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# The Ecumenical Remnant: Using a Narrative Approach to Revelation to Form Missional Imagination in an Adventist Context

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE ECUMENICAL REMNANT:  
USING A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO REVELATION TO FORM MISSIONAL  
IMAGINATION IN AN ADVENTIST CONTEXT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

MICHAEL LARSON

PORTLAND, OREGON

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Portland Seminary  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by  
the Dissertation Committee on February 15, 2019  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation

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## DEDICATION

To my Dad, Virgil, for inspiring me with a holy curiosity about the Bible, the church, and the unending search for truth. To my Mom, Sherry, for teaching me to trust that God is at work in everyone and everything. Thank you both for inspiring me to serve God with my talents and my life. This work is dedicated to you.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the renewal of missional imagination in an Adventist church context. This study will make the case that even among members who loyally participate in their local church, *many Adventists in North America are conflicted about their witness, leading to ineffective evangelism and disengagement with the mission of the church.* Much of this is related to a theological disconnect with exclusive positions the church has embraced regarding its identity as the remnant church. This identity is largely derived from the church's founding document, the Book of Revelation. How then can local Adventist churches in North America reignite members with evangelistic fervor within their current theological framework? This study will suggest that a narrative approach to teaching the Book of Revelation can renew missional imagination in these churches.

Remnant identity is embedded in Adventist theology and polity, but the membership's complicated relationship with this identity creates a detrimental impact on missional imagination. Renewing this identity calls for a fresh engagement with Scripture as an unfolding redemptive drama, particularly the narrative of Revelation. The groundwork for such an engagement is already being laid by Adventist scholars, including challenges to the church's traditional approach to interpreting Revelation. But it must be fully applied to address the historical development of a distinct, separatist Adventist theology and the policy that now supports this view. Though the challenges are significant, narrative demonstrates incredible potential in shaping identity and renewing imagination. Immersing the local church in this narrative can lead to missional renewal and a revived witness among contemporary Adventists.

CHAPTER 1:  
CONFLICTED WITNESS OF CONTEMPORARY ADVENTISTS

**Story of the Problem**

Mark is the lead pastor of City Center Seventh-day Adventist Church, a plateaued 300-member congregation in Puyallup, WA. While attendance and giving have remained steady for years, and the church-school on campus enrolls 220 children, Mark wishes his members were more passionate about their witness for Christ in the community. Internal congregational health surveys indicate that people are happy to be a part of City Center Church and also reveal high engagement in personal spiritual disciplines. The congregation appears to be growing spiritually, but when it comes to the people's willingness to share their faith or invite friends and neighbors to church, engagement is quite low. The experience of church leaders illustrates this larger concern in the congregation.

For example, Sally, the director of evangelism, is one of the few members passionate about sharing her faith. She takes advantage of every opportunity to share "The Three Angel's message" with family, friends, and complete strangers. She firmly believes that the sole mission of the church is to warn others of the coming judgment of God and to call them to "come out of Babylon." While many fellow members are put off by Sally's approach, she finds great joy in convincing others that the Seventh-day Adventist church is "the remnant church of bible prophecy" and is disappointed that her fellow members do not share her excitement.

One of the members who concerns Sally is the new youth leader, Omar. Omar is fairly new to Adventism, having joined the church just a couple years ago, after participating in a health seminar. The lifestyle lessons he learned renewed his energy and led him to give his life to Christ. Omar is passionate about the church's emphasis on a wholistic faith, but Sally's antagonistic tone toward other churches really bothers him. While he loves to share with others how his life has changed, he is uncomfortable inviting them to attend or even telling them what church he belongs to.

Then there's Walter, the worship leader who greatly appreciates the church's history of social activism but refuses to participate in the evangelistic meetings. He is passionate about the humanitarian efforts of the church locally and across the globe but he does not agree with the evangelistic focus of making people loyal to the Adventist church, rather than Christ. Walter gives generously to the church through his time and resources and leads a large Sabbath School class at church. Still, he refuses to invite any of his friends or colleagues to an evangelistic meeting and is reluctant to even bring them to church for fear someone might scare them off with talk about the "remnant."

Pastor Mark is at a loss for how to move forward. He feels pressure from administrative levels of the church to draw in more members, but he also personally wrestles with the same issues as his members. He believes that people sharing their faith is crucial to the life of the church, but he is not comfortable with traditional evangelistic approaches. He is looking for something fresh to inspire a passionate witness for Christ among his members.

## Problem Statement

According to the official church website, “The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church is to call all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the everlasting gospel embraced by the three angels’ messages (Revelation 14:6-12), and to prepare the world for Christ’s soon return.”<sup>1</sup> Since its establishment in the Northeastern United States, the church has embraced this mission with evangelistic fervor, growing from a few thousand members in 1863, to over 20 million members today, in 215 countries worldwide.<sup>2</sup> To put it in context, that number represents a greater total than the worldwide membership of either the United Methodist Church<sup>3</sup> or the Mormon Church.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, the Adventist church grew by more than 1.3 million members worldwide, adding one new member every 23.26 seconds, and it has added a million or more members each year for the last 13 years.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Adventists boast significant achievements in

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<sup>1</sup> “Official Statements: Mission Statement of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church,” last modified October 13, 2014, <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/statements/article/go/-/mission-statement-of-the-seventh-day-adventist-church/>.

<sup>2</sup> *2017 Annual Statistical Report: 153rd Report of the General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists for 2015 and 2016*, February 26, 2018, 87, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2017.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> “Who We Are – The United Methodist Church,” *United Methodist Church*, accessed April 27, 2018, <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are>.

<sup>4</sup> “LDS Statistics and Church Facts | Total Church Membership,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, accessed April 27, 2018, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/argentina>.

<sup>5</sup> *2017 Annual Statistical Report*, 7.

education,<sup>6</sup> health care,<sup>7</sup> relief work,<sup>8</sup> life longevity among members,<sup>9</sup> and work to promote religious liberty.<sup>10</sup>

However, these noteworthy accomplishments mask a pressing issue at the heart of Adventism in the United States. Even among members who loyally participate in their local church, many Adventists in North American are conflicted about their witness, leading to ineffective evangelism and disengagement with the mission of the church. This is a complex problem, hidden beneath glowing reports, embedded in the church's theological heritage, and compounded by political structures of the church. Any intended solution to this problem requires taking the whole picture into consideration. The remainder of this chapter will identify and explore the main elements of this problem, including ineffective evangelism, the disconnect of the younger generation, and a deficient missional imagination (based on Adventism's interaction with Revelation). This deeper analysis of the problem begins by addressing the distinctive belief at the heart of conflicted witness: Adventism's remnant identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Elissa Kido, "For Real Education Reform, Take a Cue from the Adventists," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 15, 2010, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2010/1115/For-real-education-reform-take-a-cue-from-the-Adventists>.

