? Because of the tenacious and often erratic impact of sin on human beings.

The fact that our lessons on “Unity” this quarter focus on “Oneness in Christ,” suggests that the ideal of oneness comes clearest in the life and ministry of Christ. It is worth noting that the Gospels record no violent acts in connection with Jesus’ life on earth. He killed no one, he never struck anyone. Even when he cleansed the temple, he attacked the furniture, not the people (Reynolds Price). Jesus constantly used the Old Testament. It was his Bible. But he never attempted to explain the violence of the Old Testament. Even the apostles don’t seem to have as clear a focus on gentle love as Jesus did. The story of Ananias and Sapphira involved Peter, not Jesus. But now let’s turn to Scripture and explore our theme for this week.

1. Question: What does the New Testament teach as the “most convincing proof”?

Comment: From the Gospels and epistles these passages come to mind. They are all ones that include a focus on how we treat people:

Matthew 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (NRSV)

Matthew 22:36-40: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (NRSV)

John 13:35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (NRSV)

1 John 3:18: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (NRSV)

1 John 3:23: “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.” (NRSV)

Interestingly enough, when Jesus summarized his teaching most succinctly, he focused on his second great command: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). Paul does the same thing in Galatians 5:14: For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (NRSV)

2. Question: What would constitute the “most convincing proof” for someone who has a more rigorous view of God as a starting point?

Comment: Three examples can highlight the issue. One is from Scotland, one from the US, and one from Africa:

Scotland: Sister Ferrier, a new convert to Adventism from the very rigorous “wee Free Church,” told me that when she first became an Adventist, she could not appreciate *The Desire of Ages* at first because it was too gentle. *The Great Controversy* was her favorite. It took several years before she could appreciate DA. Every year, this dear sister would stand in front of the Edinburgh church, asking the saints to pray for her because she was taking her holiday to Albania and would be smuggling Bibles into the country illegally.

It was clear to all that she was deeply vexed, hyperventilating as she fervently made her request to the church members. And she was troubled when they tried to talk her out of going. “All I asked of them was that they pray for me,” she said. “And they tried to talk me out of it.” When I questioned her, she said that from her “wee free” upbringing, she had learned that whatever she found most difficult, that would be what God was requiring her to do.

United States: Donna Coffeen was hired as a teacher at a special school for young people in the Walla Walla Valley who had been convicted of a felony. They were in prison and only had contact with people when they came to this special school.

One day a young woman asked her, “Mrs. Coffeen, how often does your husband beat you?”

“He doesn’t beat me,” responded Mrs. C. “He loves me.”

After a pause, the young woman replied, “I feel sorry for you, Mrs. C. In my life, my parents beat me to show that they cared for me. My boy friend beats me to show that he cares about me, the gang beats me to show that I belong. I feel sorry for you, Mrs. C, that your husband doesn’t love you.”

Africa: A former colleague in the School of Theology, John Brunt, told of a conversation he had with a black African. While he was at the seminary in the US, he became

convinced that he should go back to Africa and convince his fellow Adventist men that they shouldn't beat their wives. He won them over and they stopped beating their wives. But then the wives began complaining that their husbands didn't love them any more because they had stopped beating them.

In short, all the violence in the Bible may represent first steps in moving toward a belief in a God who didn't kill anyone and didn't even strike anyone. Even Paul presented the choice to the believers in Corinth: "What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" (1 Cor. 4:21, NRSV)

Theme: Unity *and* Broken Relationships

Leading Question: What biblical stories of restored relationships are most powerful for you?

Our lesson for this week focuses on two New Testament experiences and then several passages of Scripture to show how unity can be restored when a relationship is healed.

1. Question: Paul rejected John Mark as a suitable “missionary” – because he abandoned an earlier assignment (see Acts 15:36 - 41). What is significant about his restoration? (2 Tim. 4:11)?

Acts 15:36-41: 36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” 37 Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. 39 The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

2 Tim. 4:11: Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry.

Comment: It is notable that the man who taught us so much about grace had to learn to extend grace and forgiveness to John Mark.

The story of the escaped slave, Onesimus, and his restoration to his master through the ministry of Paul, is one of the most touching restoration stories in Scripture.

Philemon 4-22: 4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9 yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but I preferred

to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

22 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

2. Question: Is forgiveness something that can be commanded? Or is it, like repentance (cf. 5:31), a gift of God?

Comment: C. S. Lewis illustrates from his own experience, the position that forgiveness is not something that responds to human effort. Here is an excerpt from *Letters to Malcolm*:

I really must digress to tell you a bit of good news. Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered – or felt as if I did – that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might. When the thing actually happened – sudden as the longed-for cessation of one’s neighbour’s radio – my feeling was “But it’s so easy. Why didn’t you do it ages ago?” So many things are done easily the moment you can do them at all. But till then, sheerly impossible, like learning to swim. There are months during which no efforts will keep you up; then comes the day and hour and minute after which, and ever after, it becomes almost impossible to sink. It also seemed to me that forgiving (that man’s cruelty) and being [106/107] forgiven (my resentment) were the very same thing. “Forgive and you shall be forgiven” sounds like a bargain. But perhaps it is something much more. By heavenly standards, that is, for pure intelligence, it is perhaps a tautology – forgiving and being forgiven are two names for the same thing. The important thing is that a discord has been resolved, and it is certainly the great Resolver who has done it. Finally, and perhaps best of all, I believed anew what is taught us in the parable of the Unjust Judge. No evil habit is so ingrained nor so long prayed against (as it seemed) in vain, that it cannot, even in dry old age, be whisked away. – *Letters to Malcolm*, XX.1 (pp. 106-107)

