

The *iFollow* Discipleship Series



# Beginning your Spiritual Journey

*Six important possibilities for  
your new life with Christ*

by  
Dan Day

***i*FOLLOW**

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# Introduction

## “You’re On the Way!”

by Ivan Williams

**T**he spiritual journey is the most important of life’s passages. It touches the deepest longings of the soul. It shapes our future and gives us hope to continue on when we’re in crisis or when we become discouraged. It is a pathway, but it is not one we walk alone. Jesus walks it with us.

Some of us come from Christian homes, where we were introduced to Jesus at our mother’s knees, as stories of faith were read to us and we had a chance to see Jesus in the lives of our parents and the other people in our world. Spiritual things were part of the web of life. In that case, we may seemingly “discover” one day that we’re on the path. “Oh, hi, Jesus,” we say, seeing that He is walking along with us. “It feels as though I’ve always been walking along with You.” We reach out and take His hand, knowing for certain that He would never lead us astray.

He reaches out and takes our hand and says, “I’m glad you finally noticed that I was here with you.”

For others, though, the beginning point is more sudden. It is quite obvious and dramatic. It may be that we’ve reached out to God in some moment of crisis, and found Him there. Or we may have come face to face with Him in a week of prayer or an evangelistic meeting—where we’ve found Him to be the answer to our questions and the fulfillment of our deepest needs. Before that moment we weren’t on a spiritual path, but after it, we are. When we see Jesus walking with us, we fall down on our knees and worship Him. We say, “Oh, Lord! Thank You for touching my life and making me whole!” The emotion is deep and compelling—and we can hardly wait to tell others about what happened to us.

Because our paths can be so different, it is important to have an opportunity to think about what it means to be on the path, in intentional terms, with structure and illustration. We need to be able to see the cross streets and off ramps. We need to observe the road markers and speed signs. We need someone to remind us of the rules of the road and to be our “navigator,” to be sure we get where we want to go.

Beginning Your Spiritual Journey by Dan Day is deliberately aimed at making sure each of us has the tools we need to begin our spiritual journey. He has attempted to take into account how distinctive we are as newborn children

of God and to position us to start down our own individual spiritual journey with confidence and courage.

The book consists of only six chapters, so it's an easy read whether you're reading it on your own or in a small group at church. Each chapter represents specific considerations that we need to apply in our own individual way as we prepare ourselves for the journey. The tools in this book represent backpack, bottle of water, compass, and walking stick we carry while hiking. They're things to remember if we want to begin the spiritual journey in the best way possible.

One of the things you will find in this book is an acute awareness of the fact that you are beginning your spiritual journey in the 21st century—a world that is quite distinctive. The expectations for what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist today are quite different from what they might have seemed years ago. When people look at the church today, they are not asking about what doctrines we believe—even though these are very important to us (and will be to them, over the long term). They are not even asking about Jesus, because there is so much disappointment over what religious people have done and are doing in His name.

What people are asking to see today is an evidence that God has changed us into men and women who care about the needs of the community and environment, who are engaged in reaching out to make a difference in people's lives. They want our words about Jesus to match our actions. They want to see us ministering in the same way He ministered in the streets of ancient Palestine.

In other words, people today want to take a hard look at the path we're on as Christians to see if it's a path that goes anywhere they want to go. In previous generations, the conversation was mostly about "getting out of this world," about matters of personal salvation and believing in what the Bible teaches. Both of these things still matter today, of course. People today want to be saved, too. People want to know what the Bible teaches. But if they look down the path we're walking and see indifference, bigotry, or closed-mindedness, they wonder if Jesus is really on the path with us. If they look down the path and they don't see a commitment to ministering as Jesus ministered, which included going out on the streets and touching lives with healing and hope, they wonder if the path we're on is the path Jesus is walking.

*Beginning Your Spiritual Journey* acknowledges that if you're reading this book you may be in one of several groups. You may have just become a Christian or an Adventist, and you're really just starting out—full of hope and high expectations. If you're in this category, you want to be sure you are starting right

so your spiritual growth will be sure and you won't succumb to any of the pitfalls along the road.

Or else you may be someone who has been in the church and left—and who is coming back, in the hope that you can get it right this time. If you're in this category, you probably have some idea concerning what caused you to leave and how you fell off the pathway, and you want to be sure you get it right.

You may even be someone who has been in the church for years, but who has never really connected with Jesus in a personal way. If you're in this category, you may have been on the road, walking in place, but going nowhere. If that sounds anything like you, you want to be sure you get out of the doldrums and make real progress in growing in Jesus.

In any case, there is hope and help to be found in *Beginning Your Spiritual Journey* for each reader, whatever group you're in—or even if none of these categories fit you. You will find ideas you can use, along with resources that make a real difference as you start out with Jesus. If you're reading the book alone or in a small group, you will find help for the road ahead. I urge you to take the fullest advantage of everything you find inside these pages. It has all been prepared with you in mind.