<sup>7</sup> *2017 Annual Statistical Report*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Among these accomplishments are studies on Adventists in Loma Linda, CA with a life expectancy 10 years longer than the general public. For more information see: Dan Buettner and Sam Skemp, "Blue Zones: Lessons From the World's Longest Lived," *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 10, no. 5 (September 2016): 318–321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827616637066>.

<sup>10</sup> Bettina Krause, "Make Your Voice Heard on the Plight of Refugees," *Public Affairs and Religious Liberty*, accessed May 2, 2018, <http://www.adventistliberty.org/make-your-voice-heard-on-the-plight-of-refugees>.

### *Adventism's Remnant Identity*

The robust benefits that the Adventist denomination provides through its educational structure, employment opportunities in religious and medical fields, and even end of life care in denominationally run nursing homes, offer a cradle-to-grave support system that encourages a high degree of brand loyalty.<sup>11</sup> An official church report indicated that distinctive beliefs that shape this brand – such as the Seventh-day Sabbath and the church's remnant identity – receive strong support from worldwide membership.<sup>12</sup> In turn, these distinctive beliefs tend to foster a separatist perspective on the life and ministry of the church. This can be seen clearly in a public statement of Ted Wilson, president of the General Conference, the worldwide governing body of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In his keynote address at the 2015 General Conference Session (a meeting of the worldwide church of Adventists) he admonished the audience:

Don't reach out to movements or megachurch centers outside the Seventh-day Adventist Church which promise you spiritual success based on faulty theology. Stay away from non-biblical spiritual disciplines or methods of spiritual formation that are rooted in mysticism such as contemplative prayer, centering prayer, and the emerging church movement in which they are promoted. Look WITHIN the Seventh-day Adventist Church to humble pastors, evangelists, Biblical scholars, leaders, and departmental directors who can provide evangelistic methods and programs that are based on solid Biblical principles and 'The Great Controversy Theme.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This loyalty is a part of the church's actual approach to branding materials, introducing a method dubbed as "The Creation Grid" for graphic designers intending to use the church logo in publications. For more information, see the design video at: "Seventh-Day Adventist Global Identity Guideline System," *Identity Guideline System*, <https://identity.adventist.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> Edwin Manuel Garcia, "Landmark Survey Reveals In-Depth Beliefs, Perceptions of Adventist Members," *Adventist.org*, October 17, 2013, <https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2013-10-17/landmark-survey-reveals-in-depth-beliefs-perceptions-of-adventist-members/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ted Wilson, "Go Forward" (presented at the 59th General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Atlanta, Georgia, July 3, 2010), <https://www.scribd.com/doc/33861749/Ted-N-C-Wilson-Sermon-Go-Forward>.

Contrary to the results of this worldwide survey, Wilson's remnant understanding<sup>14</sup> would make many North American Adventists highly uncomfortable, particularly those of the younger generation. Church-sponsored surveys conducted by the Barna Group indicate that 50 percent of unengaged young adults in the United States affirm the belief that "God is more at work outside the church than inside it and I want to be a part of that."<sup>15</sup> One could understand their reluctance to invest their time and effort into a church embracing exclusive positions such as the one above, particularly when it comes from a leader as significant as Ted Wilson. In addition, the remnant identity of the church was the least affirmed belief of six key doctrines tested in that same Barna study. This identity was affirmed by less than half of the engaged and less than one-fifth of the unengaged Adventist millennials.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, this struggle is nothing new. Almost 40 years ago, Adventist scholar Jack Provonsha reflected on the tension that exists for Adventist who find something rich and challenging in the remnant identity and yet also feel repulsed by the exclusive notions often expressed along with it. In a 1981 Spectrum magazine article, Provonsha tells the story of a non-Adventist journalist who attended the 1975 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This journalist witnessed the insider perspective and that the

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<sup>14</sup> Previously in his presentation, Wilson made clear this was about the remnant church, paradoxically stating, "When we use that term, remnant church or remnant people, we must never use it in a self-centered, exclusive manner."

<sup>15</sup> Barna Group, *Seventh-Day Adventist Church: Young Adult Study*, 2013, 36, accessed December 28, 2018, <https://adventsourceshop.blob.core.windows.net/media/product-samples/70ecd72f-99cb-e811-af11-000d3a911a22/39005.pdf?v=636746760239929204>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. It is notable that 3 of the 6 key doctrines the participants were asked about received significant agreement among both groups: Second Coming, the state of the dead and the Sabbath. However, the heavenly sanctuary, Ellen White's prophetic ministry and the Adventist church's remnant identity were all much lower, none receiving more than a quarter approval from the unengaged group, and the remnant identity gaining the least approval from both groups.

“terminology tended to be esoteric,” constantly referring to gospel activity as if Adventists were the exclusive people of God, including this statement by then Vice President W. Duncan Eva: “God has committed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church the last task to save the world. We have God’s package deal...the Gospel from beginning to end.”<sup>17</sup>

For many, this would be enough to dismiss Adventism out of hand. However, insiders understand, and are often sympathetic to, the theological basis of such proclamations. Knowing the history behind this belief, and its importance to Adventism’s self-identity and sense of mission, they often find it difficult to make a wholesale rejection of this position. Provonsha’s explanation on his own internal wrestling shed light on this:

There remains in my heart a tension. On the one hand, I feel deeply that I and my church are uniquely important to God, that we are the object of His supreme regard, that God has specially called us to a task that is ours alone, that in some special way we are ‘His chosen people.’ On the other hand, I am keenly aware of the obvious fact that God is the universal Father of all men, that He can never become the exclusive possession of any individual or group, that there can thus never be an exclusive ‘people of God’ wearing an institutional label like ‘Seventh-day Adventist.’<sup>18</sup>

Many Adventists who are proud of their faith tradition and its accomplishments wrestle with a similar tension. Without this special sense of mission and identity, it is doubtful the organization would have achieved as much as it has. Because of this perspective, questions linger about the organization’s place within Christianity, creating a discomfort among members when it comes to sharing their faith.

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Provonsha, “The Church as Prophetic Minority,” *Spectrum: A Quarterly Journal of Association of Adventist Forums* (1981): 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Even the fundamental denominational beliefs carry this tension within them. In the belief entitled *The Remnant and Its Mission*, it explains, “The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ,” offering potential affirmation of Christians from any denomination. However it goes on to explain that “in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out” which will become God’s heralds of the soon coming judgment and “every believer is called to have a personal part in this worldwide witness.”<sup>19</sup> Thus this belief regarding the remnant church simultaneously attempts to affirm the universal church of Christ and the special role of the remnant. While it is never explicitly stated in this or any of the church’s official beliefs,<sup>20</sup> the logical conclusion is that the remnant church is the Adventist church, and this remnant is where the universal church will be located in the last days.<sup>21</sup> A fuller understanding of how this identity has created a conflicted witness among contemporary Adventists requires a deeper look at the church’s traditional evangelistic efforts.

