



# REFLECTIONS

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## THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

# Is God Responsible for COVID-19?

By Kwabena Donkor

**W**ith the challenge of COVID-19 has come questions and statements about the role of God in natural disasters and pandemic outbreaks. Some question why such disasters occur and whether the 2020 coronavirus is God’s means of drawing humanity’s attention to His sovereignty. Others have said that the virus is God’s “angel of death” in seeking justice for practices such as homosexuality and transgenderism. But is God really responsible for the deadly coronavirus epidemic?

The attribution of pandemics to God does not arise in a vacuum since, as some see it, in Luke 21:10 Jesus made a prediction about the occurrence of pestilences before His advent. Kourtney Kardashian read 2 Chronicles 7:13 and on her Instagram announced the text to mean that God would punish an evil world with an epidemic. Kardashian, therefore, draws a direct link between the text and the current epidemic. Indeed, there are several passages of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, that seem to suggest it is God who brings plagues and pestilences on His covenant people because of their disobedience (e.g., Jer 14:12; Ezek 14:21; Amos 4:10). Yet, there are passages in Psalms that suggest we ought not to draw such a direct causative connection between God and every plague or pestilence. One such passage is Psalm 91, for example, where the psalmist presents God as the one who provides a shelter or refuge from, among other things, plagues that do not seem to originate from Him. Indeed, it is suggested that the “it” in Psalm 91:7, referring to the pestilence and destruction of Psalm 91:6 that causes thousands to fall, could refer to plagues that frequently broke out during military campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

The issue at the heart of the question in this short discussion is the relationship between divine and natural causality—namely, whether *God* is the cause of the coronavirus epidemic or whether it is the result of *natural causes*. Implied in this discussion is the broader subject of theodicy—the seeming challenge one confronts in presuming, as Christians do, the coexistence of an infinitely good, loving, and omnipotent God and occurrence of “evil” such as coronavirus in the natural world. Evil for this purpose is defined as events that have detrimental impact on humans. Unless one is willing to accept the proposition that because God is omnipotent, He must be held responsible for whatever happens in the world, the answer to the question of whether God is responsible for the current coronavirus calls for careful analysis.

### Biblical Principles to Take Into Account<sup>2</sup>

From a biblical point of view, to simply take certain biblical passages that seem to suggest that God on occasion brought pestilences to discipline His covenant people, concluding thereby that pestilences such as COVID-19 are the punitive acts of God, oversimplifies the problem. The biblical viewpoint is rather complex and requires the consideration of several important principles that ought to bear on the discussion.

### Goodness of God

First, the Bible is unequivocally clear in affirming the reality of a personal God who, besides being omnipotent, is surpassingly good. The goodness of God is not just one of His attributes; it is a depiction of His very essence (Exod 33:18–20). His nature is inherently good. The psalmist invites humans to “taste and see

that the LORD is good” (Ps 34:8).<sup>3</sup> It is this essential goodness that God displayed in His creative acts. The Genesis 1 creation account describes God as bringing things into being with the divine word, repeatedly affirming alternately, “God said,” “and it was good.” Robert Jensen observes that in the Genesis story “the ‘and it was good’ belongs to the creative act itself: things are in that they are judged good by God.”<sup>4</sup> So, the psalmist declares of God, “You are good, and what you do is good” (Ps 119:68). Consequently, God’s goodness implies that His purposes for humanity are good. Thus, James declares that God, our Heavenly Father, desires only good for us: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (Jas 1:17). Significantly, from Romans 8:28, God’s goodness is to be judged from God’s perspective: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” It is in this light that God’s interaction with Israel, including His disciplinary actions, ought to be understood and evaluated.

In answering the question about God’s relationship to natural disasters, therefore, it is imperative to keep in perspective the biblical view of the goodness of God. Any answer to the question about the origin of natural disasters such as the coronavirus that fails to reckon with God’s goodness towards the world is, to that extent, defective.

### Human Free Will

The second biblical principle to be acknowledged in responding to the question about divine and natural causality is human freedom and the responsibility that accompanies the exercise of human free will. It is manifestly clear in the Bible that God has granted humans the freedom to make choices that are not coerced—even by God Himself. And the free choices that humans make are accompanied either by life or destructive outcomes. Thus, in concluding His covenant with the Israelites, God seems to set before them the facts and dynamics of creaturely existence: “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways . . . then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed” (Deut 30:15–18). The consequence and apparent inevitability of wrong choices leading to death and destruction seem evident when God discloses to His people, “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? . . . Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live” (Ezek 18:23, 31–32). While we are not told precisely *how* wrong choices lead to destruction, it seems that they are able to originate

evils that impact not only humans, but the rest of God’s creation. The account of the fall in Genesis 3 shows that because of man’s disobedience, the whole world—animals, plants, and the ground—no longer embodies the goodness with which it was originally endowed. Significantly, in Isaiah 24:5, the sinful actions of Israel defiled the earth.

So, as we consider the question of whether God is responsible for the coronavirus, it is relevant that we keep in mind the biblical truth about human free will and choices as well as the consequences that such choices have on all reality.

### The Natural World

The truth of the biblical principle regarding human free will and choices outlined above leads to a third factor that needs to be considered when answering the question about divine and natural causation. This factor has to do with the reality of our natural world out of which natural disasters proceed. Romans 8:19–23 expresses profoundly God’s plan for the natural world. The passage depicts the present corruption of the natural world and the eschatological vision that awaits it. The biblical facts about nature in its current state is that “creation was subjected to futility” (Rom 8:20) and as a result it is in “bondage to decay” (Rom 8:20) and “has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom 8:22), awaiting its eventual redemption (Rom 8:20). Thus, while the natural world is not itself disobedient to God, Adam’s sin had the cosmic effect of bringing the created order into bondage to death, decay, corruption, and futility (Rom 8:20–21). In other words, while “in the things of nature, marred as they are by the blight of sin, much that is beautiful remains,”<sup>5</sup> nature does not now possess the condition it originally had when it was created.

The biblical portrayal of nature as embodying decay, corruption, and futility is a fact that cannot be overlooked in any account of disasters that arise from nature.

### The Reality of Evil

The fourth biblical principle that should be recognized regarding divine and natural causality in natural disasters is the reality of evil itself. The Bible does not relegate evil to the realm of non-reality by treating it merely as a “privation of the good” or a strictly psychological phenomenon. The biblical view of the reality of evil is connected with a *real* celestial being, Lucifer, in whose heart evil originated (Ezek 28:15; Isa 14:13–14). This is the devil or Satan who is depicted in the Bible as one who, though possessed with limited power, has the ability to foment trouble and cause destruction in both humans and the natural world (see, for example, Job 1:13–19). In the New Testament Satan is depicted as the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 16:11; cf. 14:30; 1 John 5:19) whose work is at cross purposes with the God of the Bible. Perhaps nowhere is Satan’s intentions more clearly portrayed than in Christ’s parable of wheat and tares (Matt 13:24–30). The answer “An enemy has done

this!” (Matt 13:28) to the question, “Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?” (Matt 13:27) suggests that, on occasion, evil is the work of an adversary (Satan) who opposes the Master (God). Despite the anti-supernatural tendencies of contemporary Enlightenment-influenced cultures, the Bible presents Satan and his fallen angelic hosts (Rev 12:4) as constituting a causal factor in the reality of the evil that manifests itself in the world.

### Toward a Comprehensive Answer

In attempting to answer the question, from a biblical perspective, of whether God is responsible for the coronavirus, we have come to the point where a comprehensive answer is required, taking into account the goodness of God, the reality of human free will, the actuality of evil in the post-fall natural world, and the reality of evil itself as depicted in the Bible. How does one bring all these biblical principles to bear on the problem of natural disasters such as the coronavirus? The Seventh-day Adventist view of the Bible’s “philosophy of history,” which is commonly referred to as the cosmic conflict or great controversy between good and evil motif, provides a model with which to correlate the four biblical principles outlined above. In this model, God is *not* presented in the Bible as determining everything that happens in the world. It is therefore premature to conclude, in the face of a natural disaster such as the coronavirus, that God is responsible for it as a means of punishing sinners. Evil in the natural world may have causes other than God’s direct action, but in His providential rule over creation He brings all things to work toward creation’s goodness (Rom 8:28). In addition, the exercise of human free will is able to bring about evil consequences contrary to God’s desires for the well-being of His creation (Isa 66:4), and Satanic agencies are able to wreak havoc and bring about calamities, including loss of life through natural causes as in the case of the destruction of Job’s children. This capability on Satan’s part should not be surprising, since the entrance of sin in the world through Satan introduced decay and futility into the natural order, such as to make it subject to vulnerabilities. That Satan

is allowed to carry out such evil schemes, albeit within limited parameters, suggests the operation of what appears to be some “rules of engagement in the conflict.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, because the central issue in the cosmic conflict involves God’s character, it appears that the omnipotent God, by self-limitation, curtails His power to act unilaterally to bring about His desires.

The Bible, however, predicts a time when the controversy will come to an end, sin and Satan will be eliminated, and a new heaven and earth will be brought into being (Rev 20–21). Then, God’s goodness and love will be vindicated when “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 will flow life, and light, and gladness, throughout the realms of unlimited space . . . and from the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy will declare that God is love.”<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> M. E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 20, *Psalms 51–100* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 455.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard W. Kropf, “Natural Disaster or ‘Act of God’: The Search for the Missing Link in Theodicy,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 57–65. Kropf sees the significance of recognizing principles similar to the perspective presented in this study, but comes to the conclusion that the theory of evolution offers “the only way of establishing a linkage that can account for all or most of the types of suffering experienced by the human race” (*ibid.*, 63).

<sup>3</sup> All biblical quotations are from NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Jensen, “Aspects of a Doctrine of Creation,” in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History, and Philosophy*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 291.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the nature of the cosmic conflict and the possibility of “rules of engagement,” see John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 87–118. On specific biblical references hinting at rules of engagement, see p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 678.

# APOCALYPTIC FICTION IN TIMES OF COVID-19

By Elias Brasil de Souza

**T**imes of global upheaval, like the current COVID-19 pandemic, provide a fertile ground for apocalyptic speculation. Before we draw eschatological implications from COVID-19, we should remember that many other epidemics and pandemics have afflicted the human race throughout history. In 430 BC a devastating plague believed to be typhus struck Athens. It

began during the Peloponnesian War and lasted three years, killing possibly as many as seventy-five thousand or one hundred thousand people—about a quarter of the city’s population.<sup>1</sup> As the plague ravished the city, many Athenians gave themselves up to the unbridled gratification of their carnal instincts. Seeing that all stripes of people were perishing, “they judged that piety and impiety came to the same thing, and . . . no one

expected that he would live to be called to account and pay the penalty of his misdeeds.”<sup>2</sup>

In AD 541 the Byzantine world was hit by what has been dubbed the world’s first true pandemic. Known as the Plague of Justinian, it was caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* and killed millions of people.<sup>3</sup> The plague heightened eschatological expectations as some believed that the six thousandth year from creation would have fallen between AD 492 and 508. Thus, many saw the plague as foreboding Jesus’ coming and the last judgment.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1340s, the Plague of Justinian rose its ugly head again, but this time with a new name: the Black Death. Nothing like it had ever happened before; it struck Europe with merciless fury, killing a third of its population and erasing entire towns from the map.<sup>5</sup> Some saw the plague as a demonstration of God’s judgment upon sin and “a precursor to the end of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1918 an influenza virus emerged that killed more people than any other outbreak of disease in human history. Although the Black Death of the 1300s killed a much larger proportion of the population, in raw numbers influenza killed more than the plague, and even more than AIDS has today. Epidemiologists estimate that it “caused at least fifty million deaths worldwide, and possibly as many as one hundred million.”<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, influenza also sparked its fair share of religious frenzy, acting as a “powerful midwife to prophetism and eschatological belief.”<sup>8</sup>

Other plagues could be mentioned, but this sketch will suffice to indicate two points: On the one hand we learn that humanity’s struggle with the microbial world is by no means unique to COVID-19. Indeed, humans have been under the sword of microscopic enemies since the entrance of sin. On the other hand, like other major crises—such as war—pandemics can spark eschatological frenzies, and even in the post-Enlightenment world some people remain vulnerable to apocalyptic speculations. Rather than an eschatological trigger of the last events, COVID-19 may be better perceived as an indication of the ravaging effects of sin in the world.