May God richly bless you as you begin your spiritual journey with your hand in the hand of Jesus, our Savior, Redeemer, and Lord. Trust God to be with you all along the way. He will speak to you words of encouragement and point out potholes along the way so you can avoid them and continue on with overcoming victory. Trust Him to keep you safe and show you the right places to step.

# Chapter One

## Why should I care about Adventists in today's secular world?

To be a saint is to live not with hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews.<sup>1</sup>

**A**dventists want to be saints. We want to be warm and real: the sort of people who make a difference in our world, who are able to stretch our hands out to others in need, and do it in ways that seem sincere and compassionate—and not at all arrogant or self-righteous. We want to be more than just another group of religious people, echoing familiar religious themes that no one wants to hear. We want to be *restorers*, not just critics or the sort of cloistered saints who are so heavenly-minded that we're no earthly good. We want to be like Buechner suggests in the quote above: “strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater in the world that mends and renews.”

We want to believe that there is hope for renewal and restoration, and that we can play some part in that effort.

“Why should I care?” It's a fundamental question, one virtually everyone asks today—in every context of life, but particularly in terms of what Christians

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 119.



say to the people in their communities. What it really means—in the context of these pages—is: “What is it that Adventists have to offer me that would make my life better?” Or maybe: “In what ways is the Adventist message so important that I should drop what I’m doing and pay attention?”

I’m not going to mince words: I’ll be making a fairly simple case all through the book. It is that the Adventist “brand” is significant; I’m going to be asserting that our message matters because of who Adventist people are, even if we’re not all living up, all the time, to what the brand infers. The ideas behind the church are worth noting because the people who hold the ideas are people worth listening to, especially when we’re responding to the “better angels” of our experience and letting ourselves be led by our values.

In our contemporary culture, people are less interested in what we have to say—what we profess to believe and argue, theologically—than what they see us doing, both in terms of how we treat the people around us and where we stand on matters like social justice and religious generosity, along with transparency of faith and practice.

Now, I’m not saying that the ideas or theological beliefs of Adventists shouldn’t (or couldn’t) stand for themselves; I’ll be arguing that what Adventists believe, both doctrinally and in terms of our practice, is powerful, on its own—that our beliefs are biblical and logical, and all the rest. But I’m also acknowledging what we all know to be true: that ideas which sound great in theory don’t always pan out in the rough and tumble of human experience.

That guy who tells you his vacuum will pick up everything, including pet hair and steel balls, seems so sincere. That shapely young woman, promising that if you’ll buy her exercise machine you’ll soon look like her, seems to be your friend, telling you nothing but the truth. But when we’ve paid the money, all too often, we find we’re on our own. The products never seem to be as great as the claims, and we’re disappointed and disillusioned—and, even worse, when we call customer service we seem to get “Peggy,” who actually lives in India or Siberia, and can’t seem to understand our problem or help us get it fixed. Often, even though they speak English, these people don’t really understand very much about our setting or needs.

The parallels to the church and our witness should be clear.

When Jesus said to His disciples, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,”<sup>2</sup> He was speaking to this very issue. Religion, in a very real sense, is less about what you *say* than what you *do*. It is less

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<sup>2</sup>John 13:35 (NIV).



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## ADVENTIST VOICES PAST AND PRESENT

- To be credible, our deeds must match our words. And our deeds must conform to justice, fairness, honesty. The temple police sent to arrest Jesus found their hands tied by an invisible cord; for before them stood the rarest of all behavioral phenomena, namely, the manifestation of complete correspondence of word and action in a human person. “Never man spake like this man,” they said (John 7:46, KJV). Because never man lived like this Man. Roy Adams, *Adventist Review*, April 23, 2009, p. 6
- Until we care enough to confront and resolve the underlying barriers, we will never grow close to God or each other. Since we are family, we need to protect and defend the family at all cost. A family member may be a little goofy, but is still one of us. We all have quirks and annoying habits, but the basis of our fellowship is our relationship with God. This is how we become the family of God.  
Steve Jencks, *Adventist Review*, May 12, 2011, p. 29
- Just as we are to be staunch servants of Christ in our homes and in the church, so God expects us to be His true disciples in the community where we live. Through consistent Christian lives the light of God is to shine out into the neighborhood where we reside. Our conduct should ever be such that even though neighbors and friends may consider us peculiar because of some of our religious beliefs and practices, they can never escape the conviction that we are Christians.  
A. V. Olson, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 1, 1947, p. 10

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about what you claim to stand for than about how you actually treat the people around you. I know that some theologians would find that too simplistic, wanting religion to be about lofty concepts and intricate theologies. But I’m just telling it like it is. When the apostle Paul wrote, “No wonder we do not lose heart! Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed,”<sup>32</sup> he was promising what we all are hoping to find—people who are inwardly renewed, who show that they’re Jesus’ disciples by the love displayed in their lives. It’s not about theory; it’s about transformation.