### *Ineffective Evangelism*

Since its inception in the 1860’s, the Adventist church has relied on public evangelism to drive its growth<sup>22</sup> and even today in North America this has brought a level

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<sup>19</sup> “28 Fundamental Beliefs,” *Adventist.org*, 6, last modified 2015, <https://www.adventist.org/fileadmin/adventist.org/files/articles/official-statements/28Beliefs-Web.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Other Adventist Scholars have noted this as well. See: Jon Paulien, “Fundamental Belief Number 13 (Remnant and Its Mission),” *Jon Paulien’s Blog*, September 20, 2016, <http://revelation-armageddon.com/2016/09/fundamental-belief-number-13-remnant-and-its-mission/>.

<sup>21</sup> This becomes especially clear in considering the emphasis on the proclamation of the “Three Angels Message” in the stated mission of the church. Also, in the belief entitled “The Gift of Prophecy, the affirmation of Ellen White as a prophet, coupled with conclusion that this is an identifying mark of the remnant church, leads to the logical conclusion that the Adventist organization is the actual remnant.

<sup>22</sup> See Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-Day Adventism and the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2007), 136.

of numerical success for the church.<sup>23</sup> Despite the positive long-term results of the church's evangelistic thrust, church officials openly admit their disappointment with these numbers, particularly in North America where the growth stands at half the rate of the faster growing regions in the world.<sup>24</sup> In noting this fact, Ron Clouzet, director of North American Division Evangelism Institute opined, "We don't feel that we're growing very much, and that is a source of concern, especially for North America."<sup>25</sup> Monte Sahlin, an Adventist statistician, explains this disappointment in his 2007 article for *Adventist Today*:

Conventional evangelism is largely stalled, despite the widespread use of satellite technology, Web sites, etc., and increased funding. The majority of baptisms in North America come from immigrants, despite the fact that these are not the focus of most of the evangelism initiatives. About one in three converts through public evangelism are former members rejoining the church, and another 20 percent are the children of church members. There are very few real converts among the cultural mainstream of America — less than one per congregation per year. That is an accession rate so low that it would likely occur if the organization did nothing about evangelism and spent not one dime on outreach.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In 2011, USA Today featured the Adventist church as the fastest growing denomination in North America. Citing a 2.5% increase, it outpaced all other denominations, growing almost twice the rate of the Mormon church, the next fastest group (1.4 %). More recently, the 2017 Annual Statistical report from the Adventist church revealed steady growth in North American membership annually since 2012, ranging between 1.4%-2.2%. *2017 Annual Statistical Report*, 4. Additionally, results from Pew Research's 2014 religious landscape study revealed Adventism's percentage of the population holding steady at a time when U.S Christians overall are on the decline Michael Lipka, "A Closer Look at Seventh-Day Adventists in America," *Pew Research Center*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/03/a-closer-look-at-seventh-day-adventists-in-america/>.

<sup>24</sup> The number is even less in some cases, such as 2015 when the West-Central Africa Division, the fastest growing in the world, saw membership swelled by 7.6 %. See more at: "Adventist Church Tops 19 Million Members," *Adventist Review Online*, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story3843-adventist-church-tops-19-million-members>.

<sup>25</sup> "Adventists Are Fastest-Growing Denomination In North America," last modified April 1, 2011, <https://ted.adventist.org/news/255-adventists-are-fastest-growing-denomination-in-north-america>.

<sup>26</sup> Monte Sahlin, "The Adventist Church in North America Today," *Adventist Today*, October 2007, 6, [https://www.andrews.edu/library/car/cardigital/Periodicals/Adventist\\_Today\\_Online/2007/2007\\_05.pdf](https://www.andrews.edu/library/car/cardigital/Periodicals/Adventist_Today_Online/2007/2007_05.pdf).

Although the inability to connect with the cultural mainstream of America raises enough of a concern, even more pressing to the issue of conflicted witness is the way that traditional evangelism has disenchanted many Adventists: they sense something disingenuous in many of the practices. As evangelist Francis Bush shared years ago: “I have found that some of our best members are disillusioned concerning evangelism ... [where approaches meant to maximize results] have caused some of our thinking people to feel that there is something dishonest about some of our evangelism.”<sup>27</sup> These approaches include avoiding using the Adventist name, Adventist evangelists presenting as if they are non-partial preachers, and starting evangelistic meetings in alternative locations before moving to the sponsoring local churches once the unique Adventist doctrines have been presented.<sup>28</sup>

Evangelists employ these methods to create the least resistance to the concept of Adventism’s remnant identity when it is inevitably introduced. Although the remnant identity is not explicitly mentioned in Adventism’s fundamental beliefs, this has not stopped it from becoming a core feature of Adventist evangelistic efforts over the years. As one evangelist explains: “The objective of our meetings was to get the evangelistic listeners to make three decisions. First, they were encouraged to accept Christ; second,

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<sup>27</sup> Miriam Wood and Bobbie Jane Van Dolson, *Those Happy Golden Years: The Laughter, Tears, and Adventures That Were Part of the Halcyon Years of Adventist Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishers, 1980), 25.

<sup>28</sup> See further discussion in Wood and Van Dolson, *Those Happy Golden Years*. These are practices I have also personally witnessed during evangelistic meetings, including most recently as a part of a 2013 campaign held in Mobile, AL. This online chat board demonstrates the way some attendees perceived these practices: “Discover Prophecy by Johnny Mosquera in My Area,” Rapture Ready, <http://www.rr-bb.com/forum/end-times-events/prophecy-the-end-times/84068-discover-prophecy-by-johnny-mosquera-in-my-area>.

they were asked to accept the Sabbath; and finally, they were invited to accept the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the true remnant church.”<sup>29</sup>

This objective is out of sync with the beliefs of many contemporary Adventists. However, even those who strongly support traditional public evangelism and its goal of achieving denominational allegiance, recognize that a major problem exists. Despite Adventism’s higher rate of conversions compared to other denominations, many of these individuals do not stay in the church. Executive secretary of the General Conference, Dr. GT Ng reported at year-end meetings in 2014, “Over the last 40 years, 31.8 million people have been baptized in Seventh-day Adventist churches, but 11.4 million have dropped their membership or ‘gone missing.’ He added for explanation, “the second figure does not include those who have died.”<sup>30</sup>

This perpetual cycle of attraction and attrition in Adventist evangelism has led some church leaders to emphasize the need for member nurture rather than attention to doctrinal concerns. “The notion of people dropping out because of something the church does or a doctrinal disagreement is not apparent in the data,” explains Sahlin. “It’s been shown that a member of a church board is just as likely to disagree with one of the church’s 28 Fundamental Beliefs as someone who’s been disfellowshipped.”<sup>31</sup> While nurture may be a needed emphasis, an equally important consideration requires the

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<sup>29</sup> Wood and Van Dolson, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Karen L. Willoughby, “Seventh-Day Adventists Report Global Growth of 1.5 Percent, Mostly in Southern Hemisphere,” *Christian Examiner*, October 16, 2014, <https://www.christianexaminer.com/article/seventh-day-adventists-report-global-growth-of-1-5-percent-mostly-in-southern-hemisphere/47482.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Ansel Oliver, "At First Retention Summit, Leaders Look at Reality of Church Exodus," November 19, 2013, <https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2013-11-19/at-first-retention-summit-leaders-look-at-reality-of-church-exodus/>.

examination of the beliefs that negatively impact the enthusiasm for church sponsored evangelism.