Even if forgiveness cannot be commanded, it is still something we must “practice.” It is, after all, firmly embedded in the Lord’s Prayer. Henri Nouwen illustrates the necessity of forgiveness with these moving words:

Forgiveness is the name of love among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all of us love poorly. We do not even know what we are doing when we hurt others. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour -- unceasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family. – Henri Nouwen, *Weavings* vii.2, March/April, 1992

Finally, we should note the deep passions that are inevitably linked with forgiveness. C. S. Lewis links the passionate nature of God's wrath with our reconciliation to him:

I fully grant you that "wrath" can be attributed to God only by an analogy. The situation of the penitent before God isn't, but is somehow like, that of one appearing before a justly angered sovereign, lover, father, master, or teacher. But what more can we know about it than just this likeness? Trying to get in behind the analogy, you go further and fare worse. You suggest that what is traditionally regarded as our experience of God's anger would be more helpfully regarded as what inevitably happens to us if we behave inappropriately towards a reality of immense power. As you say, "the live wire doesn't feel angry with us, but if we blunder against it we get a shock."

My dear Malcolm, what do you suppose you have gained by substituting the image of a live wire for that of angered majesty? You have shut us all up in despair; for the angry can forgive, and electricity can't.

And you give as your reason that "even by analogy the sort of pardon which arises because a fit of temper is spent cannot worthily be attributed to God nor gratefully accepted by man." But the belittling words "fit of temper" are your own choice. Think of the fullest reconciliation between mortals. Is cool disapproval coolly assuaged? Is the culprit let down lightly in view of "extenuating circumstances"? Was peace restored by a moral lecture? Was the offence said not to "matter"? Was it hushed up or passed over? Blake knew better:

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end. [96/97]
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

You too know better. Anger – no peevish fit of temper, but just, generous scalding indignation – passes (not necessarily at once) into embracing, exultant, re-welcoming love. That is how friends and lovers are truly reconciled. Hot wrath, hot love. Such anger is the fluid that love bleeds when you cut it. The *angers*, not the measured remonstrances, of lovers are love's renewal. Wrath and pardon are both, as applied to God, analogies; but they belong together to the same circle of analogy – the circle of life, and love, and deeply personal relationships. All the liberalizing and "civilizing" analogies only lead us astray. Turn God's wrath into mere enlightened disapproval, and you also turn His love into mere humanitarianism. The "consuming fire" and the "perfect beauty" both vanish. We have, instead, a judicious headmistress or a conscientious magistrate. It comes of being high-minded. – C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (1963), 96-97

3. Question: Is Jesus' prayer for his enemies on the cross a viable model for humans?

Comment: In key ways, Jesus cannot be a model for us. He, for example, never had to struggle with the aftermath of broken promises. And the divine pattern of reconciliation which he demonstrated (described in Romans 5:8-11) presents us with powerful imagery. But it is not something we can imitate.

Romans 5:6-11(NRSV): 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 9 Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11 But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Theme: Unity in Worship

Leading Question: Given the wide variety of worship preferences and styles, is it possible even to speak of “unity in worship” this side of heaven?

Interestingly enough, the official study guide completely avoids any discussion of music, in our day, the most vexed question that arises in connection with worship. Here is the list of headings from the official study guide. Is there anything else missing besides music?

Worshiping our Creator and Redeemer

False Worship

First Angel’s Message

Bible Study and Fellowship

Breaking of Bread and Prayer

It may be helpful to work through various aspects of worship behavior, looking at both sides of some contrasting pairs, seeking to illustrate both sides from Scripture:

1. Loud and Noisy vs. Silent and Sedate

Habakkuk 2:20: The Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him. (NRSV)

1 Kings 19:11-12: 11 He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. (NRSV)

Deut. 5:22-27: 22 These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me. 23 When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you approached me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders; 24 and you said, “Look, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. 25 So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? 27 Go near, you yourself, and

hear all that the Lord our God will say. Then tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it.” (NRSV)

Isaiah 6:1-8: 6 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. 2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 5 And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (NRSV)

Psalms 150: Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

3 Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

5 Praise him with clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord! (NRSV)

2. Spontaneous vs. Structured

Comment: On the side of “structure,” we could place the acrostic Psalms (e.g. Ps. 119) and the acrostic laments in Lamentations. These would represent a very measured and highly structured form of worship. And here we could cite C. S. Lewis’ quote in favor of structured public prayer:

The advantage of a fixed form of service is that we know what is coming. *Ex tempore* public prayer has this difficulty; we don't know whether we can mentally join in it until we've heard it -- it might be phoney or heretical. We are therefore called upon to carry on a *critical* and a *devotional* activity at the same moment: two things hardly compatible. In

a fixed form we ought to have 'gone through the motions' before in our private prayers; the rigid form really sets our devotions *free*. I also find the more rigid it is, the easier it is to keep one's thoughts from straying. Also it prevents getting too completely eaten up by whatever happens to be the preoccupation of the moment (i.e. war, an election, or what not). The *permanent* shape of Christianity shows through. I don't see how the *ex tempore* method can help becoming provincial, and I think it has a great tendency to direct attention to the minister rather than to God. – C. S. Lewis, *Letters*, 239 (to a lady, 1 April 1952)

3. Prostrate vs. Active and Standing

Luke 18:9-14: 9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (NRSV)

1 Timothy 2:8: 8 I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument. (NRSV)

4. Praise vs. Lament

Jeremiah 18: 19-23: Please, Lord, answer my prayer. Make my enemies stop accusing me of evil. 20 I tried to help them, but they are paying me back by digging a pit to trap me. I even begged you not to punish them. 21 But now I am asking you to let their children starve or be killed in war. Let women lose their husbands and sons to disease and violence. 22 These people have dug pits and set traps for me, Lord. Make them scream in fear when you send enemy troops to attack their homes. 23 You know they plan to kill me. So get angry and punish them! Don't ever forgive their terrible crimes. (CEV)

The last word: After all that, should we add music to the list to be discussed in Sabbath School? In short, there is much more diversity in Scripture than most of us can handle. But it still belongs to appropriate ways of worshiping God.

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Church Organization and Unity

Leading Question: Does the Bible tell us anything at all that applies to church organization?

Perhaps the most significant words from Jesus that relate to church organization are found in his response to the request of James and John and their mother that the two brothers be granted the highest places in the kingdom. This is Matthew's version of the conversation:

Matthew 20:20-28: 20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (NRSV)

Comment: Here is God incarnate giving the example of servant leadership. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus command his followers to worship him. He came to serve, not to be served.

1. Question: How might the experience of Moses and Jethro, his father-in-law, during Israel's wilderness wandering inform modern church organization? Is organization simply a practical matter or are their theological implications?

Exodus 18:13-27: 13 The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. 14 When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" 15 Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." 17 Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19 Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent

the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; 20 teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. 21 You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. 22 Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.”

24 So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. 25 Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. 26 And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. 27 Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country. (NRSV)

Comment: While the purpose of organization is practical, the theological implications become significant when practical matters involve other people and are handled in God’s name.

2. Question: How are the practical and theological implications reflected in the first General Conference, as reported in Acts 15?

Comment: Acts 15:28 is the key verse that describes how the “delegates” related to the issues and the people involved: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”

3. Question: Do the contrasting features of the “works of the flesh” and the “fruit of the Spirit” have a bearing on church organization?

Galatians 5:19-26: 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Comment: Note the reference to “competing against one another, envying one another” in vs. 26, precisely the problem that Jesus and the disciples experienced when James and John asked for the top positions in Jesus’ kingdom.

Adventist Postscript

Early Adventism has much to offer the church today in terms of how to relate organization, leadership, and the Bible. It wasn't until 1980 that Adventists began "voting" on beliefs, a practice which seemed innocent at the time, but has turned into a dangerous procedure. The two documents that are most crucial from early Adventism is first, the original Covenant which was used by the early Adventists when they first began organizing churches in 1861, and second, the preamble to our first unofficial statement of beliefs in 1872. Those are reproduced below:

"We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ [Rev. 14:12]." – Adopted in 1861 at the organizing session of the first SDA conference (Michigan), recommended for use in the organization of local churches; published in *Review and Herald*, October 8, 1861 (*SDAE* [1996] 416)

In presenting to the public this synopsis of our faith, we wish to have it distinctly understood that **we have no articles of faith, creed, or discipline, having any authority with our people, nor is it designed to secure uniformity among them**, as a system of faith, but is a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them. We often find it necessary to meet inquiries on this subject, and sometimes to correct false statements circulated against us, and to remove erroneous impressions which have obtained with those who have not had an opportunity to become acquainted with our faith and practice. Our only object is to meet this necessity. – **From the preamble** to the 1872 (unofficial) "Declaration of the Fundamental Principles Taught and Practiced by the Seventh-day Adventists" (Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, Battle Creek Mich., 1872).

Theme: Final Restoration of Unity

Leading Question: What is your favorite passage that points to the final restoration of unity?

These are the crucial features of the Adventist hope:

Return of Jesus

Promise of a restored (vegetarian!) kingdom.

Resurrection

Life in a new world

From the writings of Ellen White, the last paragraphs of the book *The Great Controversy* capture the vision of Adventism:

And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of his character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption, and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise. {GC88 678.1}

“And every creature which is in Heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.” [Revelation 5:13.] {GC88 678.2}

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love. {GC88 678.3}

The hope of restoration is not held by Adventists alone. C. S. Lewis shared the hope:

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

Guesses, of course, only guesses. If they are not true, something better will be. For ‘we know that we shall be made like Him, for we shall see Him as He is’ [1 Jn. 3:2]. – *Letters to Malcolm*, 124.