In simplest terms, if *you* don’t matter, as an individual or a group, whatever it is you have to *say* doesn’t matter either. If what Adventists are saying and doing doesn’t equate to value in today’s world—in *your* world—there is no reason for you to pay attention. It’s all about relevance. As members of the church, we may matter to one another, of course; however, we’ll never matter to you—unless

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<sup>32</sup> Corinthians 4:16 (NEB).

we're *earning* the right to be heard.

Now, after I've said all this, some—with too much time on their hands—will no doubt want to lecture me about “truth.” “If the Bible says it, it's true,” they'll assert, giving me a hard look. Then they'll add, “People ought to believe it because it's in the Bible.”

Sure, okay. Let me be very clear: I agree with those sentiments. I fully accept the line of reasoning that the Bible is God's Word and that we should all follow it. But the problem is, many in our audience don't. All the statistics show that most of the people we meet—including those in our secular audience (those who are in churches *and* those who aren't)—no longer find the “it's biblical” argument to be persuasive.<sup>4</sup>

So, what do we do? Wash our hands of them and head off into the sunset singing a gospel song and forgetting that we've failed? The fact that people don't automatically resonate with our biblical message doesn't mean we can't lead them down a path that results in their believing in the Bible. It just means we can't *start* there.

In addition to being Bible-believing Christians (or irrespective of it, if you choose), Adventists deserve the world's attention on the basis of who we are and how we're displaying the character of Jesus. I believe people should care about Adventists because what we're bringing to the conversation matters—in terms relevant to *them*. And it's my job to show how that is true.

When I was a teenager, I was a bit like Peter Pan, I suppose, in that I didn't really want to grow up. (I'll never forget the image of Mary Martin, playing Peter Pan, standing with her hands on her hips and singing, “I'll never grow up, I'll never grow up!”) I suspect that many guys follow a similar pattern; we'd like to keep playing games and shirking responsibility. I mean, who wouldn't want to remain a child if he could? We get taken care of, and if we scream, people generally rush to get what we want. What a deal!

It's a guy-thing, something we've spent years perfecting—and we're not about to give it up now, when we're famous for it.

As a result, though, it's probably the case that I've clung to a bit of adolescent behavior a little too long. For example, in those days my mouth got me into more than my share of trouble. The truth was, I wasn't all that big, height-wise. So, I had to win my place among the thugs I ran with by pretending to be tough. My

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<sup>4</sup>There are many places you can go to verify this. I'd suggest you spend some time with “Barna Updates,” (just type it into your browser) where you will find regular articles based on research on what “born-again Christians” actually believe. I suspect you'll be surprised at what you find.



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## INSPIRED THOUGHTS

- There may be marked defects in the character of an individual, yet when he becomes a true disciple of Jesus, the power of divine grace makes him a new creature. Christ's love transforms, sanctifies him. But when persons profess to be Christians, and their religion does not make them better men and women in all the relations of life—living representatives of Christ in disposition and character—they are none of His.”  
E. G. White, *The Sanctified Life*, p. 55
- Now that Jesus has ascended to heaven, His disciples are His representatives among men, and one of the most effective ways of winning souls to Him is in exemplifying His character in our daily life. Our influence upon others depends not so much upon what we say as upon what we are. Men may combat and defy our logic, they may resist our appeals; but a life of disinterested love is an argument they cannot gainsay. A consistent life, characterized by the meekness of Christ, is a power in the world.  
E. G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 141
- The true Christian is bent on doing good, not only to his own family, but to all who come within the sphere of his influence. Many ways of usefulness will open before the willing, aspiring, devoted soul, who wants to labor for the salvation of others, thus improving the only means God has provided whereby Christians can grow to the full stature of men and women in Christ Jesus. The more such persons do, the more they will see to do, and the more earnest will they be to have a part in every good work for the up-building of the kingdom of Christ. It will be their meat and drink to benefit their fellow-men and glorify God.  
E. G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 10, 1860

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preferred comeback to any argument was a careless sneer and the words, “So, who cares?”

Yes, it is true I had a fairly troubled youth, and yes, my words did result in a few fistfights, with broken knuckles and knife scars, but what can I say? I was who I was. Of course, today I’m much better at that sort of thing—far more mature and full of restraint (please don’t ask my wife for a confirmation). Some might argue that my mouth (or pen) continues get me in a bit of trouble now and then, but that’s another story.

By that taunting question, “So, who cares?” I was thumbing my nose at the world. I was declaring I was too cool to be moved by anything coming from the other person. “Maybe you think you know more than I do, but I don’t care what

you have to say! So, there!” I was using my supposed lack of interest as a method to extract myself from the conversation. Of course, being a teenager—caught up in my own journey of self-discovery (which wasn’t going so well)—I always cared far more than I would ever let on.