This is especially important when considering the design of traditional evangelistic meetings and the evidence that the greatest doctrinal disagreement centers around the issue of self-identity.<sup>32</sup> Sahlin's conclusion about nurture certainly highlights one deficit in the Adventist faith experience. However, it minimizes the dissonance even devote members can have with Adventism's system of beliefs and the conflicted witnesses that results from it. This becomes even more apparent from the perceptual dissonance and mission disengagement among young adults.

#### *Disconnect of the Younger Generation*

The problem of attrition is extensive among the younger demographic, something that is particularly important considering that more than 10% of baptisms come from those age 15 and under.<sup>33</sup> At a 2009 meeting of Sociologists, Ronald Lawson reported that "the dropout rate among Adventist youth in the developed world is 50 to 60 percent in spite of the fact that in America close to half have attended church-sponsored schools." As an Adventist himself, he went on to lament, "the realization that there are probably more former Adventists than currently attending members in America has caused

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<sup>32</sup> *Young Adult Study*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> This is based upon worldwide statistics found in the *2017 Annual Statistical Report*. A separate statistic for North America was unavailable in the report.

heartburn.”<sup>34</sup> While the struggle to retain young people is not unique to Adventism,<sup>35</sup> it is worth noting the specific challenges that surface among Adventist young people.

In an effort to better understand these challenges, the Adventist church sponsored the study by the Barna Group, surveying young adult members throughout North America. Among the objectives of the survey was determining the current faith engagement of young adults and the barriers to maintaining that engagement. The research paid special attention to the individual’s behaviors during childhood and how those affected their later engagement, with engagement being defined as those who attended a church at least once a month and disagree with the statement that church is not relevant for them. The unengaged were identified as those missing either of these two attributes.<sup>36</sup>

The survey noted some startling differences between the two groups. Surprisingly, childhood behaviors were much the same: high percentages attended church regularly, participated in youth events, gave tithe, and volunteered. But, by young adulthood the two groups differed in nearly all categories of participation. Whether it was attendance (97% engaged vs. 29% unengaged), paying tithe (71% vs. 26%), or attending church social functions (60% vs. 12%) the differences between engaged and unengaged young adults in Adventism was drastic. As the study noted, this significant contrast “indicates that it is their experiences and perceptions of their church as a child, rather than their

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<sup>34</sup> John Dart, “Adventist Growth Boosted by Immigrants,” *Christian Century*, May 3, 2011, 17, Academic Search Premier.

<sup>35</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 22. David Kinnaman’s research identified a 43% decline in church engagement from the teenage years to the early adulthood among American churchgoers.

<sup>36</sup> *Young Adult Study*, 25.

behavioral engagement with the church, that predicts if they will be behaviorally engaged as young adults.” It goes on to explain, “this insight should not be underestimated. Adventist culture currently seems to place high value on the behaviors of its children and youth (and provides many opportunities along these lines), but it cannot neglect their subjective experiences in the process.”<sup>37</sup>

The research also noted that “the differences between engaged and unengaged seem to be exacerbated rather than mitigated in young adulthood.”<sup>38</sup> Many of the key perceptual differences revolve around the sense from young people that they were not intellectually accepted. As Barna notes, “Many engaged—and the majority of unengaged—participants agree that the church leaders didn’t tolerate doubts, that their church was overprotective of its youth, that it was repressive of people with different ideas or opinions.”<sup>39</sup> All of these markers indicate that young people are indeed asking doctrinal questions and find themselves dissatisfied with the response. More importantly, this study noted that both engaged and unengaged young adults had significant disagreement with the identity of the Adventist church as “the true church.”<sup>40</sup> This is in direct contrast to an internal worldwide church survey which cited that 90% of respondents affirmed the Adventist church as “God’s true last-day church.”<sup>41</sup> These results further demonstrate the divide for North American Adventists on this issue of self-identity, particularly among the younger generation.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>41</sup> Garcia, “Landmark Survey.”

As another report on inactive and former Adventist members explains, “research has shown that the Adventist Church seems to be more effective at presenting an attractive faith than a durable faith.”<sup>42</sup> This lack of durability, demonstrated by high attrition rates and the disengagement of the younger generation, points to the root of the problem with the Adventist faith: an inability to captivate and inspire the congregation’s missional imagination.

### *Deficient Missional Imagination*

What is meant by the term missional imagination? Each of the words, missional and imagination, have come under greater examination in the last few decades. Defining them briefly here will help better locate the challenge Adventism faces in this crucial area in the life of the church.

Missional is meant to bring attention to the theology that defines mission as something done on the margins of the church. As John R. Franke explains,

A missional approach to theology arises from the conviction that the triune God is, by God’s very nature, a missionary God and that therefore the church of this God is missionary by its very nature. From this perspective mission defines the church as God’s sent people and is therefore at the very core of the church’s reason and purpose for being and should shape all that the church is and does.<sup>43</sup>

Since missional refers to the fact that God is in his very nature a missionary, then the church being sent by God is missionary not merely through activity, but through identity.

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<sup>42</sup> Center for Creative Ministry, Survey Former Inactive Members, 10, accessed December 28, 2018, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/exit-interviews-an-international-survey-of-dropouts-from-the-seventh-day-adventist-church.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 8.

Within this understanding, imagination becomes a valuable way of engaging the world from the starting point of God's mission. For some readers, imagination may be thought of as one's capacity for fantasy or wishful thinking about the world they inhabit. On the contrary, it is actually a powerful force for navigating the dangerous and chaotic realities of life. Walter Bruggeman helps clarify this when he defines imagination as, "the human capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens."<sup>44</sup> Without imagination, there would be little hope for progress in any of life's valuable endeavors such as scientific exploration, social justice, or expansion in theological perspective.

Given the research on the attitudes of the disengaged members in the Adventist church, there is a desire for a more engaging vision for the life of the church than is currently being offered. The complaints from young people of a church that doesn't tolerate doubts, is overprotective of youth, and oppressive towards new ideas, all point to a dissatisfaction with the current worldview of the church. As Roy Branson lamented in the early 80s:

The besetting sin of Adventism today is preoccupation with itself...what is desperately needed are people who speak distinctively and movingly from within Adventism to the large community; voices who, from the core of Adventist particularity, express a universal message for our time; people who allow the power of the gospel to challenge those who oppress the vulnerable.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>45</sup> Roy Branson, "Celebrating the Adventist Experience," *Spectrum: A Quarterly Journal of Association of Adventist Forums* (September 1981): 5.

A shift of this kind holds out promise for renewed engagement. Barna's survey results back this up, as a strong majority of the unengaged millennials indicated that reengaging with the church was not out of the question for them, despite their various frustrations.<sup>46</sup> This indicates a desire to find a path forward that makes staying with the church tenable. But for many, this will require a renewed imagination about God, the church, and their involvement with it. Since this desire for change relates so closely to Adventism's self-identity as God's last day remnant church, any renewal of imagination requires dissecting the church's longstanding approach to its source of missional imagination, the book of Revelation.