Unfortunately, an adverse side effect of COVID-19 has been the upsurge of sensationalist interpretations of biblical eschatology. One case in point lies in the ideas propagated by Walter Veith, a South African zoologist and Seventh-day Adventist author and speaker who runs the Amazing Discoveries media ministry.<sup>9</sup> To press home the argument that the end of the world is imminent, Veith builds an eschatological scenario by correlating current events with quotes from Ellen G. White and biblical passages. With the creativity of a fiction writer, Veith puts together conspiracy theories merged with an idiosyncratic understanding of Adventist eschatology to convey the message that the end is near. In principle there should be no problem in proclaiming the imminence of Jesus’ soon coming; this remains a vital component of the gospel message and the blessed hope of the church. The problem lies in

the fact that Veith’s exposition consists of 1) concocting conspiracy theories based on the news headlines and 2) postulating a time frame for the end of the world.<sup>10</sup> The critique that follows addresses these two aspects of Veith’s teachings and should not be construed as an evaluation of his person, Christian experience, or motives.

### Conspiracy Theories

In his presentation, Veith pays lip service to the historicist position but seems more concerned with advancing speculations concerning the correlation of current events with biblical prophecy. Although correctly recognizing that Jesus related the “abomination of the desolation” to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Veith reapplies the abomination of the desolation to the future implementation of the Sunday law. In doing so, he overlooks the historicist view that has related the abomination of the desolation to the work of papal Rome and the oppression of God’s people during the 1260 years mentioned in Daniel and Revelation.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, Veith’s interpretation comes much closer to a futuristic rather than historicist understanding of apocalyptic prophecy.

To make his prophetic scenario look plausible, Veith argues that the United States president Donald Trump, the vice president Mike Pence, and Anthony Fauci—who serves as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases—are part of a Jesuit conspiracy to restore Roman Catholic dominance over the world. That all three men are currently involved in the enforcement of COVID-19 regulations would be a sign that the last events are upon us. But on what grounds does Veith make such an inference? For Veith the evidence seems clear: all three men have studied in Jesuit schools and thus must be part of a Jesuit scheme to restore Roman Catholicism to its former glory. Indeed, Trump and Fauci have studied in Jesuit schools and Mike Pence has a Catholic background.<sup>12</sup> But to argue that these factors make them part of a large Roman Catholic plan to restore its former power cannot be sustained with serious arguments.

In the same vein, Veith also understands the appointment of William Barr (a Roman Catholic) to serve in the position of United States attorney general as another step in this Roman Catholic machination. According to Veith, Barr allegedly reinstated the death penalty; since the second beast of Revelation (the United States) would make use of the death penalty, Veith understands Barr’s appointment to have prophetic implications. Indeed, Barr reinstated the death penalty for the “executions of five death-row inmates convicted of murdering . . . children and the elderly.”<sup>13</sup> But the idea that Barr’s action has a bearing on the prophecy of Revelation 13 strains credibility. Following the same logic, Veith also sees the Supreme Court appointment of Brett Kavanaugh—who happens to be a Roman Catholic—as another element in this vast network of Jesuit/Catholic stratagem to restore Catholicism.

In the wake of his exposition to show the influence of Catholicism, Veith mentions John Henry Newman

(1801–1890), an Anglican priest converted to Catholicism and subsequently made cardinal.<sup>14</sup> Veith argues that Newman’s conversion destroyed Protestantism in England. Such a claim seems to exaggerate the historical significance of Newman’s conversion.<sup>15</sup> In addition, from a theological perspective, Veith’s statement seems to minimize the close similarities between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism.

In the same context, Veith refers to Newman’s canonization by Pope Benedict XVI with information that cannot be corroborated by any credible source. For example, Veith asserts that the pope had Newman’s remains dug up, held Newman’s moldy bones in his hands, and ordered the bones to be disseminated all over the world to be venerated. An investigation of this claim reveals that Veith’s reconstruction lacks historical credibility. Indeed, the Vatican decided to move Newman’s remains from his burial site in a small cemetery near Rednal to a marble sarcophagus in the Birmingham Oratory, a congregation established by Newman. However, as the tomb was opened,

Newman’s corpse was mystifyingly absent, [and] there remained a paltry cluster of sundry materials—“brass, wooden, and cloth artifacts.” The empty grave was forensically predictable: according to the opinion of medical professionals present for the exhumation, the sodden clay native to the area, coupled with the mold in which Newman insisted his casket be enshrouded, rendered conditions ideal for the quickened and complete decomposition of a corpse.<sup>16</sup>

In view of Veith’s fictional account of Newman’s bones, one wonders how much of Veith’s presentation stems from fanciful imagination as opposed to serious research. If Veith’s depiction of the pope holding Newton’s bones can be taken as a measure of his respect for the facts, one wonders how many of Veith’s prophetic predictions abide by the same standards. Unfortunately, many of Veith’s correlations between current events and prophetic fulfillment spring more from a fertile imagination than from serious engagement with the biblical text and historical sources. For Veith, the presence of Catholics in the United States government and Supreme Court indicates a Roman Catholic conspiracy. But what about the presence of Protestants, Evangelicals, Mormons, and secular people who most likely outnumber Roman Catholics in the United States government? Furthermore, does a degree from a Roman Catholic institution turn one into a Jesuit agent? For Veith, the answer is an unequivocal yes.

Veith claims not to be propagating conspiracy theories, but his reasoning indicates otherwise. He sees prophetic fulfillment not only in the United States, as previously noted, but also in movements among Islamic leaders, Orthodox rabbis, the prime minister of Israel, the Turkish president, and the Russian leader Vladimir Putin. He also refers to locust plagues in Af-

rica and a reported arrival of American soldiers in Europe as part of a wide network of events signaling the impending unfolding of eschatological events. With a sleight of hand, Veith’s presentation weaves everything into a checkered tapestry of eschatological fiction. However, an even bigger problem lies behind Veith’s eschatological speculation: his inclination to prophetic time setting, to which we now turn.

### Time Setting

Distinguishing between hard time setting (a precise date) and soft time setting (an approximate date), Veith seems inclined to favor a soft time setting. But how can Veith argue such a “soft time setting” in view of biblical passages such as “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matt 24:36)?<sup>17</sup> Veith argues that such a reading would exclude even Jesus, which of course would not make sense since Jesus is one with the Father. Veith apparently ignores the standard explanation, that

as a man on earth Christ voluntarily limited His knowledge and power to the capacities of human beings in order that His own perfect life might be an example of how we should live, and that His ministry might be a pattern we could follow, aided by the same divine guidance and help that were His (see on Luke 2:52).<sup>18</sup>

Instead, he appeals to a brochure by James White titled “The Second Advent,” according to which the verb “knows” should be translated as “make known.” From this the implication follows that others may know the time, but only the Father has the authority to “make it known.” Veith appeals to 1 Corinthians 2:2, where the verb “know” arguably can also be read as “make known”: “For I determined not to know [make known] anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). The problem with this kind of interpretation is that it overlooks the context and the actual communicative intention of the sentence in which the verb is embedded. One cannot simply take the meaning of one word in one passage and claim the same word has the same meaning in another passage without paying close attention to the context. Although the signs of the second coming recorded in the Bible may certainly allow the believer to know that the end is approaching, Veith claims a degree of precision that cannot be corroborated by the biblical text.

For example, Veith attempts to ground his “soft time setting” on statements by E. G. White, according to which the earth has been under sin for about six thousand years. To drive home his thesis, Veith takes a statement in which E. G. White says that Jesus’ baptism took place four thousand years after Adam fell into sin:

Christ, in the wilderness of temptation, stood in Adam’s place to bear the test he failed to endure. Here Christ overcame in the sinner’s

behalf, *four thousand years after Adam turned his back upon the light of his home*. Separated from the presence of God, the human family had been departing, each successive generation, farther from the original purity, wisdom, and knowledge which Adam possessed in Eden. Christ bore the sins and the infirmities of the race as they existed when He came to the earth to help man. In behalf of the race, with the weaknesses of fallen man upon Him, He was to stand the temptations of Satan upon all points on which man could be assailed.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, Jesus' baptism in AD 27 sets the beginning for the last two thousand years of earth's history. That being the case, 2027 will mark the completion of the six thousand years of earth's history. But before one concludes that Christ will return in 2027, Veith quickly argues that the "six thousand years" during which "Satan has struggled to maintain possession of the earth"<sup>20</sup> must include the short time Satan will have after the millennium to arraign his forces for the final battle against God. Of course, although we do not know how much time Satan will spend in that process, that lapse of time must be discounted from the six thousand years, which implies that Jesus may return some time before 2027.<sup>21</sup> Veith claims that he is not setting the time for the second coming of Jesus, but at the same time he argues that we are in the final week of earth's history, which ends in 2027. He claims to draw on what the spirit of prophecy says, but by weaving E. G. White's quotes with biblical passages without proper regard for context and in a literalistic fashion, he sets the time before which Jesus will come. What is this, if not time setting?

Veith does not reckon with the fact that "four thousand years after Adam turned his back upon the light of his home" may be a round number with no intention to set the precise timespan that transpired between Adam's fall and Jesus' baptism. Indeed, E. G. White says that on the occasion that Jesus was tempted by the devil, sin had been ravishing the world for "more than four thousand years."<sup>22</sup> Significantly, in another publication, E. G. White indicates that since Satan overcame our first parents "more than six thousand years" have elapsed.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it seems clear that such chronological statements from the Spirit of Prophecy are approximations and not precise calculations of an exact time span.<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, neither E. G. White nor the other pioneers interpreted such references to four thousand and six thousand years with the chronological precision Veith ascribes to them. To arrive at such time setting, Veith strings together a litany of quotes from E. G. White and the Bible with no serious regard for their context. In doing so, he overlooks some significant statements from E. G. White herself in which she instructs the church to stay away from time setting. The following statements are a representative sampling of her position on this matter:

No one has a true message fixing the time when Christ is to come or not to come. Be assured that God gives no one authority to say that Christ delays His coming five years, ten years, or twenty years. "Be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (Matthew 24:44). This is our message, the very message that the three angels flying in the midst of heaven are proclaiming. The work to be done now is that of sounding this last message of mercy to a fallen world.<sup>25</sup>

Many Adventists have felt that unless they could fix their faith upon a definite time for the Lord's coming, they could not be zealous and diligent in the work of preparation. But as their hopes are again and again excited, only to be destroyed, their faith receives such a shock that it becomes well-nigh impossible for them to be impressed by the great truths of prophecy. . . . The repeated efforts to find new dates for the beginning and close of the prophetic periods, and the unsound reasoning necessary to sustain these positions, not only lead minds away from the present truth, but throw contempt upon all efforts to explain the prophecies. The more frequently a definite time is set for the second advent, and the more widely it is taught, the better it suits the purposes of Satan.<sup>26</sup>

I plainly stated at the Jackson camp meeting to these fanatical parties that they were doing the work of the adversary of souls; they were in darkness. They claimed to have great light that probation would close in October, 1884. *I there stated in public that the Lord had been pleased to show me that there would be no definite time in the message given of God since 1844.*<sup>27</sup>

Our position has been one of waiting and watching, with no time-proclamation to intervene between the close of the prophetic periods in 1844 and the time of our Lord's coming.<sup>28</sup>

*The people will not have another message upon definite time. After this period of time [Rev 10:4-6], reaching from 1842 to 1844, there can be no definite tracing of the prophetic time. The longest reckoning reaches to the autumn of 1844.*<sup>29</sup>

From the quotes above, it seems clear that E. G. White does not endorse speculations regarding the time of Jesus' coming or the end of the world. Indeed, she warns against such suppositions on the grounds that they "lead minds away from the present truth" and better serve "the purposes of Satan."