Still, the question, “So, who cares?” and its twin, “Why should I care?” are fairly fundamental to any effort to persuade. It’s the one we have to answer, generally, before anything good happens. You can tell me what it is you want from me, and I can see the logic behind your intention, but unless I can see how it matters to *me*, I’m probably not going to respond in the way you want.

In spite of its inevitability, some of us in the Christian community don’t much like the “why should I care?” question. That’s because we’d like to believe the answers should be obvious—given that we know so much about faith, and life, and God. We believe that everyone should care about what God says in His Word, and we’re a bit stunned when people give us a blank stare and walk away.

I spent many years as a professional marketer, so I’m very sensitive to the ways in which customers (and that’s what anyone we approach with the gospel is—a customer) are unwilling to respond to our offering unless it speak to their needs. We can persuade ourselves that we don’t have to “sell” the gospel because we’re dealing with matters of ultimate value, but in our arrogance we’re failing in our efforts to reach others. We’re the ones who are letting God down. As the apostle Paul put it, “Let your conversation be always gracious, and never insipid; study how best to talk with each person you meet.”<sup>5</sup> That “studying how to talk with each person you meet” is marketing, pure and simple. And at the very center of marketing is this question, “Why should I care?”

When I click on iTunes, the first thing that happens is that Apple tells me all the new artists and new songs I should care about. I know they’ve got all these algorithms and such, but I’m still impressed that they know me so well that they’re able to anticipate what I’ll want to hear. When I click on Google News, somebody has already determined which stories they think will be the most important to me. Google has accumulated so much information on me that they “know” what I care about, and are now able to recommend things to me that are predicted to capture my imagination.

In each case, somebody else is trying to decide for me what I should care about, and none of us like that much, do we? I don’t always agree that I should care about what others have chosen for me—but the remarkable “miracle” of modern technology is that they’ve got me. They do, in fact, know enough about

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<sup>5</sup>Colossians 4:6 (NEB).



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## RESOURCES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- Integrity requires you to be congruent in what you say and what you do; you must walk your talk. When you stand and walk with integrity, your actions match what you say you believe and value. This was certainly true for Lincoln. As his friend and law partner attests, Lincoln was unmovable on such high-stakes issues as justice, liberty, and humanity. For Lincoln, aligning his actions with his values was as necessary and natural as breathing.  
Gloria Burgess, *Dare to Wear Your Soul on the Outside: Live Your Legacy Now*, p. 99
- The most enduring lesson is that one human being can make a difference in this world. The individuals who become caregivers, the firemen and policemen who put their lives at risk to save others, and the millions of human beings who perform countless acts of kindness for others—teaching children in cancer wards how to draw, prisoners training seeing-eye guide dogs in their cells for blind people, and those countless people who make a difference in others' lives by noticing them and giving them hope.  
Hal Giesecking, *Reinvent Yourself*, p. 158
- While the vision, mission, and values of a congregation are important, it is this type of passion that makes the largest difference. We are not “doing church” to provide a nice place for people to stop by before they go to brunch. We are about making a difference, and highly effective congregations have a sense of urgency about making that difference.  
Rick Morse, *From Our Doorsteps: Developing a Ministry Plan That Makes Sense*, p. 129

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my preferences that the stuff they give me is, actually, what I want. Sometimes, of course, I find nothing I really care about on iTunes and no stories on Google I want to read. When this happens, I wonder if I'm too shallow or unsophisticated to see the value in what others have chosen for me (and I find myself trying to do better), or I'm afraid I don't know *myself* as well as they do.

What we care about defines us.

If we follow a particular sports team, that says something about who we are. Some people are passionate about sports, while others find such a passion pedestrian. If, when we read the newspaper, we turn first to the business news, or to the comics section, or to the fashion or entertainment news, that says something about us, too. We are defined a little by whether we read a paper newspaper or get all our news online—and whether we watch C-SPAN or Fox News. On the ABC Sunday news show, the last thing they do (at the time I'm writing this) is run through the names of those who have died during the week, mostly in Iraq

and Afghanistan. That says something about ABC, doesn't it?

I'm always fascinated by what captures my imagination—because I know it will shape what I will do. I'm a watercolorist in my spare time, and I know from years of experience that the quality of my painting is based entirely on the level of enthusiasm I have for a particular project. If I am excited about a scene displayed in a photograph I've taken, I can translate it onto paper in a way that pleases me. In other words, I have to be inspired to paint well. This doesn't always work, and some paintings get trashed. But it is the only way that ever works, when it does.

The same thing is true about what we do in the rest of our lives.

When we make significant choices in life, like what church to join, they emerge from our experience and needs, not from our planning. The decisions we make in life are rarely driven by intellectual persuasion. We don't *think* ourselves into the major transitions in life. We don't develop a strategy and then follow that plan in an organized, systematic manner—built around logic and evidence. Some people do this more than others, it's true; but we're all people of emotion. And I'm not just talking about the people on Judge Judy or Jerry Springer.