### *Revelation as Basis for Adventist Theology*

In speaking to the importance of the book of Revelation, church historian, George Knight contends, "If Adventism loses its apocalyptic vision, it has lost its reason for existing as either a church or as a system of education."<sup>47</sup> While some contemporary Adventists may be uncomfortable with this apocalyptic vision, it is impossible to refute its historical significance to the denomination.

Seventh-day Adventists grew as a movement out of those devastated by the failed predictions of William Miller that Christ would return to earth around 1844.<sup>48</sup> Early Adventists found solace in the apocalyptic scenes of Revelation. Believing that they had

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<sup>46</sup> *Young Adult Study*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> George Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 2013), 11.

<sup>48</sup> George Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-Day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 2000), 38-39.

been called to warn people of coming judgment spoken of in Revelation 14:6-12, they embraced the words of the prophet John as a sacred calling: “You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”<sup>49</sup> Within this understanding, they identified with the “remnant of her seed” of Revelation 12:17, those followers of Christ “which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”<sup>50</sup> They further asserted that their faith was under attack by the work of Babylon and her daughters, or the corroding influence of corrupted religious institutions, and it was their responsibility to live faithfully for God while calling others to “come out of Babylon.”<sup>51</sup>

While the development of this theology will be revisited in Chapter 4, for now, the most pertinent point is that Revelation cannot be avoided if one wishes to understand Adventist mission and identity. Adventism’s fascination with end-times, its characterization of the story of God in stark visions of good vs. evil, and its suspicions of political powers and even religious institutions, all find their origin in the scenes of Revelation. It is the starting point for any conversation about Adventism’s theological imagination and it defines how the church interprets Scripture, history, and current events.

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<sup>49</sup> Revelation 10:11, ESV.

<sup>50</sup> Revelation 12:17, KJV.

<sup>51</sup> Revelation 18:4, ESV. This teaching of Babylon identified the Roman Catholic church and other Protestant churches as the corrupted organizations, and actually began during the time leading up to 1844 and the predicted return of Christ. This viewpoint further isolated the Adventist people identifying as the remnant people of God and consequently linked the organization they established as the true church. For example of this see chapter 35 in: Ellen White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (eBook, Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., 2010).

This is not to say that Revelation itself is to blame for any current deficiencies in Adventism's theological approach. For one, Adventism would not have made its great achievements in education, health, and lifestyle, humanitarian aid, or proliferation of the gospel without the inspiration of this Apocalyptic vision. Indeed, it is a rich document that serves as inspiration for a courageous and bold faith against forces of spiritual oppression<sup>52</sup> and holds the power to infuse Christ followers with a robust missional mindset.<sup>53</sup> But Adventists may do well to question certain interpretations of the book of Revelation that have undergirded their identity and currently contribute to a conflicted witness. Doing so requires reconsidering another traditional aspect of Adventism: its exclusive historicist approach to interpreting Revelation.

### *Historicist Interpretation of Scripture*

The steadfast conclusions about Adventism's identity and sense of mission that shaped the denomination are directly related to Adventism's long-held assumption that Revelation must be interpreted from a historicist perspective. The historicist approach is a method of biblical interpretation that sees the prophecies of Scripture as a divinely ordained order of events leading from the author's day to the climax of human history. While Adventism originally shared this view with most other Christians, in recent years this view has fallen almost entirely out of favor among scholars.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For a powerful example of this see: Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), 36-39.

<sup>53</sup> See chapter on Revelation in Dean E. Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Jon Paulien, "The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part One," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* (Fall 2003): 16, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1251&context=jats>.

Adventist scholars contend that maintaining this approach is necessary to protect the identity of the Adventist church. As scholar Jon Paulien explains,

SDAs today are paying less and less attention to the historic Adventist approach to apocalyptic. Liberal, conservative, old, and young alike are experimenting with alternative approaches and questioning traditional ones. But this lack of attention is not a neutral matter. It is creating a radical, if unintentional, shift in the core message of the Adventist Church. Prophetic preaching and interpretation is increasingly left to the evangelists, while weekly sermons focus more on social scientific insights and storytelling. The result is, in my opinion, a crisis in Adventist identity.<sup>55</sup>

Paulien's description is an accurate account of the shift taking place within Adventism. Considering the development of Adventist theology, it should come as no surprise that this dilemma around prophetic preaching has created an actual identity crisis. One solution hinted at in Paulien's assessment, and developed further in his two-part essay, is to find new evidences that defend one's belief in the historicist approach to prophecy, particularly in Revelation. Fellow Adventist scholar Reimar Vetne, also contributes to that position in his 2003 article, "A Definition and Short History of Historicism as a Method for Interpreting Daniel and Revelation." In his first footnote to that article he explains that:

The essence of the historicist approach is part of the official faith of the Seventh-day Adventist church, last confirmed in a report by the Methods of Bible Study Committee approved by the 1986 General Conference Annual Council: "apocalyptic [prophecy] emphasizes the sovereignty of God and His control over history ..." apocalyptic prophecy presents the course of history from the time of the prophet to the end of the world.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Paulien, "The End of Historicism?, Part One" 20.

<sup>56</sup> Reimar Vetne, "A Definition and Short History of Historicism as a Method for Interpreting Daniel and Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* (Fall 2003): 1, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1207&context=jats>.

These sources reveal a deep desire for Adventism to find congruency with the historicist approach. Unfortunately, besides being an un-compelling approach for most non-Adventists, the exclusive historicist approach does not speak to the deep hunger of contemporary Adventists for a more imaginative faith experience. It is also readily recognized that such an approach is flawed. As Paulien himself admits, “Historicism has been prone to excesses. It has been applied to texts where it probably doesn’t belong (like the seven churches of Revelation).”<sup>57</sup> Vetne likewise recognizes that Revelation should not be considered as an historicist document as a whole but that “it is the task of the interpreter to argue the case for historical apocalyptic in each individual section... without automatically assuming that all the rest of the material... is likewise intended to describe future history.”<sup>58</sup> These selective historicist approaches reveal both the inadequacy of an exclusive historicist approach to Scripture and the need for a new approach that will re-capture the imagination of disillusioned Adventists today.

### **Summary of Problem**

Remnant ideology is a source of conflict for many Adventists in North America and a major issue for consideration, given the central role it plays in Adventism. Emerging from the historicist understanding of Revelation, this remnant identity is promoted by church leadership, embedded in the denomination’s fundamental beliefs, and infused in evangelistic efforts of the church. However, it is not embraced by many of the members entrusted to carry on witness for Christ in the local church. Any attempt to

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<sup>57</sup> Paulien, “The End of Historicism?, Part One” 20.

<sup>58</sup> Vetne, "A Definition and Short History of Historicism as a Method for Interpreting Daniel and Revelation," 7.

renew missional imagination and resolve the conflicted witness of contemporary Adventists must take these components into account.