## Conclusions

Many hearts open to the gospel in times of crisis, as people become more aware of their limitations and the fragility of the human and societal condition. Such spiritual longings, however, cannot be met with sensationalist predictions, conspiracy theories, or time setting. The exposition of God's Word must be based on truth, not on misguided expectations generated by apocalyptic fiction. In fact, idiosyncratic interpretations of end-time prophecies serve only to spark emotional excitement and bring the church's end-time message into disrepute.

Our preaching and proclamation are to be centered on Jesus Christ—His love and care for a suffering world, and His offer of forgiveness and restoration for all. And of course our message certainly includes the proclamation of the soon coming of Jesus. There is nothing inherently wrong with preaching about the signs of the end. Jesus Himself, when asked about the signs of His coming, told the disciples about war, “famines, pestilences, and earthquakes” (Matt 24:7; par. Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11). But the end-time message must be based on the Word of God rather than on news headlines or speculative understandings of current events.

Significantly, when the disciples asked Jesus about the time of His coming, He told them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Then He made a promise: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Whereas the disciples wanted to know the time, Jesus shifted their concern to the gift of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel.

So, as the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps the world, our focus should be on a deeper personal commitment to Jesus so that we can embrace Christlike compassion for a needy and suffering world. By the power of the Spirit we can become effective witnesses of Jesus and thus enjoy the privilege of being part of the most evident sign that Jesus is soon to come: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Littman, “The Plague of Athens: Epidemiology and Paleopathology,” *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine* 76 (2009): 456–467. According to Mark Welford, *Geographies of Plague Pandemics: The Spatial-Temporal Behavior of Plague to the Modern Day*, Geographies of Health, ed. Allison Williams and Susan Elliott (London: Routledge, 2018), 14, “The first wave of the Athenian Pandemic occurred in early May 430 BCE, soon after the Spartan army laid siege to Athens. Thereafter, pandemics hit in summer 428 BCE and again in the 427–426 BCE winter (Morens and Littman 1992). The population of Athens might have swollen to as much as 400,000 in early May 430 BCE as refugees

entered the city ahead of the Spartan army, although Athens' base population was closer to 155,000 (Rostovcev 1941; Morens and Littman 1992). Thucydides suggests the epidemic lasted 4–5 years with a secondary peak in summer 428 BCE (Morens and Littman 1992).”

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.53.1–4, trans. Charles Forster Smith, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, vol. 1, *Books I and II*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 353–355.

<sup>3</sup> As noted by Dan Carlin, “A Pandemic Prologue?,” chap. 6 in *The End Is Always Near: Apocalyptic Moments, From the Bronze Age Collapse to Nuclear Near Misses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), some have estimated the Justinian Plague killed a hundred million people, a number now considered far too high. But whatever the actual numbers may have been, “it was the precursor to the Black Death of the Middle Ages, and it was caused by the same thing—the plague, which was spread by fleas hosted by rats. It was a horrific way to die.”

<sup>4</sup> Lester K. Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109.

<sup>5</sup> Welford, 73; and Carlin.

<sup>6</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 689.

<sup>7</sup> John M. Barry, “Prologue,” in *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> David Killingray, “A New ‘Imperial Disease’: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918–9 and its Impact on the British Empire,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2003): 30–49.

<sup>9</sup> See Wikipedia, s.v. “Walter Veith,” last modified June 4, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter\\_Veith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Veith) (accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> The points selected for discussion are taken from Walter Veith and Martin Smith, *Amazing Discoveries Africa*, “Is This The End? (2 Hour In Depth Study) — What's Up Prof? 8,” YouTube, April 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6h4H1DHQzc&t=6080s> (accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> As explained by Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 809, “this period of 1260 days is referred to seven times in the books of Daniel and Revelation. As 1260 days it appears in Rev. 11:3; 12:6; as 42 months in Rev. 11:2; 13:5; and as 3 1/2 times in Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 12:14. For the calculation of this period see on Dan. 7:25. Adventists generally date this period as from A.D. 538 to A.D. 1798. During this period God's hand was over the church, preserving it from extinction.”

<sup>12</sup> A Google search shows that he has indeed a Catholic background, but studied at Hanover College (BA, 1981), an institution affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. Subsequently, Pence earned a law degree at Indiana University in 1986. Interestingly, neither of these institutions are known to have ties to Jesuits. Pence, although coming from a Catholic background, “joined an evangelical megachurch, the Grace Evangelical Church. In 2013, Pence said his family was ‘kind of looking for a church.’ He has described himself as ‘a Christian, a conservative and a Republican, in that order,’ and as ‘a born-again, evangelical.” See Wikipedia, s.v. “Mike Pence,” last modified June 7, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mike\\_Pence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mike_Pence) (accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of Justice, “Federal Government to Resume Capital Punishment After Nearly Two Decade Lapse,” July 25, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-government-resume-capital-punishment-after-nearly-two-decade-lapse> (accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> See F. X. Connolly, “Newman, John Henry,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Berard L. Marthaler et al., vol. 5 (Detroit, MI: Thomson and Gale, 2002), 331–340.

<sup>15</sup> What most likely brought Protestantism (or, more broadly, Christianity) to a near collapse in Britain were the two World Wars of the twentieth century. According to Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God* (London: Continuum, 2000), 56–57, “The churches were full before 1914, half-empty after 1919, and three-quarters empty after 1945. And I would add that, by all but destroying British Christianity, these wars may come to destroy the spirit of the country.”

<sup>16</sup> Justin Coyle, “Newman's Bones,” *First Things*, September 30, 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/09/newmans-bones> (accessed June 11, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NKJV.

<sup>18</sup> Nichol, 5:503–504.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen G. White, *Confrontation; Redemption; or the Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1971), 32, emphasis supplied.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1890), 342.

<sup>21</sup> For an incisive critique of recent speculation about the nearness of Jesus' return and the date of 2027, see Laurence Turner, “Blessed Hope or Blessed Calculation?,” TED News Network, <https://ted.adventist.org/news/1708-blessed-hope-or-blessed-calculation> (accessed June 7, 2020). For a detailed response (in German with English subtitles) to Veith's proposal of a Cosmic Week and his reasoning that Jesus might come back in the year 2027, see the video produced by the theology teachers at Bogenhofen Seminary, Austria, “2027 - Ende der Welt? Hat Walter Veith RECHT!?”, YouTube, May 29, 2020, <https://youtu.be/zoNpgVmuVXw> (accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958–1980), 269.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen G. White, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-Day Adventists* (Basle: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Although the unequivocal testimony of the Bible and the spirit of prophecy points to a recent six-day creation, any attempt to arrive at a precise date for the creation or the fall faces insurmountable challenges given the complexities of

the biblical genealogies. For some helpful studies on this matter, see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11," *Origins* 7, no. 2 (1980): 53–70; Colin L. House, "The Successive, Corresponding Epochal Arrangement of the 'Chronogenealogies' of Genesis 5 and 11B in the Three Textual Traditions LXXA, SP, and MT" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1988); and Warren H. Johns, "Ellen G. White and Biblical Chronology," *Ministry*, April 1984, 20–23.  
<sup>25</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:113–114.

<sup>26</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 457.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 2:73, emphasis supplied.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 10 (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 270.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 35–36, emphasis supplied.

# Is COVID-19 a Sign of the End?

By Clinton Wahlen

In several places the gospels record Jesus' Olivet discourse in which He describes events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs that will precede His coming (Matt 24; Mark 13; Luke 21; cf. Matt 17:20–37). Political and religious turmoil, earthquakes, and famines appear in the first part of the discourse—troubles that culminate with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Matt 24:4–8; Mark 13:5–8; Luke 21:8–11). Among the troubles mentioned by Jesus, one stands out in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic: pestilences. "And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences" (Luke 21:11).<sup>1</sup> The Greek word translated "pestilences" (*loimoi*) refers to "a widespread contagious disease."<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, this warning of Jesus is the only clear reference to pestilences in the entire New Testament.<sup>3</sup> A similar mention in Matthew 24:7 does not appear in the earliest manuscripts,<sup>4</sup> but is parallel to this passage in Luke and is classed there among "the beginning of sorrows" (Matt 24:8). Jesus, in fact, clearly indicates that "the end will not come immediately" (Luke 21:9; cf. Matt 24:8). Therefore, the specific reference to pestilences would seem to refer not to the end-time, but to the period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and, in fact, Josephus describes a "pestilential destruction" in connection with that event.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, before excluding pestilences from among the troubles or "sorrows" that might characterize the time just prior to the second coming of Christ, it will be helpful to look at some additional biblical references.

Generally in Scripture, pestilences are seen as one of the ways by which God brings judgment. Often it is brought upon His people for their disobedience and/or failure to render Him the worship He is due as Creator and Deliverer (Exod 5:3; Lev 26:25; Deut 32:24; 1 Chr 21:14). At other times it is a judgment on various nations for their rebellious attitude toward God (Exod 9:1–7). Such divine judgments could lead to widespread death (Exod 9:15; Ps 91:7; cf. Ps 91:3) and even total annihilation (Num 14:12). Significantly, pestilences as a divine judgment in the Old Testament appear most frequently in connection with the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon.<sup>6</sup> Such warnings are given in order to draw God's people to think more seriously about their situation and turn back to God in heartfelt repentance (see esp. 2 Chr 7:13–14).

Jesus specifically mentions only a few things that immediately precede His second advent. The most im-

portant of these is the gospel being given as a witness "to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14; cf. Rev 14:6; 18:1). In Luke, several additional indicators are given and are specifically referred to as "signs" (*sēmeia*), linking them with the disciples' question at the beginning (Luke 21:7).<sup>7</sup> There will be signs in the heavens (in the sun, moon, and stars; cf. Isa 13:9–10; Rev 6:12–14) as well as "on the earth" (Luke 21:25). The latter signs fall into three specific categories:

1. "distress of nations, with perplexity," which could be applicable to the world wars of the twentieth century;
2. "the sea and the waves roaring," possibly referring to sea-based natural disasters that are growing in intensity (tsunamis, typhoons, and hurricanes); and
3. "men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth" (Luke 21:25–26),<sup>8</sup> which fittingly describes the rise of terrorism and other global worries.

## Pandemics

Certainly the COVID-19 pandemic has instilled fear in the hearts of many all over the world and, while not specifically highlighted by Jesus, it may certainly be considered as among the kind of troubles described as preceding the end. Looking back in history, three pandemics were actually, based on the number of deaths, much worse than the current one:

1. the Plague of Justinian in AD 541–542, which hastened the demise of what remained of the Roman Empire (between thirty and fifty million dead);
2. the Spanish flu of 1918–1920 (30 million dead);
3. the Black Death of 1347–1352, which killed by far the most in recorded history (between seventy-five and two hundred million dead).<sup>9</sup>

Arguably, though, very few events in history have led to such immediate worldwide consequences as has the COVID-19 pandemic. Who could have imagined it even possible that virtually all travel and economic activity on a global scale would come to a sudden halt? Even the world wars of the twentieth century, despite the huge loss of life, were more gradual in their global impact and could not be said to have affected the daily routine of practically everyone on the planet as drastically as this pandemic has.

Could God be allowing such events to get our atten-



tion? In light of current events, the following statement seems prescient:

The present is a time of overwhelming interest to all living. Rulers and statesmen, men who occupy positions of trust and authority, thinking men and women of all classes, have their attention fixed upon the events taking place about us. They are watching the strained, restless relations that exist among the nations. They observe the intensity that is taking possession of every earthly element, and they realize that something great and decisive is about to take place—that the world is on the verge of a stupendous crisis.

Angels are now restraining the winds of strife, until the world shall be warned of its coming doom; but a storm is gathering, ready to burst upon the earth, and when God shall bid His angels loose the winds, there will be such a scene of strife as no pen can picture. . . .