We take into account certain information we gather from various sources, of course. We're not emotional junkies. But in the end, we all do what we do because it feels right for us. It's only when we can "see ourselves in that picture," that we step ahead into some new set of circumstances.

Adventists, generally, misunderstand this.

If you're contemplating becoming an Adventist, you need to understand this about us—especially if you're going to get inside our heads. Adventists think the world is shaped by ideas, and that if we persuade people our ideas are better than theirs—especially if they're biblical—that people will go, "I see that! That's what the Bible teaches and it's what I want in my life. By George, I'm going to do it!"

Now, this belief among Adventists isn't a character flaw. It's not something in the church that I want to criticize, somehow, or even change. It would be wonderful if people *did* approach things on this basis, and I'd like to see more of it. It represents a hopeful view of humanity that I would love to embrace. And it may even be that it does work somewhat that way with some people, some of the time. But it's my experience that it doesn't usually work very well or last forever. We do

**We need to understand the broad scope of Bible teachings before we're going to be able to apply specific interpretations made from some individual part.**

what we do for personal reasons.

The first question we're addressing here in our conversation—Why should I care about Adventists in today's world?—is a fundamental one, tied to value. The easiest course for you, under any circumstances, is to do nothing about becoming an Adventist. Just go ahead and stand pat. Your life will almost certainly experience the least disruption if you disregard everything Adventist and remain whatever you are now—whatever it is. If you're an agnostic, you will be most comfortable if you stay one. If you're a Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Buddhist, a Moslem, or a fundamentalist Pentecostal—whatever—you will experience the least life-changing repercussions if you just stay where you are.

*Don't become an Adventist if you can help it.*

I know that's a rather shocking statement, coming from someone who's trying to make the case for Adventism. But I'm serious. It's kind of like getting married. When you're single, you're in absolute control over the television. If you want to leave your socks on the floor, nobody is going to give you dirty looks—or pick up after you and then make you pay for it. If you want to sit on the floor and eat potato chips, rather than fix a real meal, nobody but your scale will know the difference. If you want to miss showering for two days, who will care, other than your cat, who'll probably take one sniff and run off to hide?

You should never get married if you want things to remain the same in your world—because they won't once you do. You should only get married when you've met someone who makes you *want* to pick up your socks, shower, and share meals.

Do you see my point? Frankly, there are already too many Adventists who grew up in the church and never fell in love with it. You'll see them hanging around the church but not really engaged. If you choose to join the church, you will almost certainly encounter some of them. They sit around and complain about how the preacher in their church isn't as dynamic as the guy in the next town, or how the praise group doesn't sing on key or sings too loudly or too softly. I could go on, but you get the point. You should only become an Adventist when you can't envision any other course for you. I mean it. It should be a hard decision that you're prepared to live with—like wedding vows.

### **Why should you care?**

So, what is there to care about in Adventism? Well, let's start with some demographics. Our numbers are growing rapidly, as I noted earlier, and as I write this there are about 17 million of us in the world today. The church started here





## OTHER VOICES

- Everything you say and everything you do has to prove what you believe. A WHY is just a belief. That's all it is. HOWs are the actions you take to realize that belief. And WHATs are the results of those actions—everything you say and do: your products, services, marketing, PR, culture and whom you hire. If people don't buy WHAT you do but WHY you do it, then all these things must be consistent. With consistency people will see and hear, without a shadow of a doubt, what you believe. After all, we live in a tangible world. The only way people will know what you believe is by the things you say and do, and if you're not consistent in the things you say and do, no one will know what you believe.  
Simon Sinek, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, p. 127
- Being relevant to the world means you have to be able to actually do something that's relevant to the community in the larger sense, the culture in which you live. Maybe you know how to pour concrete. Maybe it's you have good computational skills, you know how to program. Maybe it's that you're a doctor or a religious person. But being relevant to the world is to do something that contributes to the conduct of the civilized society. You could be the most secure and hardest working person of all, but if you're doing something that's not relevant that's not part of a bigger picture, to what end then? You're not going to achieve success in part because there's no basis on which to measure the success! Just being relevant means you've got to be able to perform in a way that goes beyond mere self-gratification. That constitutes useful or productive labor.—Richard Parsons, Chairman and CEO, Time Warner, Inc.  
Doris Lee McCoy, *America's New Future: 100 New Answers*, pp. 205, 206
- Paul Tillich, with his facility for language and theoretical formulation, picked just the right word to describe his pursuit of the meaning of health and the relation of religion and health: Thymos—"the courage to be." If we choose to live, we choose not only joy and love, peace and fulfillment; we must also accept the other side of the package. Since life is not open ended, and since we don't know how long it will last, hadn't we better do some living? Find ways of making the most of the time we do have? Discover the meaning in every single event in our lives, so that we can choose and develop the most significant aspects of them?  
Donald A. Read, *Health Education: A Cognitive-Behavioral Approach*, p. 7

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in North America, but we soon became committed to the idea of taking the gospel to the world, as Jesus commissioned,<sup>6</sup> and now a full 16 million of that 17

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<sup>6</sup>Matthew 28:19.

million live outside North America, in what we used to call the mission field.