### **Proposing a Narrative Approach to Revelation**

As a solution to this issue of conflicted witness, this study will suggest an approach to understanding Revelation that serves to renew missional imagination within the Adventist church. It is an approach that can maintain the foundational place of Revelation in forming Adventist theology, while reframing its identity in more kingdom-inclusive ways. It is an approach that honors the unity and authority of Scripture that is paramount to Adventist theology, while considering recent developments from Adventist scholarship.

The approach suggested is a narrative reading and telling of the book of Revelation. This invites leaders and members of local church to find their self-identity within the pages of Revelation, but without demanding they accept interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation that they find untenable according to the text. A narrative approach can provide an invitation to the reader and listener to find themselves within the story. For those concerned about entirely abandoning traditional approaches, it should be noted that the narrative approach does not need to be used entirely in place of the historicist or even other approaches, and it can still invite a faithful engagement with God's mission for the Adventist church. However, as it will be demonstrated in this study, even in cases where one allows narrative to supersede the historicist approach, it will help renew the theological imagination of Adventism, unleashing the passion in members to fulfill the true mission of God through his church.

### **Concessions and Limitations**

I concede there are some Adventists who will disqualify any shift away from a historicist interpretation of Revelation. Some may contend that such a shift falls outside of Adventist orthodoxy. Although I believe there are ways to reconcile the two approaches to an extent, I will also concede that the narrative approach encourages less attention towards many of the prophetic applications that evangelists, preachers, and other members have made in the past. While I hope to present a way forward that can be a renewal of faith for contemporary Adventists, I recognize in suggesting another approach to Revelation this could affect the theological framework of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Beliefs may be revisited and readopted. However, I believe the heart and soul of Adventism can still be protected when this approach is rightly understood.

Furthermore, it is not the purpose of this study to determine whether narrative should be the sole approach to Revelation. Nor is it the purpose of this study to determine how this may alter certain aspects of Adventist theology such as Ellen White's prophetic authority or the sanctuary message based on Daniel 8. It is also not the purpose of this study to consider what changes this altered approach may necessitate in policy surrounding membership, beliefs, and discipleship processes, although I concede that such a shift may necessitate a reevaluation of these practices. I hope to demonstrate from this study that Adventism, historically and structurally, provides room for such

challenges and that these challenges can benefit the membership even if the denominational structure does not fully embrace the suggested shift.<sup>59</sup>

Keeping the above limitations in mind, it is the purpose of this study to consider how an altered approach to Revelation may reinvigorate missional imagination in Adventism, as well as consider how this renewed imagination may contribute to a greater passion for evangelism among contemporary Adventists in a North American context. This study will demonstrate how this new approach can be embraced while maintaining an Adventist identity that is both appealing to the contemporary mindset and consistent with the historical roots of Adventism and the biblical text.

### **The Direction of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 has explored the pressing issue of conflicted witness in Adventist churches, a complex problem requiring methods that will require renewal of the church's missional imagination. In the chapters that follow, the possibility of a narrative approach to the book of Revelation will be explored for its potential in renewing this imagination and resolving the issue of conflicted witness among contemporary Adventists.

Chapter 2 will explore the biblical foundations for a narrative approach to Revelation. First, support will be offered for viewing the whole of Scripture as a "Drama of Redemption," unfolding the story of God's love for humanity and our response to it. It will be demonstrated that this approach honors both the unity and authority of Scripture in the Christian's life, while inviting active participation and engagement with the work

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<sup>59</sup> Historically, significant theological challenges have contributed in just this way to Adventism. See: Timothy L Dunfield, "The Role of Dissent in the Creation of Seventh-Day Adventist Identity" (University of Alberta, 2009).

of God. Second, the book of Revelation will receive special attention, to highlight its narrative aspects. This will include a survey of the traditional approaches to interpreting Revelation and an outline for a narrative approach that can be used to enhance one's understanding of Revelation.

Chapter 3 will respond to the question: "Is there room within Adventist theology to make a shift to this kind of approach?" To answer this question, key aspects of the Adventist approach to Scripture will be considered, including its emphasis on unity and authority. Additionally, special attention will be given to Revelation regarding the traditional historicist approach that Adventism has employed in its interpretation. Finally, because of her respected role as an authority in the church, this chapter will explore the influence of Ellen White's approach to these issues.

Chapter 4 will discuss two issues that have stifled a true missional identity: forming a missional congregation in an Adventist context and the attendant release of the remnant ideology. This chapter will explore the history and theology behind the missional movement and consider the challenges inherent in the denomination's desire to develop its missional imagination.

Chapter 5 will explore the potential of narrative or story as a catalyst for individual and organizational change. This will include examining the role of narrative in shaping our identity, renewing imagination, and leading change within organizations.

Chapter 6 will outline a practical approach for teaching the story of Revelation in the local congregation, with the intent of forming an authentic missional imagination.

## Conclusion

While certain statistical reports indicate Adventism is thriving in the United States, a deeper look reveals trouble beneath the surface. Despite higher than average growth rate compared to other denominations, the reality is that attrition is eating away at the gains made from evangelistic efforts in the church. Especially among its youth, Adventism is losing sometimes half or more of its members, resulting in more former Adventists in the United States than currently active ones. Furthermore, survey results in recent years have indicated a disconnect between members young and old and the identity and mission of the church. In particular, this relates to the church's self-identity as the remnant people of God, an organizing principle in the church's evangelist efforts and a core component in establishing a sense of mission for members and congregations.

These issues emerge from the church's approach to its formative document, the book of Revelation. As the historical backbone for Adventist identity and mission, it has shaped the theological imagination of the church since its inception. Dealing with the attitudes and perceptions of church members requires a formative approach to Revelation. This is difficult to do within the current historicist approach to the book of Revelation, and it is the suggestion of this study that moving to a narrative focus for interpreting Revelation would provide a biblically-sound and imaginatively-rich approach for Adventists seeking to re-ignite their enthusiasm for mission in their local church. The following chapter will explore the biblical foundations behind such an approach.

CHAPTER 2:  
BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO REVELATION

**Overview**

In the preceding chapter, the problem of conflicted witness in many North American Adventist churches was introduced. It was shown that this conflict relates to the denomination's sense of identity and mission rooted in its self-understanding as God's remnant church. This identity emerges directly from the book of Revelation and still maintains a strong hold on the imagination of contemporary Adventists. However, the historicist reading that the church has traditionally applied to Revelation has recently come under greater scrutiny, as a desire grows for a renewed missional imagination among many North American Adventists. Rather than abandon the roots of Adventist identity and mission, Chapter 1 suggested that a new interpretative approach to the book of Revelation may provide the opportunity for a renewed imagination that maintains a grounding in the church's theological foundation.