A moment of respite has been graciously given us of God. Every power lent us of heaven is to be used in doing the work assigned us by the Lord for those who are perishing in ignorance. The warning message is to be sounded in all parts of the world. . . . A great work is to be done, and this work has been entrusted to those who know the truth for this time.<sup>10</sup>

### Signs of the End

Considering that pestilences were frequently connected in Scripture with Babylon's attacks on God's people and that end-time Babylon is rapidly gaining strength as predicted in Revelation 17,<sup>11</sup> it is certainly possible that the COVID-19 crisis constitutes one of the "sorrows" referred to in Matthew 24 as a sign of the end. God uses such signs just before the coming of Jesus to arouse His church and signal that their redemption is near (Luke 21:28).<sup>12</sup> While this pandemic will in all likelihood pass, other earth-shaking events—some even more momentous—are ahead of us. In the midst of it all, we are called to be God's messengers to people with nowhere else to turn, symbolized by the angel giving the final "loud cry" (Rev 18:1–4; cf. Isa 60:1–3).

As we near the end, the winds of strife that have been held back (see Rev 7:1, 3) will ultimately be released. The "seven last plagues" (Rev 15:1; 21:9)—which these troubles are not—will have an even bigger global impact (see Rev 16) but, by then, everyone will have sealed their eternal destiny and no one will choose to repent (Rev 16:9, 11). Unlike those who have no hope (cf. Eph 2:12; 1 Thess 4:13), Seventh-day Adventists have a special privilege to be the beacons of light and hope to a lost world. God has revealed all that is necessary for His people to know. It is left for us to study these things and keep in mind Jesus' words to His disciples just before His ascension: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:8). He has not given any time prophecies that tell exactly when the coming of

Christ will be, but only when it is "near."<sup>13</sup> Jesus said, "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28). The prophecy of Jesus given on the Mount of Olives has never seemed more timely.



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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NKJV.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988–1989), §23.158.

<sup>3</sup> The only other New Testament use of the word is of Paul, who is accused before Felix of being a "pest" or "plague" by Tertullus, a Jewish orator (Acts 24:5). Pestilence is not explicitly mentioned in the book of Revelation, despite the numerous troubles described there, though the reference to "death" (*thanatos*), together with being killed by sword, hunger, and beasts of the earth (Rev 6:8), seems to imply the Old Testament complex of judgments that include pestilences (cf. n. 6 below).

<sup>4</sup> The Greek word for pestilence (*loimos*) is omitted from most of the earliest codices (⋈ B D E\*) and some other ancient witnesses, while it is present in the majority of manuscripts, ancient versions, and quotations of the New Testament by early church fathers. Although this variant is typically explained as a scribal harmonization from Luke 21, Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 51, admits that "the words *καὶ λοιμοὶ* may have been omitted because of the similarity of ending." In addition to the possible confusion of endings, the word for "famine" in Greek (*limoi*) is very similar to the word for "pestilence" (*loimoi*), differing by just one letter. Misspellings could have contributed to some confusion also in view of the misspelling of the word "famine" as *leimoi* in the codices Vaticanus (B) and Bezae (D). Two fragmentary extant papyri contain Matthew 24 but, unfortunately, verse 7 was not preserved (P<sup>70</sup>, P<sup>85</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.421. The Greek phrase is *loimōdē phthoran*, employing the lexically related adjective.

<sup>6</sup> See Jer 14:12; 21:6–9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 28:8; 29:17–18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; Ezek 5:12, 17; 6:11–12; 7:15; 12:16; 14:12–20; 33:27.

<sup>7</sup> Heavenly signs (less specifically described) are also mentioned in connection with the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:11), and Josephus records that there were such signs in the sky prior to that event (*War* 6.288–315).

<sup>8</sup> In Matthew, the only event specifically called a *sign* in response to the disciples' question (Matt 24:3) is the second coming itself: "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven" (Matt 24:30).

<sup>9</sup> Michael S. Rosenwald, "History's Deadliest Pandemics, from Ancient Rome to Modern America," *Washington Post*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/retropolis/coronavirus-deadliest-pandemics/> (accessed April 30, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Ellen G. White, *Maranatha* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), 266.

<sup>11</sup> Babylon's present existence is indicated by the second angel's reference to it (Rev 14:8). This power, defined in Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 830, as "all religious bodies and movements that have fallen away from the truth," is the polar opposite of the pure woman in Revelation 12, which represents God's true church. See Hans K. LaRondelle, "The Biblical Concept of Armageddon," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28, no. 1 (March 1985): 22–23. The similarity of the beast on which the harlot rides to the beast of Revelation 13 (Rev 17:3; cf. 13:1), one of whose heads was wounded to death and then healed (Rev 13:3), suggests a temporary interruption in the influence of the sea beast's false system of worship, but also the eventual expansion of its earthly power to a point of near-total global domination (Rev 17:5; 18:3)—the sole exception being God's remnant people "who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12).

<sup>12</sup> Leon Morris, *Luke: Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 317–318: "When the perplexing signs begin to occur Jesus' followers must not be downcast. Their deliverance is near."

<sup>13</sup> See Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1992), 34–39.

# No War Has Ever Done This to Us<sup>1</sup>

By Frank M. Hasel

**N**o natural disaster, no tsunami, no earthquake, no flooding, no hurricane or famine has had this global effect. No persecution has ever forced us into this behavior.

While some are waiting for certain dreaded Sunday laws to bring it upon us, it is this microscopic thing called COVID-19 that has caused such cataclysmic global chaos. It has accomplished a coup d'état that no one thought possible. With sweeping speed and global dimensions of unprecedented proportions, it has forced us into social distancing. People were made to live in community, not to socially distance or isolate. It poses tremendous challenges. Being forced to distance ourselves socially for many days and weeks—while no one really knows for how long—will alter the way we live and interact. It also has profound consequences for the world economy in ways that can make the Black Tuesday of the Great Depression look like a breeze.

The new experience of social distancing that we are forced to endure has brought amazing restrictions on our freedom. Restrictions of personal freedom and the right of free assembly and worship have raised important questions about the power of the state, religious freedom, and our human responsibility in all this. All of a sudden, we cannot gather in groups of more than five or ten for prayer meetings—even in our homes. Social distancing has led us to the point where we can no longer enjoy the blessings that come from fellowshiping with believers who love to assemble for Sabbath worship in our churches. We are literally grounded in our houses. Instead of enjoying personal encounters with friends in worship services with real people, we are, at best, forced to watch virtual worship services in front of our computer and TV screens. But socially we have sunk to our worst experience since World War II. All of this has happened because of a tiny virus that was unknown just a few months ago—in fact, that did not even exist a few months ago! This little virus is so powerful that it has infected large numbers of people around the globe with a lethal disease. Perhaps even more powerful than its infectiousness is its ability to instill fear and a feeling of Angst in many of us. Every slight cough or sneeze, in what is spring allergy season in some parts of the world, leaves us wondering whether we might have caught the virus. After all, you can't see it. You can't hear it. You can't smell it. You can't feel it. You may think you are healthy, and yet you could be spreading the deadly disease. How vicious this virus is! It makes us realize how fragile this world is and that the things that are most precious to us can rapidly change and are ultimately beyond our human control.

It is amazing how quickly we have become accustomed to speaking about “social distancing”—a term

that is actually not very helpful. What we are called to practice in these times of global health crisis and pandemic is prudent *physical distancing*, in order to avoid the spread of the virus, while at the same time finding new ways of *increased social care*! This calls for our creativity and determination as well as for our compassion and love. Those in need and those who are vulnerable, lonely, and scared especially need our attention and support.

Here we Seventh-day Adventists have a unique opportunity to show the world the very best we have learned from our Savior and friend Jesus: that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18, ESV).

For there is one thing that this virus can never do and will never, ever achieve: it can never separate us from the tender love of God! The apostle Paul has stated it in these beautiful words: “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39, ESV).

This love compels us (2 Cor 5:14) to show kindness to others.

This love teaches us to be patient as we wait for relief and deliverance.

This love motivates us to share what we have with those who have less.

This love propels us to get active in support of those who can't help themselves.

This love encourages those who are fearful.

This love finds ways to reach out to those who are lonely.

This love will listen to those who need an attentive ear.

This love brings forth a gentle smile on the face of those who are scared.

This love has courage in the face of danger.

This love endures in times of adversity.

This love triumphs over fear.

This love makes us agents of hope in times of suffering.

This love will go the extra mile.

Let us share the good news and live the gospel of God's love that becomes visible in a lifestyle of compassion and care in times of physical distancing—for the good of all of our health.



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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in the General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter, April 2020, <https://executivecommittee.adventist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ECN-April-2020.pdf> (accessed June 9, 2020).

# COVID-19 IN THE LIGHT OF TRUTH AND THE LIE IN REVELATION

By Ekkehardt Mueller

**W**e have arrived in the age of “fake news.” Fake news is a kind of journalism, propaganda, and maybe even approach to life that consists of deliberate misinformation. Fake messages are written and posted with the intent of creating one’s own “truth,” to conceal one’s motives and actions, and, on a larger level, to mislead organizations and/or individuals, gain financial or political advantages, and harm others. Fake news is often spread with sensational, exaggerated, or false claims in order to attract attention. It is not limited to public and social media, but is also found in politics, market research, science, the religious realm, and elsewhere. While deception and intentional misinformation have always been with humanity—since the serpent in paradise—it seems to have attained such an unexpected and bewildering level that it has become almost impossible to tell lies and falsehoods from truth.

## Conspiracy Theories

Related to fake news are conspiracy theories.<sup>1</sup> Conspiracy theories consist of explanations of events and situations—past, present, or future—suggesting that certain powerful persons and/or groups behind the scenes pursue threatening and harmful goals related to the life or way of life of individuals or entire populations. They may be triggered by deep distrust in official statements and explanations—justifiable or not—and be motivated by religious theories or political agendas. By definition, conspiracy theories are unable to prove their claims—that is, they lack sufficient evidence. On the other hand, they may not be falsified or refuted easily, if at all. Thus, they become a matter of faith. Adherents to conspiracy theories often live in their own world. Their theories have become true to them, even if they are questionable, wrong, and harmful. Some also believe that these theories must be shared with others and strongly defended. Typically, these people can no longer be reached by rational arguments. Rather, each argument against a conspiracy theory is typically incorporated into the theory in order to strengthen and validate it. Scott A. Reid states,

Conspiracy theories increase in prevalence in periods of widespread anxiety, uncertainty, or hardship, as during wars and economic depressions and in the aftermath of natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, and pan-

demics. . . . This suggests that conspiratorial thinking is driven by a strong human desire to make sense of social forces that are self-relevant, important, and threatening. . . . The content of conspiracy theories is emotionally laden and its alleged discovery can be gratifying.<sup>2</sup>

“Conspiracy theories once limited to fringe audiences have become commonplace in mass media, emerging as a cultural phenomenon of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.”<sup>3</sup>

Here are some examples of conspiracy theories: 1) Supposedly, the United States government created the AIDS virus in order to “kill homosexuals and African Americans.”<sup>4</sup> 2) There “are claims that Elvis Presley’s death was faked, and that Adolf Hitler survived the Second World War and fled to the Americas, to Antarctica, or to the Moon. . . . Some theorists believe that Denver International Airport stands above an underground city which serves as a headquarters of the New World Order. Theorists cite the airport’s unusually large size, its distance from Denver city center, Masonic and alleged Satanic symbols . . . Bible conspiracy theories posit that significant parts of the New Testament are false, or have been omitted.”<sup>5</sup> 3) It has been suggested that the General Conference is infiltrated by Jesuits. 4) Allegedly, Bill Gates is “the creator of Covid-19, . . . a profiteer from a virus vaccine, and . . . part of a dastardly plot to use the illness to cull or surveil the global population.”<sup>6</sup> Similar ideas are floating around regarding Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

What are some of the problems with conspiracy theories? First, they may be true or false; by definition, we do not know. If they are false, conspiracy theories are fake news and are deceptive. If we do not know that they can be supported by clear evidence beyond doubt, it is irresponsible and morally wrong to disseminate them.

Second, they may hurt and harm severely those who are attacked, especially if the targeted people are innocent.

Third, conspiracy theories are able to destroy trust and thereby the fabric of society. For instance, there is no way to know if Jesuits have infiltrated the church. But if we constantly think about them, we have to be suspicious about all fellow workers. Yet if we do so and others do the same, the organization becomes inoperable. We should not forget that God has promised that

He will take care of His church, and therefore, we do not have to worry.