How did that happen? No other church has had this happen. Was it accidental or on purpose? Did it just happen, or was it virtually inevitable, given our values? This leads us to the first reason you should care:

**First of all, you should care about Adventists because we care about you and your needs and are working to make things better.** The Adventist perspective is shaped entirely by a world in desperate need of redemption and restoration. This perspective has changed us; it led us to turn away from the navel-gazing you sometimes see in religious people (not that I'm pointing fingers), and sent us out to save a world with the good news of salvation, along with the good deeds to back it up. In other words, you should care because of our mission. The change in perspective I just described represents a fairly significant set of deeply-held priorities, to which we've hitched our wagon.

Not all churches take the path we've chosen. The typical evangelical church is preoccupied mostly with individual salvation. "Getting saved" is the predominant theme of church life, and working to get other people saved is what the members do. It's all about escaping this world. Now, I'm not "dissing" getting saved. As a part of the Christian message, it is very important. I wouldn't want to take anything away from it. If that's what you're mostly interested in, as a reason to go to church, there are plenty of churches available to you that will help you along that process. It's what they do, after all. It's what they care about.

Adventists care about personal salvation, too. Some of us are just as oriented toward getting saved as any evangelical. At some level, we're all interested in a saving relationship with Jesus—and no Adventist will deny the centrality of this.

However, one of the first things you will notice about Adventists is that we are also concerned about other things. We believe that God has put us here to deliver a message to the world that contains several key elements. These include things like drawing attention back to the seventh-day Sabbath, a message of wholistic health, Christian education, and a call to get ready for a climactic set of events that will usher in the end of time. We have a list of 28 fundamental beliefs that you can find in several places.<sup>7</sup> But we're mostly interested in living in ways that reflect our relationship with Jesus and help people prepare for these last-day events.

Are other Christians also interested in more than getting saved? Sure they

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<sup>7</sup>Type in "Seventh-day Adventist" or "North American Division" in your browser, and you'll quickly find such a list.

are; but Adventists paint with a larger palette of colors. For most evangelicals there is getting saved up on one level (a big blotch of paint), and a lot of other things way down on another level (with tiny dabs of color). For Adventists, there are a bunch of things we find important. We'll be explaining what these are all through the rest of the book—but I suspect many of them will be obvious to you.

**The second reason you should care about Adventists is because we are engaged in what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus.** Adventists have a “big picture” approach to what it means to be a Christian. When you look at what Adventists are doing in the world, with the fact that we have a health care system that is in many ways unique, that we have the second largest Christian education system in North America, that we have ministries of compassion associated with so many of our churches—and a score of other distinctive engagements—it's clear we are taking some distinctive stands.

One of the things that is distinctively true about young people today is that they care about what is happening in the world. Part of this is due to the impact of media, and social media in particular. The world is far more connected today than it has ever been before. Many people, who just a few years ago were lost in rigid, agrarian societies, are now connected by cell phones with the broader world. You can't look at the so-called “Arab Spring,” and how it was carried out, and not realize that something fundamental has changed about the world.

What it means to be a Christian today takes on a whole new set of priorities, due to the ways in which the world has changed around us. Many of the preoccupations of evangelical Christianity, even in terms of the emotional emphasis within the charismatic community, just doesn't seem big enough any more. In some ways, Adventists are leading out in this, but we're learning, too.

Disciples of Jesus are *players*, today. The whole discipleship issue, the one we're featuring in these iFollow discipleship resources, is of significance for Adventists. We believe that it matters what we do as Christians, to work with God in His effort to cause church members to grow into greater spiritual maturity. It's one thing to accept Jesus as your Savior; but it's another to allow God to use you in His way in whatever work He is doing in the world. The truth is, God is at work. He is bringing human history to a close and He wants to use each of us in His larger plan. He wants to use us as “restorers,” and “reconcilers.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>2 Corinthians 5:18.

**Third, you should care about Adventists because of our pervasive and vital-ly-needed apocalyptic message.** Adventists see themselves as delivering a call to embrace the values of Jesus in a world on its way to destruction. There is no way to sugarcoat Adventist belief, here. We think we're delivering the message of God to a dying world. In Revelation 14, with what Adventists call the "Three Angels' Messages," we find a call to return to God in the face of the end of all things, as we know them.

Adventists believe we, as a church, have been called into existence, in a distinctive way, in order to share this message with the world. So, as we see ourselves, we're not just another denomination. We represent a movement of destiny, a call to share with the world a final appeal to turn to Jesus in the face of catastrophe.

I know this may seem a bit messianic, or even extremist, as though we have something to say that everyone ought to hear—and that everyone should stop what they're doing and listen. But there you have it. We *do* believe God has called us out to tell people that the end is coming and that there is still hope if they'll turn to Jesus.