With that in mind, this chapter will explore the basis for a narrative approach to understanding the book of Revelation. First, the case for viewing the whole of Scripture as an unfolding narrative of God's redemptive work will be considered, including the book of Revelation as the climactic scene. Second, special consideration will be given to the challenges in understanding Revelation, particularly when it comes to identifying its genre and choosing an interpretive approach. Finally, an outline for the narrative approach to Revelation will be provided. It is my contention that the narrative approach is

consistent with the content and structure of Revelation and is the most helpful way of viewing John's apocalypse for reshaping imagination among contemporary Adventists.

### **Metanarrative of Scripture**

#### *Outline of Scripture's Metanarrative*

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...”<sup>1</sup> From this opening line in Genesis, the reader is invited to embrace the words that follow as the truth about humanity, God, and our place in this world. The following scenes unveil these truths by introducing the characters Adam and Eve, describing the domain of their inhabitation, their momentary taste of immortality, and the consequences of their mistrust in God the Creator. These episodes, the family tales that follow, and that opening hook (“In the beginning...”), clue the reader in on how these truths will be revealed: through the telling of a story.

This story unfolds a tale of God's unrelenting love throughout the pages of Scripture. Following the creation and fall of humanity, God warns the deceiving serpent that one of humanity's future offspring will “bruise your head.”<sup>2</sup> Even as humanity splinters further apart, God chooses a man and a family to whom he promises: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”<sup>3</sup> When this family turns into a nation, and finds themselves enslaved in a foreign land, God calls another man to deliver his people, and delivers a promise to

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:15.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12:2.

lead them to a new land that will be their own.<sup>4</sup> In this new land, God will establish them as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>5</sup> This vision for the nation of Israel reveals God’s desire to restore the intimacy that was lost with the fall. However, the people are reluctant to experience God in his fullness.<sup>6</sup> After God delivers them to the promised land, they eventually demand a human king to stand in the place of God.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this reaction from his people, God refuses to abandon them. Time and again, he seeks for a righteous king to lead Israel and sends his prophets to call the people back, longing for their affection like a jilted lover, struggling with the pain of betrayal and the resolve to be faithful. In Hosea, God first responds to Israel’s infidelity by saying, “I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals ... [for she] went after her lovers and forgot me, declares the Lord,” before ultimately deciding, “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.”<sup>8</sup> Hosea sums up the dilemma in God’s heart with these words towards the end of his book: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:7-10.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 19:5,6.

<sup>6</sup> Notice how they respond when God draws near at Mt. Sinai to address the nation directly: “[They] said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” Exodus 20:19.

<sup>7</sup> This becomes clear in God’s response to Samuel who is distressed over the people’s request for a king: “And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.’” 1 Samuel 8:7.

<sup>8</sup> Hosea 2:13,14.

<sup>9</sup> Hosea 2:13,14.

Later, as exile looms for the people of Israel and their land lays waste, the prophet Isaiah infuses hope into the story by echoing the promise of God to “create a new heavens and a new earth.”<sup>10</sup>

The hope of this future hinges on the arrival of the long awaited chosen one. Centuries later, in the fourth gospel of the New Testament, John begins his story, “In the beginning was the word.”<sup>11</sup> As it turns out, his gospel is actually the pivotal chapter of the story begun in Genesis. Along with the other gospel writers, John locates the reason for our hope in the person of Jesus Christ. His incarnation, death, and resurrection demands a response from every human being to his claim to being “the way, the truth and the life.”<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the New Testament, the writers recognize this as the ultimate, yet controversial, climax of the story begun long ago in the first chapter of Genesis. Stephen is a prime example of this in Acts 7 as he recounts the story from Abraham to Moses to David to Christ, connecting the theme of Israel’s refusal to accept the movement of God: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and earth, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.”<sup>13</sup> This bold declaration leads to Stephen’s death, all for suggesting Jesus as the proper conclusion to the story. Such a reaction reveals the power of this narrative in shaping their worldview and organizing their identity as the People of God.

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 65:17.

<sup>11</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>12</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 7:51.

This grand narrative reaches its final chapter in the scenes of John's apocalypse which speaks of the things "that are and those that are to take place after this."<sup>14</sup> When the book of Revelation reaches its conclusion, it is with the return of Christ, the hope of the new heavens and new earth created by him and a climatic promise echoing back to the opening line: "Behold I am making all things new."<sup>15</sup> The clear implication is that the story reaches its fulfillment through the lives of those taking the name of Christ from the time following his resurrection until the time of his final return.

#### *Scholarly Support for Metanarrative*

Viewing this progression of texts can help one appreciate the cohesive metanarrative the authors of these books create as they build upon one another through the centuries. Numerous scholars recognize this narrative flow as a way of affirming the unity and authority of Scripture. NT Wright, for one, makes the argument that this is the most established approach to Scripture, as a foundational story for Judaism unfolding their various experiences with that story throughout the generations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the call of the Patriarchs is a natural response to the problems emerging from creation and its subsequent fall. The Exodus is at once both a sign of God's redemptive power, and simultaneously, a reason for wondering why everything is not back at peace with him. The disappointing era of kings in Israel leaves the Jews still awaiting their deliverance, as

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<sup>14</sup> Revelation 1:19.

<sup>15</sup> Revelation 21:5a.

<sup>16</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 218.

does their exile, return and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The time of the Hebrew bible concludes without a resolution to the story.<sup>17</sup>

Wright contends that it is not just the traditional narrative or historical portions of Scripture that demonstrate this, nor is it limited only to canonical material. The Psalms, the Jubilees, and the stories from the Maccabees all reveal a sense that the Jews “were able to conceive of the story as a whole, and to be regularly looking for its proper conclusion.”<sup>18</sup> The history and literature that informs our knowledge about Judaism demonstrates this use of story again and again. Wright concludes, “on virtually all sides there is a sense that the history of the creator, his world, and his covenant people is going somewhere, but that it has not yet arrived.”<sup>19</sup> This carries with it the full expectation that “The creator will act again, as he did in the past, to deliver Israel from her plight and to deal with the evil in the world. The multiple tellings of this basic story witness powerfully to every aspect of the Jewish worldview.”<sup>20</sup>

For those seeking to make relevant application of biblical teaching today, Wright contends that “it is vital that we understand scripture, and our relation to it, in terms of some kind of overarching narrative which makes sense of the texts.”<sup>21</sup> To help organize this overall scheme of interpretation, Wright suggests viewing the whole of Scripture as a 5-part play: Creation, Fall, Israel, and Jesus with the writing of the New Testament as the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting Beyond the Bible Wars* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 122.

opening scene in the fifth act.<sup>22</sup> This framework emphasizes the participatory nature of Christians today, by envisaging the conclusion of the fifth act as drama unfolding through the life of the church. We, as God's people, are "... required to offer an improvisatory performance of the final act as it leads up to and anticipates the intended conclusion."<sup>23</sup>

It is this improvisational element that Kevin J. Vanhooser emphasizes with his drama-of-redemption model. In this model, the authority of Scripture is derived from its ability to engage the listener/reader and invite them to act out their part in the drama. He chooses the word drama over narrative because as he explains,

drama does better in reminding us that the whole into which we are to participate is a unified action, and that we are to participate in active faith ... While narrative can be told in the third person at something of a distance from oneself, drama is 'dialogue in action' and calls for first and second person discourse, the language of interpersonal relations. Story becomes drama when one enters into it, body and soul.