Fourth, conspiracy theories create an alternative reality. The more we hear and talk about them, the more they take on a life of their own and the more biased we become, convinced they are true even if they are wrong. They no longer allow us to look at all evidence with fairness<sup>7</sup> and may psychologically harm the persons believing in them. Maybe Paul's message to Timothy applies also to such a scenario today: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season. . . . For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim 4:2–4, ESV).

Fifth, the Gospels do not leave us a track record of Jesus pursuing and sharing conspiracy theories.<sup>8</sup> He had other priorities—namely, proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God and salvation from personal sin and from death through Himself. His emphasis was on good news, not bad news. He did not build barriers to other people by the use of claims to conspiracy, but rather tried to tear walls down by giving each and every one an opportunity to become a child of God and be saved. Since Jesus is not only our Lord and Savior but also our example, we need to follow His approach to other people and to life.

Some conspiracy theories in the context of COVID-19 have already been mentioned. Here are some reiterated by Adventist believers: "Dear Friend and Fellow Believer, the good news is that corona virus is not such a big deal. The bad news is that gov't is lying to us and that means more trouble. . . . You need to **see this video!** All the hospitals are empty!" "I posted 5 reasons that Gates' plan to depopulate the world is flawed." "Dear Friend and Pastor, Coronavirus is a crisis brought by CDC, WHO, Bill Gates and forces pushing a New World Order to humble the US and require UN and martial law." "Halleluia—Justice is being served—if this is a shock, it shows how biased the media is. This 16 min video has good evidence behind it. Faucii [*sic*] Indicted, Faces Military Tribal To Answer For Crimes Against America."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic raises again the question of truth versus lie. But the issue is much deeper than only fake news and the occasional conspiracy theory: the issue is a basic and systematic assault on truth. Many people's approach to COVID-19 continues to disintegrate the truth.

### Truth and Lie

Alexander Schwalbe speaks of "lies and deception everywhere." He writes, "When in the process of secularization God faded into the background, a sacralization of politics followed. . . . Now the fragmentation of reality and the dissolution of our previous experience of the world seems to be followed by a destruction of truth. After God is forgotten . . . truth can also be forgotten. Instead, the lie is spreading."<sup>10</sup> Miroslav Volf

states, "The truth about the past cannot be had, the argument goes, and the demand for truth is dangerous. I disagree strenuously."<sup>11</sup>

How do we define lies and falsehoods? While truth is the antidote to the lie, the lie may be so successful that it overpowers truth—at least temporarily. Wikipedia makes a good start by explaining a lie in the following terms:

A lie is a statement of which the sender (*liar*) knows or suspects that it is untrue and which is expressed with the intent that the recipient believes it anyway, or in other words, "the (also non-verbal) communication of a subjective untruth with the aim of creating or maintaining a false impression with the other party." Lies are used to gain an advantage, for example to conceal an error or a forbidden action and thus avoid criticism or punishment. People also lie for the sake of politeness, shame, fear, insecurity or distress ("white lie"), in order to thwart the other party's plans or to protect themselves, other persons or certain interests (e. g., privacy, intimacy, economic interests). They also lie compulsively/pathologically or for fun sake.<sup>12</sup>

Lies can be expressed in words (Prov 6:19), in a way of life (Ps 62:9), in errors (2Thess 2:11) or in a false form of religion (Rom 1:25). . . . Lying is characterized in various ways, e. g. by Cain's evasive answer (Gen 4:9), Jacob's intentional lie (Gen 27:19), Gehazi's false representation of his Master's behavior (2Kings 5:21–27) and the deception practiced by Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:1–10). Lying is the sin of the Antichrist (1John 2:22) and all habitual liars lose eternal salvation (Rev 21:27).<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, Christians and Adventists are affected by this problem. Whether we want it to or not, culture exerts an influence on us and shapes us—at least to some extent. In the public sphere, lies are usually acceptable and not punishable as long as they are not perjury. So-called "white lies"—that is, deciding to be untruthful in difficult situations—are considered tolerable or perhaps even the necessary and right thing to do. For instance, in the Mediterranean world, deception "is a strategy for establishing and protecting honor, as well as for bringing shame upon one's enemies."<sup>14</sup>

Even if we confess to accept the Ten Commandments, we may consider some of them to be more important than others. Lying, fake news, and conspiracy theories are understood as trivial offenses, while murder is considered to be a serious crime.<sup>15</sup> Usually, the effects of adultery are more dramatic than the effects of a lie. Yet one can also drive people to suicide with a lie or incite persecution by making false allegations. "Deception, the act of deluding or misleading others, is an important ethical issue in the Bible and in moral dis-

course. In Scripture, deception basically constitutes a false witness and is condemned (Exod. 20:16).<sup>16</sup> Thus, an offence against one of the Ten Commandments is a sin, as is the offence against any other of the Ten Commandments.<sup>17</sup>

### The Lie in the Book of Revelation

In the book of Revelation nine texts are found on the subject of lying: There are false apostles who are liars (*pseudēs*, Rev 2:2). Some people claim to be Jews, but they are not really. They are lying (*pseudomai*, Rev 3:9). The false prophet (*pseudoprophētēs*, Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) spreads lies and falsehoods. Three texts describe the terrible consequences for liars: “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars [*pseudēs*], their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev 21:8). Whoever uses the lie to achieve his purposes has no access to the new Jerusalem: “And nothing unclean will come in, and no one who does abominations and lies [*pseudos*], but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” (Rev 21:27). “Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying [*pseudos*]” (Rev 22:15). Fortunately, there is a group of true followers of Jesus, the 144,000. “No lie [*pseudos*] was found in their mouth” (Rev 14:5).

These texts provide the following information:

- *If there is a lie, there must also be truth.* Without truth, there is no lie. While truth is called into question nowadays and people can no longer distinguish between truth and lie, we find chaos happening before our eyes. Conceptually, lying and deception are closely related. Jezebel, claiming to be a prophetess, seduces (*planaō*) God’s servants (Rev 2:20). Satan deceives (*planaō*) the whole world (Rev 12:9)—that is, all the people and nations who follow him (*planaō*, Rev 20:3, 8, 10). The beast that comes out of the earth “deceives [*planaō*] those who dwell on the earth” (Rev 13:14). As false prophet (*pseudoprophētēs*), it performs miraculous signs, deceiving (*planaō*) those who receive the mark of the beast and those who worship his image (Rev 19:20). Babylon deceives (*planaō*) all nations by its sorcery (Rev 18:23). So, deception and lying are major themes in Revelation. On the other hand, Revelation uses the word “true” or “truthfully” (*alēthinos*) ten times. True are Jesus (Rev 3:7, 14; 19:11) and God (Rev 6:10), and therefore also God’s ways (Rev 15:3), God’s judgments (Rev 16:7; 19:2), and God’s words (Rev 19:9; 21:5; 22:16).

In his gospel, John describes Jesus as personified truth (*alētheia*, John 14:6), who speaks the truth (*alētheia*, John 8:40, 45–46). “As Christ is the cause of life, so he is the cause of truth.”<sup>18</sup> The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (*alētheia*, John 15:26). The devil is “a liar [*pseustēs*] and the father of lies [*pseudos*],” and truth

(*alētheia*) is not in him (John 8:44). However, what John reports as eyewitness is true (*alēthēs*, John 10:41; 19:35; 21:24; 3 John 1:12). Lying (*pseudomai*) means not practicing the truth (*alētheia*, 1 John 1:6). The truth (*alētheia*) is not in a liar (*pseustēs*, 1 John 2:4). No lie (*pseudos*) is of the truth (*alētheia*, 1 John 2:21). Lie is lie, and truth is truth. The truth is absolutely true, coherent, and consistent.

So, there is truth. It cannot be mixed with lies; otherwise it is no longer truth. Truth and lie are mutually exclusive opposites. Truth corresponds to the character of God; lies reflect the character of Satan. Truth must therefore be embodied in the followers of Jesus. So-called half-truths and white lies have no place with Christians. Ignoring the truth means bowing to the lie.

- *It is extremely dangerous to lie.* Revelation makes blatant statements on the subject of lying. It talks about liars and about those who love and practice the lie. Since the kingdom of God is truth, the liar and deceiver and the one who consciously lets himself be deceived have no place in this kingdom. The matter of lying is so serious that it excludes access to the new Jerusalem and thus access to God, leading to the second, eternal death.

- *Lies and deception threaten the Christian community and the individual Christian.* The lie either completely destroys faith or alters the content of faith so that it no longer correctly represents God’s character, will, and plan for humanity. Thus, the liar rebels against God and breaks the relationship with Him. But a lie also has the potential to destroy human relationships. Ellen G. White states that the person who uses “untruths sells his soul in a cheap market. His falsehoods may seem to serve in emergencies; he may thus seem to make business advancement that he could not gain by fair dealing; but he finally reaches the place where he can trust no one. Himself a falsifier, he has no confidence in the word of others.”<sup>19</sup> D. W. Gill points to some consequences of lying:

Lying is wrong first of all, then, because it alienates us from the God who is truth itself. Second, lying destroys community and interpersonal relations (Prov 25:18; 26:18–19, 28). . . . the trust which is essential to community is undermined. A third reason lying is wrong is that it destroys the liar himself. The contradiction between the liar’s knowledge of truth and his participation in the lie is a dehumanizing surrender of personal wholeness and integrity. Furthermore, one lie inexorably leads to further lies to cover up the first. The web of falsehood produces a kind of bondage that is the opposite situation to the knowledge and practice of the truth which sets one free.<sup>20</sup>

- *There is not only a lie as an individual act, but also as a system.* There is an individual’s lie. There is also corporate falsehood. This can be seen with the false prophet, who was controlled by demonic powers, and

with the false apostles. The apocalyptic Babylon deceives mankind to achieve its goals. This is to mislead Christianity and the faithful followers of Jesus.

- *We are responsible for lying.* Of course, difficult circumstances can lead people to attempt to escape them by the use of lies—for example, when there seems to be no good alternative, and honesty might be considered dangerous for people’s lives. Nevertheless, we are responsible for how we deal with such situations. Carl Zuckmayer (1898–1977), a German author and playwright, whose father was of Jewish descent but had converted to Christianity, got into trouble with the Nazi regime. When he tried to escape to Switzerland, he was interrogated by a Nazi officer at the border. Instead of lying about his problems, he admitted that he was not a member of the party, that his works were banned in Germany, and that he did not agree with the National Socialist worldview. However, instead of arresting him, the officer was flabbergasted by Zuckmayer’s honesty and helped him cross the border to Switzerland, to safety.<sup>21</sup> However, we do not renounce the lie just because we hope or reckon that things will turn out well. That does not always happen. We renounce it because it is right to speak truth and it is wrong to lie, regardless of the circumstances.

- *We are not only responsible for lying, but also for accepting the lie.* Revelation 22:15 speaks of loving the lie. Similarly, Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12 states, “And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” Obviously, one can enjoy the scandal. But that is as reprehensible as is lying. Followers of Jesus, followers of the Truth, are committed to the truth.

- *Fortunately, there are people who have completely distanced themselves from the lie.* The context makes it clear that they worship God and observe His commandments. They are clearly on God’s side and trust His power and love to make right decisions under the most difficult situations. They are committed to truth and proclaim the truth (Rev 14:6–12). Thereby, they automatically uncover deception.

### Implications

Commitment to truth and opposition to lie, falsehood, and deception leads to implications.

1. *We reject plagiarism in whatever form.* Even if common in educated or not so educated circles, we do not claim the work of other persons as our own work. We do not cheat.

2. *We do not indulge in conspiracy theories and do not proclaim them publicly.* They are not verifiable. Having to retract them or having them be proven wrong over time may be harmful to God’s cause. We also need to be as objective as possible and look at any issue from different perspectives. Mature persons listen to critique and are grateful for feedback. While we may make educated guesses with regard to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, we must remain cautious even if the audi-

ence prefers a “clear” message. Clear messages are to be proclaimed where Scripture is definite—for instance, “You shall not bear false witness” (Exod 20:16).