I also realize this message is a bit out of step with what some other denominations are saying and doing. They're mostly about getting saved, as we've said, while we're concerned about this final movement in human history and what we need to be doing to support God in His final work. But I don't want to minimize the significance of such a distinctive message—or fail to emphasize how it changes things for us.

We are who we are. Frankly, if you feel God has put you in place to give such a message, you have to *act* on it. You either give the message or you don't. And if you don't (but it's right), God is going to find someone else to deliver it.

Adventists don't spend all our time worrying about the "last days," though. It's just something that is always part of us, something that contributes to every explanation of what priorities we set, how we spend budgets, and how we see our personal engagement with the world around us.

**Then, you should care about Adventists because what we have to say is both contemporary and relevant.** It is certainly true that the Adventist message was largely formed in the middle 1800s. Our founder, in most significant ways, was Ellen White, a relatively uneducated woman with little or no preparation to become a prophetic voice to a fledgling group of believers.

But Ellen White was determined that the group of Christian believers, who

came together in a flurry of excitement over the idea that Jesus was coming back in their time, not fall into the chasm of parochialism. She led in a process of discovery or rediscovery of biblical truth that brought back into the general Christian conversation an entire list of themes that had largely been lost during the darker ages when Catholicism was more a political than a spiritual force in the world.

Adventists see themselves as the inheritors of the tradition that led reformers to spring into existence during the Roman Catholic era, through the Protestant Reformation and into our modern age, and with all the other reform movements that have held sway, for however long. We understand well that true reform is a fragile experience, based on true revival. It is something that happens for short periods, and then is lost again in the sweep of history.

Adventists understand that we need to re-invent ourselves in each generation, discovering what messages or issues are relevant and contemporary to that generation, and then speaking in terms that resonate. For example, the North American Division, the umbrella organization for the Adventist church in the United States, Canada, and Bermuda (along with Micronesia), is right now engaged in a vigorous process to learn how to speak in the language of social media, with all its ramifications. At a recent Media Summit, we pulled together the best and brightest in the church and had speakers from the secular world, people with expertise in all forms of media, come and help us understand how to engage this new world we're facing. We discussed all forms of media, but the big topic of conversation was learning what is happening in the world of social media, and how our pastors can take the fullest advantage of this rapidly changing universe.

The president of the Division led out in this process. He set up the Summit, he arranged for it to be as open and inclusive as possible, and he made it very clear to everyone attending that change was a good thing, and that the church was committed to embracing the future with enthusiasm and commitment. At the conclusion of the Summit, he addressed the people who were attending and reaffirmed that, out of what we had all learned together, a true and comprehensive media strategy was going to be articulated, with the attendees involved in its shaping.

You should care about Adventists because we're not looking backward, focused on the good old days, as many conservative religious organizations are. Instead, we're focused on how to be relevant in the world that is becoming, too. This is a challenging posture, with incredible demands. But it is the only one that offers hope to a world in need.

**Finally, you should care about Adventists, ultimately, because what we're doing is working.** I know what I'm about to write in this section will sound like bragging, and if it does, I apologize. Still, I don't know any other way to make the case. Go ahead and slap me on the wrists, up front (just don't close the book).

The Adventist message and lifestyle is making a difference—on many different fronts. We've already noted that we're one of the fastest growing churches in the world, active in many different cultures. Why is this happening? I suspect it is because our message and ministry are compelling on a number of different levels. Also, we're living much longer than people who don't go to church or even those who go to other Christian churches—in ways closely tied to what we eat and how we approach life. In addition, we're keeping our families together, bucking what seems to be an almost irresistible tide of the breakdown of the family. One other factor is that while others are abandoning their belief in the Bible and the values that made them distinctive—including giving up their influence in the colleges and universities they founded—we're still vigorous in our commitments. It's not always easy to do these things, of course, but we soldier on.

And these are just a few of the highlights.

Don't misunderstand me; Adventists are just people, and we have our own challenges and failures (some of which are doozies)—which we'll touch on as we go along. You deserve full disclosure, and I feel compelled to give it.

Even though most of us in the church struggle to live up to our profession, we have a clear view of the road ahead, and we're at least trying to walk it faithfully. Still, I'd be the first to acknowledge that we've got our share of people in the church who do little more than take up space. I'll even acknowledge that some of us are “in the way,” providing obstacles for what God is trying to do.

That's the human condition. Churches attract needy people, and when people join the church, they don't necessarily respond well to opportunities to grow. I've had people say to me, “Why doesn't God get rid of all this deadwood?” The answer is actually quite simple. It's because He believes in the power of transformation, and He hasn't given up. He thinks He can change us.

And you know what? He can. He's doing it. He's doing it in my life and He can do it in yours, too.

In the next chapter, we'll take a few moments to look at how He does it through the exercise of His miraculous power, along with His infinite patience.