3. *We avoid the use of double standards.* Trying to promote what is good in an unethical way, because we think that the good must be enforced at any rate, is still problematic. In the name of so-called truth, morality can easily be abandoned. It is just not true that the end justifies the means.

4. *As individuals we commit ourselves clearly to Jesus.* We do not deny Him with our conduct, complacency, or cowardice. We pay taxes to the government. We support justice. Vishal Mangalwadi writes,

Those who followed Jesus were tired of men’s stories and their kingdoms. They were seeking God’s kingdom, a kingdom that did not derive its legitimacy from the sword, philosophy, or myths, but from truth. Therefore, while Jesus’ followers honored civic authority as divinely ordained, their commitment to truth empowered them to resist the sword when demanded that they bend the knee before falsehood. . . . It was their commitment to truth that forbade ascribing divinity to Caesar or submitting to brute force exercised apart from goodness.<sup>22</sup>

5. *Christianity is particularly affected by lies and conspiracy theories promoted in social media and elsewhere.* Fake news is not funny or entertaining, but rather absolutely destructive. For when everything is called into question and when truth can no longer be identified, how, then, can the claim of Christianity be upheld—the claim that there is a God who created everything and who governs everything in love, the claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and not just a good man, the claim that death does not have the last word and that there is salvation through Jesus and eternal life in communion with God? The lie does not only disintegrate our culture and our coexistence; it also destroys Christianity and the life of every single person. Therefore, lying is dangerous.

In other words, we may have a problem. The commandment against falsehood, lying, and deception cannot simply be ticked off as if it does not concern us. It concerns each and every one of us. We must turn back, confess falsehood, and forsake what is against God’s will. We cannot claim truth and proclaim truth if we ourselves do not try to be truthful. That would not be authentic. We are committed to the truth in every form and step in to defend truth—even in the difficult time of COVID-19.

### Conclusion

Yes, there are lies and falsehoods, as Revelation admits. There is even the danger of getting used to lying, of learning to love lying and falsehood, and of being excluded from the city of God. But there are also true believers who have distanced themselves from it. They are committed to the truth in all forms, especially the

personified Truth, Jesus our Lord. In the end, the real thing still counts. J. Hamel may be correct when he says, “The issue is not to oppose possibly wrong views. It is much more: through us God wants to bring to the fore his truth and free people from the power of lies.”<sup>23</sup>



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Jesus did not guess; He knew. While His foreknowledge sets Jesus apart from His followers, nevertheless, His disciples did not engage in conspiracy theories either. While it is claimed that conspiracy theories are found, for example, in Revelation, we need to keep in mind that Scripture claims divine revelation. Biblical prophecies are not guesswork, which may be true or false, but rather divine revelation of reality.

<sup>9</sup> From emails sent to me and many others on April 3, 2020; April 5, 2020; April 23, 2020; and May 20, 2020. The names of the authors have been withheld.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Schwalbe, “Die Gotteskrise und die Lust zu lügen,” *Christ in der Gegenwart* 68 (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Against the Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia, German ed., s.v. “Lüge,” <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lüge>, last modified May 15, 2020 (accessed June 10, 2020), translated by Ekkehardt Mueller.

<sup>13</sup> A. Flavelle, “Lie, Lying,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 687.

<sup>14</sup> John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, 3rd ed., Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Carsten Johnsen, *God, the Situation Ethicist* (Sisteron: Untold Story, n.d.), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Joe E. Trull, “Deception,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 210.

<sup>17</sup> G. H. Clark, “Truth,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 1114, argues, “One should also bear in mind that moral and spiritual truth is as much truth as mathematical, scientific, and historical truth. It is all equally ‘intellectual.’ Nonintellectual truth is unthinkable. It is not true that the common conception of truth as a fact or what is real ‘has no moral or spiritual significance.’ We need only to recall that God gave the Ten Commandments.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 76.

<sup>20</sup> D. W. Gill, “Lie, Lying,” in Elwell, 639.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Zuckmayer, “Ehrlichkeit,” in *Lesebuch für den Religionsunterricht für 14–16 Jährige* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag Stuttgart, 1969), 167–170.

<sup>22</sup> Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 140.

<sup>23</sup> J. Hamel, “Von Wahrheit und Lüge,” in *Christliche Ethik: Ein Quellenheft*, ed. Heinz-Horst Schrey (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966), 57, translated by Ekkehardt Mueller.

<sup>1</sup> See the helpful discussion of conspiracy theories and the dynamics of how they work in Michael Butter, “Nichts ist wie es scheint” *Über Verschwörungstheorien* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Conspiracy Theory,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspiracy-theory> (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. “Conspiracy Theory,” last modified June 10, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conspiracy_theory) (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*.

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. “List of Conspiracy Theories,” last modified June 10, 2020 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_conspiracy\\_theories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conspiracy_theories) (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Daisuke Wakabayashi, Davey Alba, and Marc Tracy, “Bill Gates, at Odds With Trump on Virus, Becomes a Right-Wing Target,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/technology/bill-gates-virus-conspiracy-theories.html> (accessed June 10, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> On the importance and blessing of fair-mindedness, see Frank M. Hasel, *Living for God: Reclaiming the Joy of Christian Virtue* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2020), 18–20.

<sup>8</sup> When Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their own lifestyle and theology, it was not a conspiracy theory; His accusations were verifiable by His audience. Furthermore, He spoke prophetically, knowing future events ahead of time.

# CONDUCTING CHURCH CEREMONIES IN EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BIBLICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

**T**he situation prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to reduce the risk of infection as expressed through physical distancing and other safety precautions has posed new challenges to the church, not only in regard to conducting religious services but also certain ceremonies of the church, such as the ordinances of baptism and communion, as well as weddings. This brief document is the product of thoughtful reflection by BRI scholars in response to three main

questions received from various parts of the world.

**Can a “virtual” baptismal service be conducted during the current lockdown? Can a pastor keep physical separation by praying from a distance and allowing the baptismal candidate to immerse himself or herself under the water for baptism?**

Regarding whether a “virtual” baptismal service may be conducted during the current lockdown, depends on what is meant by “virtual.” The question needs

to be clarified as to who has to be physically present because the New Testament does not define fellowship as virtual. Even if the baptismal candidate should stay at home the pastor (or the elder in some cases)<sup>1</sup> who officiates in the baptism has to be present physically and the church members should be able to witness the baptism as well. It may, for example, be appropriate to livestream a baptismal ceremony via the internet, or on a more restricted online platform, for a larger segment of the church. However, the suggestion that the candidate could immerse himself or herself under the water to prevent physical contact with the pastor who baptizes them raises serious theological issues. Nowhere does the New Testament prescribe self-immersion as a form of baptism. Jesus was baptized by John (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–23), the eunuch was baptized by Philip (Acts 8:38–40), and Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19).

Baptism, as biblically understood, requires another person than the one being baptized to administer the ordinance. There seems to be no scriptural justification for a baptismal rite in which the candidate performs the symbolic act of immersion without the agency of a person duly appointed by the church to administer it. Baptism is carried out by the church and received by the candidate. It is not something self-administered. That baptism is something a person receives is indicated among other things by the passive voice of the verbs in Romans 6:3 where the apostle Paul states that we “have been baptized” into Christ Jesus and “were baptized” into his death. This passive formulation requires an external agency to effect the action.

We acknowledge that difficult times may occasionally require making certain adjustments so that we can perform the ministry God has entrusted to us for the benefit of the church. However, as we do so, two important aspects must be considered: First, any adjustment of the baptismal rite must not violate biblical teachings. Second, in cases such as the current pandemic, we should take into account the protocols recommended by the proper authorities to protect the health of baptismal candidates and pastors.

Thus, we suggest that pastors explore some of the following options, which are by no means exhaustive: In areas still subject to restrictions related to the pandemic, the pastor and all baptismal candidates should keep appropriate physical distancing and should wear masks when they are in close physical contact. Physical attendance at these services should take into account the protocols of the proper authorities and church officials should strive to abide by these protocols. Livestreaming the baptismal service and/or utilizing an online platform may be a way of enabling the entire congregation and many others to participate in this beautiful ceremony. Since baptism also signals one’s entrance into the body of Christ, the church, it is important also to secure the vote of the church for accepting the person being baptized into its fellowship. But in

circumstances where the health or safety of any participant is likely to be endangered, it may not be advisable or even necessary to hold gatherings that require personal contact. In such cases, it may be more prudent to delay or reschedule baptismal services until it is safe to conduct them.

Nevertheless, we must also recognize that, even in extenuating circumstances, a situation may arise in which a baptismal candidate is under the conviction of the Holy Spirit to be baptized immediately when he or she has been duly prepared for baptism. In such cases, pastors should evaluate the situation prayerfully. Like medical missionaries on the front lines fighting COVID-19, pastors are fighting the powers of darkness. In the case of a baptismal candidate, for example, who has a very short time to live, it is important for the pastor to decide how to move forward conscientiously with baptism in such a case.

### Can communion services be held online?

In order to answer this question, we need to consider the following points:

1. Communion is not a sacrament<sup>2</sup> as in some Christian denominations. From the biblical standpoint, the communion service was established by Christ as a holy memorial of His sacrifice and a witness to the hope of His second coming. Although extremely significant, the Lord’s Supper is not a means of grace, as it is for Christians who view it as a sacrament. It serves as an affirmation of our salvation but is not itself a means of salvation.
2. Although not a sacrament on which we depend for grace, the communion service is a sacred biblical ordinance that, together with baptism, the church is commanded to observe. Regarding its sanctity, the *Church Manual* states, “The service of the Lord’s Supper is just as holy today as it was when instituted by Jesus Christ. Jesus is still present when this sacred ordinance is celebrated. ‘It is at these, His own appointments, that Christ meets His people, and energizes them by His presence.’—DA 656.”<sup>3</sup>
3. Fellowship as the body of Christ in communion with our Lord is an essential aspect of the communion service. This is best achieved through “the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb 10:25) as believers, washing each other’s feet (John 13:1–17), and partaking together of the emblems of His body and blood as a symbol of our unity. As Scripture indicates, we do not eat and drink of these emblems in isolation.<sup>4</sup> The ordinance of foot washing and the Lord’s Supper belong together and, by definition, foot washing is a congregational activity. As an expression of humility, repentance and love among fellow believers, this ordinance has always served as a testimony of willing service to one another and is one of the strongest signs of Christian discipleship.
4. Neither the Bible nor the writings of Ellen G.



White prescribe the frequency for the communion service. In the early days of the Adventist Church, it was held when an ordained minister was present. This could take months and sometimes years. While the communion service should be conducted by an ordained pastor or local elder,<sup>5</sup> the frequency of this ceremony is not stipulated in Scripture. Therefore, there has never been an official position taken by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on this point, although our congregations generally celebrate communion once a quarter. The sixteenth Fundamental Belief does not prescribe a frequency, and the *Church Manual* only mentions that “usually it is part of the worship service on the next to the last Sabbath of each quarter,”<sup>6</sup> without setting an absolute standard.

5. In a virtual celebration, it would be much more difficult to follow the stipulation that an ordained pastor or local elder administer the emblems in the proper way.

Thus, virtual communion (through Zoom or any other platform) is a contradiction in terms. The fact that the communion service is sometimes given to individual believers who are sick constitutes an exception that does not break the rule of the communion being a corporate experience and an expression of the unity of the church with their Lord.

In view of the above considerations, a virtual celebration of the Lord’s Supper does not seem possible, because it would not adequately reflect the sanctity and communal character of this sacred biblical ordinance, nor would it be in harmony with the *Church Manual*. The best approach, then, would be to wait until the church as a congregation can resume worshipping together in person. Otherwise, we risk trivializing the ordinance of communion by celebrating it in an inappropriate manner that is incompatible with biblical principles. Under the present extenuating circumstances or similar circumstances that may arise in the future, we deem it prudent to patiently wait until the crisis passes so that we can celebrate the Lord’s Supper in harmony with the Scriptures and the guidelines given in the *Church Manual*.

### Can a “virtual” wedding be conducted because the pastor cannot come to the church (or location) where the couple are to be married?

When God created Adam and Eve, He joined them together in a wonderful lifelong union, called marriage (Genesis 2). In a Biblical marriage a man and a woman covenant before witnesses to have an exclusive, caring, and loving relationship with each other.<sup>7</sup> In the Old Testament, elders of a village were involved in wedding and marriage arrangements (Ruth 4). Later, in Christianity, the leaders of a church were and still are involved. Thus a Christian wedding is a ceremony in which the church seeks God’s blessing on behalf of a man and woman who want to be joined together as husband and wife. However, it should be recognized that, biblically,

marriage is not a sacrament, as some Christians hold, nor an ordinance. While always bearing in mind the biblical guidelines as they are applied in the *Church Manual*, we should be aware that wedding stipulations vary from country to country, making it difficult to establish guidelines that would be applicable everywhere. In some countries, the civil and religious wedding ceremony are one and the same, performed by a minister duly authorized by the church who is also invested with civil authority to issue the marriage certificate. In other places, separate civil and religious wedding ceremonies must be carried out. In such situations, the couple receives the marriage certificate from the proper civil authority and the religious ceremony is conducted by the minister soon afterwards.

Whatever the legal requirements may be, a “virtual” church wedding, in which the officiating pastor joins the couple in holy matrimony from a distance, should only be conducted in extenuating circumstances and when witnesses are present who can legally testify to the marriage ceremony. But every situation should be carefully weighed by the pastor in dialogue with the bride and groom. For example, are the extenuating circumstances such that the pastor would be unable to perform the wedding in person? In the case of a pandemic in which larger gatherings are not allowed by the civil authorities, various measures could be taken to reduce the risk of infection—for example, requiring masks to be worn or reducing the number of attendees. In such cases, the ceremony could be livestreamed to allow for additional invited guests.

For a virtual wedding conducted by a Seventh-day Adventist minister, two considerations apply:

1. If the minister is invested with civil authority to perform the wedding, it must be ascertained whether a virtual wedding ceremony would be legally recognized, given the potential absence of other legal procedures that may be required. If a virtual wedding ceremony can be validated by the appropriate civil authorities, there may be reason to move forward.
2. In countries where civil and religious ceremonies are separate, one should ask the question whether it is also possible for the civil wedding to be done virtually. If so, there may be a case for a virtual religious wedding. But, on the other hand, if the civil wedding requires the personal presence of the couple before the proper authorities, there may not be plausible justification for a virtual religious ceremony; otherwise, the message may be conveyed that the church wedding is on a lower level or somewhat less important, when in heaven’s view it is just as important as the civil ceremony, and perhaps more so.

Therefore, in view of the above considerations, it seems clear that we cannot be dogmatic as to the appropriateness of virtual weddings. Each case must be

assessed individually, paying close attention to biblical principles, the *Church Manual*, pertinent legal requirements, and common sense. If, in some very exceptional circumstance, a pastor is not legally allowed to be present, then there may be justification even for a virtual wedding ceremony to be remotely conducted by the minister in the presence of witnesses. However, it should be noted that a virtual ceremony can never fully substitute for the physical presence of a minister who administers the charge, the vows, and makes the declaration of marriage.

In any case, we should welcome those who have made the commitment to be united together as husband and wife in holy matrimony in accordance with biblical principles. Thus, we should do everything possible to help such couples faced with exceptional circumstances, such as the current global crisis of COVID-19, to realize their dreams even if some adjustments need to be made.

### Conclusion

Experience from the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that technology can provide resources to help us cope as families and as a church, as well as offer some solutions in certain circumstances that involve our relationship with God. However, we should be aware that virtual technology can never replace the physical presence of believers gathering together to worship the Lord. Virtual technology may bring the voices and images of preachers

and sacred music into our homes, but cannot, by itself, generate real Christian fellowship, commitment, and love. We should keep in mind that worship via Zoom and other virtual platforms are a welcome, temporary contingency during these times of social isolation. It is our hope and prayer that the effects of COVID-19 can be mitigated so that we can return to a real communion of God's people. Despite some necessary innovations during these trying times, let us not think or act as if the fellowship of believers were a thing of the past. After all, heaven is a real place where real people will be gathered around a real Person—Jesus Christ Himself.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Church Manual* permits an elder to baptize in the absence of an ordained pastor as long as permission to do so is granted by the local Conference (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2016], 75).

<sup>2</sup> A sacrament is a Christian rite that is held to be an automatic means of divine grace, typically working independently of the attitude of the one who receives it and the one who administers it.

<sup>3</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> In all the passages dealing with the communion service, the commands and references to "you" are plural (Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20; John 13:12–17; 1 Cor 11:20–26).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> On the biblical concept of marriage see Frank M. Hasel, "The Biblical Concept of Marriage in the Bible" in Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, eds., *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*. Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics, vol. 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2015), 25–48.

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*God's handiwork in nature is not God Himself in nature. . . . While nature is an expression of God's thought, it is not nature but the God of nature that is to be exalted.*

*~Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 8:263*

# Lessons from Matthew 11

By Clinton Wahlen

**M**atthew 11 opens with one of the set phrases used to conclude each of the five major blocks of teaching (cf. Matt 7:28; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Jesus has just finished instructing the twelve disciples and sending them out to preach. Now attention shifts to Jesus' missionary activity, which is summarized in Matthew as teaching and preaching (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 11:1). This is followed by a description of Jesus' identity as the Messiah and John the Baptist as His forerunner (Matt 11:2–15), of the largely negative reaction to their respective ministries (Matt 11:16–24), and of the heavenly wisdom and rest that Jesus offers (Matt 11:25–30).

## Interpretation of the Chapter

1. Verses 1–15 (relation of John to Jesus)
  - The work of Jesus in “their cities” may refer to cities associated with the twelve disciples, including Capernaum (Matt 8:5, 11) and Bethsaida (John 1:44; 12:21), which would help to explain Jesus' condemnation of them later (Matt 11:21, 23).
  - According to Josephus, John the Baptist had been imprisoned in Machaerus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.119), which was Herod Antipas' palace on the eastern side of the Jordan. Upon hearing about Jesus' ministry and, specifically, about His works as the “Christ” (that is, Messiah, cf. Matt 1:16), he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus whether He is “the Coming One” whom he spoke about, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt 3:11), or whether “we look for another.” It seems that John had begun to entertain doubts, because his expectations that God's glory would soon be revealed (Isa 40:5), the wheat gathered and the chaff burned up (Matt 3:12), and liberty proclaimed to the captives, including perhaps himself (Isa 61:1), were not being fulfilled.
  - According to Luke 7:21, Jesus did not answer John's question immediately; only after healing many does He instruct these disciples to “tell John the things which you hear and see” (Matt 11:4). Then Jesus points them to the prophecies of Isaiah, which John himself referred to when asked about the nature of his work (John 1:19–23; cf. Matt 3:3; Isa 40:3)—the blind see again (Gk. *anablepō*) and the deaf hear (cf. Isa 29:18; 35:5; 42:18; LXX 61:1), the lame walk (cf. Isa 35:6) and lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised (cf. Isa 26:19) and the poor have the gospel preached to them (cf. Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18). Texts found at Qumran (11QMelch; 4Q521) alluding to these prophecies suggest their expectation of a messianic fulfillment.
  - The blessing pronounced by Jesus on the one who finds no cause of stumbling in Him is the positive counterpart to the warnings of Isaiah 8:14–15, which Jesus alludes to in a later confrontation with religious leaders (Matt 21:44). This message made clear to John that Christ's was a spiritual kingdom, focused on an inner righteousness of the heart rather than on outward glory.
- Surprisingly, Jesus does not speak about John further until after the Baptist's disciples leave. John could not be compared to a reed that moves with the winds of popular opinion, but with Elijah who rebuked Ahab as John had rebuked Herod (Matt 14:3–4; cf. 1 Kgs 18:17–19). Nor could he be compared to kings who live in luxury (Matt 3:4; cf. 2 Kgs 1:8). Instead, John's simple manner of dress and lifestyle was in harmony with his call to repentance and reformation of heart to prepare for the coming of God to Zion (Isa 40:9).
- John was not only a prophet, but also God's messenger, in fulfillment of prophecy (Mal 3:1; cf. Mark 1:2; Luke 1:76). Yet, the “least” follower of Jesus would be greater because the kingdom of heaven was dawning, which would ultimately surpass and replace the kingdoms of this world (Matt 13:32; 19:28; 24:30). Even violent efforts made against it, including John's imprisonment and the opposition that Jesus encountered, would fail as Jesus' followers press forward to beat back the powers of darkness that oppose their advance (cf. Matt 16:18).
2. Verses 16–24 (responses to the proclamations of John and Jesus)
  - Jesus' several references to “this generation” describe the unbelief of Israel's religious leadership, despite their being given overwhelming evidence that the messages of John and Jesus were from heaven (Matt 12:41–42, 45). Their persistent failure to believe will eventually invite God's judgment (Matt 23:34–36; cf. Deut 32:20). Matthew especially focuses on the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees as epitomizing Israel's proud unbelief (Matt 5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).
  - Although some identify the children in the parable (Matt 11:16–19; Luke 7:31–35) with John and Jesus, it is told as a description of “this generation” and the children's complaints parallel the complaints against John and Jesus. The hypocrisy of “this generation” (especially the religious leadership) is like the fickleness of children who expect the people to accept their contradictory complaints against John (gloomy message, fasting—“he has a demon”) and against Jesus (popular message, feasting—“He is a glutton and wine drinker,” GNT; cf. Matt 9:14). While their lifestyles and methods were different, the motivation of John and Jesus (which these ac-

cusations ignore) was the same: both sought to draw even the marginalized into God's kingdom.

- Jesus, like John the Baptist, speaks a prophetic judgment against rejecters of the message (cf. Matt 3:7–10)—in this case whole cities. Even the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon were not as gospel-hardened as the Galilean cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (cf. Matt 15:21–28; 1 Kgs 17:8–24). Jesus even implies that, spiritually, Capernaum was worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Matt 10:15; Isa 1:10).
3. Verses 25–30 (Jesus as the Source of Wisdom and Rest)
- The words of Jesus regarding the divine revelation of wisdom and the relationship He holds, as the Son, with the Father (Matt 11:25–27) has often been compared to the lengthier discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of John and helps confirm that these kinds of sayings do indeed stem from Jesus.
  - The “wise and prudent” apparently refers to those who are “wise in their own eyes” (cf. Prov 3:7; 12:15; 26:12; Isa 5:21) and who are, therefore, unwilling to learn wisdom from God (cf. Isa 54:13). On the one hand, Jesus’ message is simple enough that even children can understand (Matt 21:16), yet also contains profound mysteries that require a willing heart and divine illumination from Jesus to grasp (Matt 11:27; 13:11–15; cf. Luke 24:45).
  - Jesus’ reference to God as “Lord of heaven and earth” (Matt 11:25) and His invitation to “Come . . . and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28) allude to the Sabbath, on which the next two stories (Matt 12:1–14) focus and, not coincidentally, Jesus there refers to Himself as “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:8, NAS95).
  - The rest that Moses and Joshua failed to give Israel, Jesus offers (cf. Heb 4:8–10)—not only in a spiritual sense, but in its truest reality when He ushers

in the kingdom of heaven “with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30; cf. 16:27).

### Application of the Chapter

Among the lessons that may be gleaned from this chapter are the following:

1. Doubts may arise in the minds of even the most dedicated followers of Jesus, but this is no reason to be discouraged or lose hope. Instead, we should reexamine the reasons for our faith and the purpose for which God has raised us up as a church.
2. Just as Elijah was a model for John the Baptist, two of them are models for us in connection with the message, life principles, and mission committed to us.
3. God's kingdom will triumph and—notwithstanding all the bad things that may happen, including the trials and suffering we may experience—we can rest in that assurance.
4. We need to take seriously the message of Jesus, not relying on our spiritual heritage or status as God's remnant people; otherwise, like many in Gideon's army, we may fall away when put to the test. Also, like the Jewish leaders and the Galilean towns that Jesus rebuked, some may not even realize the depth of their spiritual destitution.
5. The more childlike willingness to learn we have, the more we will learn from Jesus—both in terms of the truths of His kingdom and the humility and rest that characterize its citizens.