# A Decisive Christian Experience

What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

### Moral action

- **Read *Philippians 3:13, 14*.** How does the apostle Paul describe the freedom provide by God to choose? **Compare:**

**Deuteronomy 30:19**

**Revelation 22:17**

**James 1:6-8**

Christian freedom does not give me *carte blanche* to act as I choose, to indulge whatever desires may rise out of my heart, but there is a higher order of freedom, freedom to be who we were created to be, creatures capable of and naturally inclined to self-sacrificial love, freedom to say no to myself and yes to the good of my neighbour, wife, children, friend or even enemy.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>E. G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Graham Tomlin, *Thirdway*, April 2005, p. 25.



- ▶ **Read 1 Timothy 1:19.** What was the apostle's advice to Timothy regarding his faith and his conscience? **Compare:**

**Acts 24:16**

**Romans 9:1**

**Hebrews 9:14**

Conscience is the voice of God, heard amid the conflict of human passions; when it is resisted, the Spirit of God is grieved.<sup>3</sup>

### **The work of the Spirit**

- ▶ **Read Ephesians 3:16.** What are the highest riches that we should strive for? **Compare:**

**John 16:7, 8**

**Mark 11:24**

**2 Chronicles 7:14**

The term “strengthened” is the Greek word *krataioo*,<sup>4</sup> which conveys the sense of something beyond just being strong. It conveys the sense of something demonstrated to be strong, demonstrated to be mighty. The promise is that the strength provided by the Spirit will be manifested both in the inside as well as in the outside.

<sup>3</sup>E. G. White, *Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen D. Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible*, p. 937.





## BIBLE STUDY

Why is it that many who profess to have faith in Christ have no strength to stand against the temptations of the enemy?—It is because they are not strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man.... If we had this experience, we should know something of the cross of Calvary. We would know what it means to be partakers with Christ in His sufferings. The love of Christ would constrain us, and though we would not be able to explain how the love of Christ warmed our hearts, we would manifest His love in fervent devotion to His cause.<sup>5</sup>

- ▶ **Read Hebrews 4:12.** How is the Word of God described by the apostle? **Compare:**

**Psalm 139:23, 24**

**Ephesians 5:13**

**John 1:4**

When we say or feel we are right or wrong, the question becomes, How do we know it? From where came the light—that is to say, the knowledge of whether it is right or wrong? From within ourselves or from the Word of God? Has there been revelation? There must be revelation or light on the basis of God's word so that we really see. The moment the Holy Spirit throws light on God's word, we see and we know.<sup>6</sup>

### **Divine help**

- ▶ **Read Psalm 16:8.** What was the secret of King David's heart? **Compare:**

**Ephesians 6:12**

<sup>5</sup>E. G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 365.

<sup>6</sup>Watchman Nee, *Gleanings in the Fields of Boaz*, pp. 15, 16.



### Galatians 2:20

### Hebrews 2:18

This is the way to live. With God always before us, we shall have the noblest companionship, the holiest example, the sweetest consolation, and the mightiest influence. This must be a resolute act of the mind. “I have set,” and it must be maintained as a set and settled thing. Always to have an eye to the Lord’s eye and an ear for the Lord’s voice—this is the right state for the godly man.<sup>7</sup>

- ▶ **Read John 16:33.** What is the Christian’s consolation?

Challenges are inevitable. Weapons will be formed against us. Trials will come. Tribulations will be part of our life experience. But the bigger picture is that these things do not have the power to destroy us. The conjunction “but” is our saving grace: “but be of good cheer”; we can overcome all of those things. The Amplified Bible states this passage with a greater emphasis: “In the world you have tribulation and trials and distress and frustration; but be of good cheer [take courage; be confident, certain, undaunted]! For I have overcome the world. [I have deprived it of power to harm you and have conquered it for you].” What is Jesus saying? You have been called to battle and you have been destined to win.<sup>8</sup>

- ▶ **Read John 15:1, 5.** What assurance were the disciples given of victory? **Compare:**

### John 10:4, 11

### Colossians 2:9, 10

<sup>7</sup>Charles H. Spurgeon, *Faith’s Checkbook*, p. 105.

<sup>8</sup>Jerry Savelle, *Called to Battle, Destined to Win: Experience God’s Breakthrough Power in Your Life*, p. 39.



## BIBLE STUDY

### John 6:35

All who ever enter heaven's gates will enter as conquerors. When the redeemed throng surround the throne of God, with palm branches in their hands and crowns on their heads, it will be known what victories have been won. It will be seen how Satan's power has been exercised over minds, how he has linked with himself souls who flattered themselves that they were doing God's will. It will then be seen that his power and subtlety could not have been successfully resisted had not divine power been combined with human effort. Man must also be victor over himself; his temper, inclinations, and spirit must be brought into subjection to the will of God. But the righteousness and strength of Christ avail for all who will claim His merits.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>E. G. White, *Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 384.