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Biblical Research Institute

*It is the Word of God alone that gives to us an authentic account of the creation of our world.*

*~Ellen G. White, Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, 13*

Matthias Dorn and  
Rolf Pöhler, eds.

## Die Schöpfung – glauben, denken, leben

(Lüneburg: Advent-

Verlag, 2018), 232 pages,  
€25.00



**M**atthias Dorn and Rolf Pöhler present a collection of essays dealing with today's relevance of the belief in creation. The purpose of the book is to present the beauty of the biblical theology of creation and to unfold its intellectual and spiritual values (p. 16). The individual essays do not primarily have a scientific focus, although scientific literature is recommended. Rather, they center upon the relationship between faith and science from a more general point of view and examine spiritual implications of the doctrine of creation. Before commenting on the book, a brief summary of each chapter is given below.

### Matthias Dorn and Rolf Pöhler, "Introduction—Writing Appropriately About Creation"

The editors begin their book by reviewing the discussion about faith and science related to matters within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which is all the more necessary, since some Adventist institutions have taught and still teach theistic evolution. The authors strongly criticize the General Conference for having revised the Sixth Fundamental Belief by using far too precise language and for not allowing any other teaching at Adventist educational institutions. Thorough information and adequate discussion with students would have accomplished more (p. 13). The defined aim of this volume is to promote the belief in creation in a theological and spiritual way.

### Matthias Dorn, "Believing in View of Creation"

What does it mean to have faith in a biblical sense? Matthias Dorn elaborates on this question and deals with common misunderstandings. Though in its fallen, not original, state, the biblical writers regarded nature as a reason to glorify God. In the scriptural passages describing nature, one can perceive a language of admiration. Dorn points out the theological difficulties that go along with the concept of theistic evolution: Creation would never be completed, but always in progress; it would be imperfect right from the beginning. God Himself, not man, would be accountable for evil, and the atonement of Christ would remedy the shortcomings of His own creative act. In the end, Dorn concludes, it seems odd to regard creation as an allegory and believe in a literal resurrection.

### Lothar Wilhelm, "Believing, Living, and Proclaiming Creation"

In his essay Wilhelm addresses four major points: how the doctrine of creation shapes our concept of man, the significance of the Sabbath, the ecological responsibility of mankind, and the difference between faith and ideology.

### Ekkehardt Mueller, "Creation in the New Testament"

This chapter evaluates the references to creation within the New Testament and their consequential implications for our understanding of creation.<sup>1</sup>

### Bernhard Oestreich, "Knowledge of God Through Creation?"

Oestreich examines the literary-historical context of Romans 1:18–21 by comparing these verses with Stoic philosophy and ideas of Hellenistic Judaism.

### Thomas Domanyi, "The Quest for Truth Between the Poles of Faith and Scholarship"

Domanyi advocates the idea that there is no conflict between faith and science, since they differ fundamentally in their objectives and topics of research.

### Jim Gibson, "Intelligent Design—Is It a Useful Concept?"

Gibson discusses the scope of different design arguments, introduces the contemporary intelligent design movement, and refutes common objections.<sup>2</sup>

### Stefan Wilhelm, "Evidence for Creation?"

Based on his own experience, Wilhelm points out both the inappropriateness of polemics as well as the indispensability of deep thinking in areas where faith and science seem to be in conflict.

### Matthias Dorn, "Alternatives to the Theory of Evolution"

Dorn argues that alternative theories must also adhere to common scientific methodologies. Informed interventionism<sup>3</sup> is a good method of conducting serious research to enlighten biblically motivated questions. Still, many questions are beyond the reach of scientific investigation (e.g., ecology before the fall). In such cases precise field work, as conducted, for example, by the *Studiengemeinschaft Wort + Wissen*, is to be preferred to mere speculation and exaggerated claims. Momentary contradictions should be acknowledged openly, and scientific problems ought to be answered with better science.

### Matthias Dorn, "Theses on the Relation of Science and Faith"

This chapter intends to summarize the subject matter of the volume in seven short theses: 1) Genesis 1–11 claims to describe reality. But since these texts contain no scientific explanatory language, they are unusable for theory formation. 2) Naturalistic sciences can only develop naturalistic theories. 3) Concerning the development of animate and inanimate nature, the explanatory power of alternative theories lags behind naturalistic ones. Micro- and macroevolution are well-founded, but mega-evolution is not. 4) There is a lack of alternative research, 5) which is partly due to the currently propagated system in natural sciences. 6) Neither evolutionary nor alternative theories are to be dogmatized. 7) We seek scientific theories that are complementary to the biblical account.

In my view, the first three theses are more than just summaries, since they by far exceed the statements of the preceding chapters. The first thesis pronounces the

primeval history as unusable for theory formation. This is much too general, since according to Jesus' reading, Genesis 1–11 provides at least some definite and crucial points, although not containing “scientific explanatory language” (p. 207). Regarding the second thesis, it has to be said that a naturalistic methodology should not be limited to naturalism, but rather should also play an integral part in alternative theories (cf. chap. 6 and p. 201). Most astonishing, however, is the third thesis, which not only considers micro-evolution but also macro-evolution as well-founded (p. 208). How Dorn comes to this conclusion is anything but obvious, since all the literature he recommends at the end of the book (pp. 227–229) presents strong arguments against macro-evolution and thereby contradicts this thesis.

### Rolf Pöhler, “Meditation—Creation and Faith”

Pöhler describes how a belief in creation answers the deepest questions of humanity, endowing it with purpose and meaning.

### Comments

While reading the collective volume, three major points attract attention:

#### Understanding of Creation

Different passages give rise to the question of whether the authors regard Genesis 1–11 as being of historical significance, or whether they consider only its theology to be inspired (cf. pp. 13, 29, 46, 52, 55 n. 43, 131, 165, 207). In reference to the creation account, the editors warn against regarding “one particular reading as the only true one” (p. 14). It is difficult to not understand this as a call for theological arbitrariness, against which the authors themselves argue (p. 9).

Domanyi's approach that faith and science cannot contradict each other, since they differ in their objectives and topics of research, is a prominent idea also referred to as Nonoverlapping Magisteria (NOMA). Unfortunately, it does not satisfactorily reflect the complex relationship between biblical revelation and scientific methodology, entailing a certain way of reading Scripture that a priori limits divine revelation to the realm beyond scientific exploration. In contrast, Lothar Wilhelm and Matthias Dorn expound the approach of Ellen G. White, where both Scripture and nature are regarded as divine revelation. They believe that their connection forms a cohesive whole and that apparent contradictions are due to either poor science or inaccurate interpretation of the Bible (pp. 79, 207).

However, Domanyi goes much further and argues that there are no infallible biblical doctrines and therefore we should beware of fixed dogmas (p. 139). The purported lack of absolute truth in the Christian faith should be looked upon as a good thing, for otherwise tolerance would be at risk (pp. 139–140). These propositions are quite radical and questionable. To pronounce in advance that God's revelation is so unclear that not one sound dogma can be derived from it is a very problematic foundation, to say the least. It is for-

bearance with human imperfection, not the imprecision of divine revelation, that calls for tolerance.

In the face of widely varying understandings of creation, it is not surprising that most authors criticize the revised fundamental belief of a recent creation in six literal days. They regard the specification of the sixth Fundamental Belief as unfortunate, since God's creative act is “not revealed” and “beyond the reach of theoretical or experimental knowledge” (p. 40).

Lothar Wilhelm argues that the biblical account of a six-day creation makes no statement concerning the time frame in which creation took place (p. 55 n. 43), nor does it explain “how everything came into being, which God created by His word” (p. 46). Rather, it sheds light on questions like origin, identity, and meaning. Likewise, nowhere does the Bible say anything about the time *when* creation occurred (p. 81 n. 142). Therefore, the revision of the sixth Fundamental Belief, speaking of a *recent* creation, is a problem for L. Wilhelm.

Stefan Wilhelm speaks against committing ourselves to literal creation days, as relativistic effects would rule out such precise statements concerning time (p. 168). While being true in a technical sense, this objection sounds a little far-fetched, since for inhabitants of our earth—to whom the Lord is speaking—such relativistic effects are in the realm of split seconds only.

Apart from these factual points of critique, it unfortunately must be noted that the introduction of the book contains polemics. The editors speak of “fundamentalist tendencies within the world church leadership,” identify the reformulated fundamental belief as “tendentious infiltrate” (p. 15), and consider words like “Adventist inquisition” (p. 15) and “witch-hunt” (pp. 16, 42) as appropriate. A more objective language, free of derogative comments, would be desirable.

After a systematic analysis of New Testament passages, Ekkehardt Mueller comes to the conclusion that in our understanding of creation we should follow Jesus, for whom “a literal and definite reading of Genesis 1 and 2 . . . appears to be a suitable approach to scripture” (p. 101). At the end of his essay, however, the editors state in a short epilogue that this article merely used a different methodology, without further theological reflections. It would be desirable, instead of such a sweeping remark, to have a concrete discussion of the opposing positions that are tacitly presented side by side in this book.

#### Handling Theological Differences

The editors open their introduction with a clear statement: “The message of God as Creator of the world is indispensable for biblically oriented faith. Its abandonment or adaptation to contemporary views would lead to an unrecognizable distortion of the Christian faith and to spiritual arbitrariness” (p. 9). It is therefore surprising that Dorn, referring to “the admittedly clear dogmatic difference between theistic evolution and traditional faith in creation,” comes to the conclusion that

such doctrinal differences should also be endured within the Adventist Church (p. 43). If you go by the lowest common denominator defined by Dorn here, Baptists, Catholics, or Methodists as well could become members of the Adventist Church. If one does not want to slip into the arbitrariness mentioned in the introduction, there must exist clear basic convictions. The question about creation or (theistic) evolution is not a matter of trifles but, as Dorn aptly puts it, of “clear dogmatic differences.” In view of this delicate topic, polarizing vocabulary such as “know-it-all,” “defamation,” and “withdrawal of love” (p. 43) should have been avoided in order to not put obstacles in the way of an appreciative dialogue.

### Conflicting Opinions

While the editors hold the view that creation can neither be scientifically tested nor proven (pp. 14–15, 40), Lothar Wilhelm suggests on the basis of Romans 1:19–20 that at least God’s “eternal power and His divinity” are evident (p. 63). Gibson agrees with this and points the reader, as an example, to the design argument in the case of the origin of life (chemical evolution), which he considers to be clear evidence of an intelligent Designer (p. 159). However, Oestreich in his analysis of the same biblical text claims that this natural knowledge of God has no apologetic-missionary value at all, but only serves to accuse all people (p. 124). Pöhler, on the other hand, ascribes even less evidential weight to nature when he claims that “there is no ob-

jective, compelling proof for what we believe—the existence of God, the truth of the Bible, the fulfillment of its prophecies, the creation of the world, etc.—apart from faith” (p. 220). In view of these profound disagreements over the general approach to the Word of God and to nature and over their information content, a discussion would be very helpful.

### Conclusion

The book offers various theological reasons that underline the relevance of a belief in creation in this day and age, some of which are even penned in artistic German. However, the approaches and ideas presented by the various authors diverge widely. A transparent and open discussion of these theological differences would add much to the clarity of the book.<sup>4</sup>

Reviewed by  
G. Engel

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a translation of the English article published in *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15, no. 1 (2004): 47–62.

<sup>2</sup> This chapter is a reprint of the article published in *Ministry*, December 2005, 12–14; and February 2006, 13–17.

<sup>3</sup> As outlined in Leonard Brand, “Naturalism and an Alternative,” chap. 5 in *Faith, Reason, and Earth History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> A German translation of the book review is available on the BRI website at: <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/de/materials/science-and-religion-creation/die-sch%C3%B6pfung-%E2%80%93-glauben-denken-leben>

*The deepest students of science are constrained to recognize in nature the workings of infinite power. But to man’s unaided reason, nature’s teaching cannot but be contradictory and disappointing. Only in the light of revelation can it be read aright.*

~Ellen G. White, *Education*, 134

# Index to *Reflections*

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