When looking into the narrative approach to Scripture, this a key distinction: is the objective to simply educate or to fully engage the listener? When this study employs the language of narrative, it is with the understanding that the listener should expect to find themselves in the story, invited to participate with the grand work of God. Or, as Vanhooser says, "The challenge is not to abstract from the world of the text to the realm of timeless principles but to ... enter into the world implied by the Bible."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 142. Wright sets up this idea with the analogy of discovering an unfinished Shakespearean play, where only the first four acts are completed. In his analogy, the only way to fill in the final scene is by having expert actors immerse themselves in the storyline that precedes it and then being commissioned to act out the conclusion for themselves. In this motif, the first four Acts would be the authority for how the actors behave, but without a dictated or rigid script to follow.

<sup>24</sup> Gary T. Meadors, ed., *Four Views on Moving Beyond The Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 62.

In *The Drama of Scripture*, the authors apply this principle and adapt Wright's framework to build a six-act drama:<sup>25</sup>

Act 1: God Establishes His Kingdom: Creation.

Acts 2: Rebellion in the Kingdom: Fall

Act 3: The King Chooses Israel: Redemption Initiated

Scene 1: A People for the King

Scene 2: A Land for His People

Act 4: The Coming of the King: Redemption Accomplished

Act 5: Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church

Scene 1: From Jerusalem to Rome

Scene 2: And into all The World

Act 6: The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

The main difference of this approach is found in the inclusion of a final Act following the return of Jesus. This emphasizes the transient nature of the scene which the church currently inhabits, perhaps providing a bit more direction for the participants.

### *Criticisms of Metanarrative*

Despite the ample evidence of an ongoing story in the pages of Scripture, some scholars question the reliability of this approach in discerning the truth of Scripture. As Vanhooser admits, "There is no guarantee that everyone who employs the drama-of-redemption model will reach the same conclusions" on a given matter.<sup>26</sup> This concession

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<sup>25</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Meadors, *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, 198.

leads to Walter Kaiser’s question of critique: “Where then is the authority and sufficiency of scripture?”<sup>27</sup> Kaiser prefers a principle-based approach to maintain the clear authority of Scripture in applying it to “a new contemporary specific situation.”<sup>28</sup> This lack of clarity in application is a major point of contention against the narrative approach.

While the ambiguity of narrative may be a concern for advocates of biblical authority, a principle-only approach “risks de-dramatizing the bible ... [leaving just...] the moral without the fable, the content without the form, the soul without the body of the text.”<sup>29</sup> Leslie Newbigin shares a personal experience that emphasizes how puzzling a principle-only approach is for one who recognizes the unique, dramatic element of Scripture. A Hindu friend of his marveled to him about the approach of Christian missionaries:

I can’t understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion — and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of the universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.<sup>30</sup>

Embracing the metanarrative of Scripture reminds us that we, too, are a part of the story. In doing so, “we learn the Bible not as an ancient text about other people who lived a long time ago, but as a book about our own history, our own culture ,our own

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>29</sup> Bartholomew, *The Drama of Scripture*, 61.

<sup>30</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *A Walk through the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 4.

identity.”<sup>31</sup> In this vein, we approach the word of God not merely “to extract principles that might help us live our own contemporary lives, but to learn who we are.”<sup>32</sup> This is especially true of the chapter containing the final, unfolding scenes, the book of Revelation. While Revelation’s genre and traditional usage in the church provide some unique challenges, its content provides surprising support to the narrative approach and ample opportunity for renewing imagination. This is the topic we turn to next.

### **Interpretive Challenges with Revelation**

#### *The Apocalyptic Genre*

As Stephen Smalley notes, “In terms of literary genre, Revelations stands on its own. ...[it] is not fiction; but neither is it just a letter, solely history, or predictive prophecy alone. It is an apocalypse: ‘A revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him, to make known to his servants what must swiftly take place.’”<sup>33</sup> Smalley’s denotation of Revelation as an ‘apocalypse’ deserves further attention in helping understand the narrative approach that will be laid out later in this chapter, but it also demands a definition of the label given to it. John Collins supplies this definition: “An apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a

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<sup>31</sup> Sharon Warkentin Short, “Formed by Story: The Metanarrative of the Bible as Doctrine,” *Christian Education Journal* 9 (Spring 2012): 119, Academic OneFile.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 7.

transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, in so far as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>34</sup>

This broad and involved definition is intended to cover all pieces of literature classified as apocalyptic and has received broad consensus, helping to establish a common core for the genre.<sup>35</sup> Hence, a narrative framework, the presence of an otherworldly guide to discern the supernatural material, and of course a concluding divine judgment to history here on earth are all present in a piece of apocalyptic literature. In the end Collins concludes, “the function of the apocalyptic literature is to shape one’s imaginative perception of a situation and so lay the basis for whatever course of action it exhorts.”<sup>36</sup> This is particularly true when one employs an approach that emphasizes the apocalypse’s narrative features. But before moving on to the structure of Revelation that provides support to this narrative approach, it is helpful to explore the traditional approaches that have been embraced in interpreting Revelation as a prophetic apocalyptic work.

### *Major Interpretive Approaches*

The complexity of Revelation has led to a diversity of interpretative approaches to the book, with a wide range of possibilities.<sup>37</sup> However, there are four main approaches to

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<sup>34</sup> John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Despite broad acceptance of the definition, some contend this is simply a matter of circular reasoning. See J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*. Guides to New Testament Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 26.

<sup>36</sup> John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> For a wider range of interpretive approaches see John Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 1-15.

Revelation that most interpretative efforts can be categorized into: preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealism.<sup>38</sup>

**Preterist.** The preterist approach emphasizes the prophetic aspects of Revelation and sees their fulfillment in events of the distant past, during Christianity’s infancy. Applied to either the time during the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, or alternatively including the fall of Rome in the fifth century, this viewpoint presents Revelation as a book meant to offer comfort to Christians suffering under the threat of persecution in the early centuries. It emerged as a part of postmillennialism theology, which anticipates a period of peace on earth resulting from the spread of the gospel.<sup>39</sup> It embraces an overall optimistic view of history, where the world gets better and better, rather than reinforcing “the apocalypticist’s doom and gloom forecasts of the future.”<sup>40</sup>

The preterist approach contends that the key to understanding Revelation is found in its opening passage when it speaks of events that “must soon take place,” and exhorts the audience that the “time is near.”<sup>41</sup> As Kenneth Gentry notes, the same injunctions are also found at the end of Revelation<sup>42</sup> and the “Greek lexicons and modern translations agree that these terms indicate temporal proximity.”<sup>43</sup> This leads the preterist to conclude that “John himself positively asserts that the events are near in his day” and they

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<sup>38</sup> These approaches are identified by a number of commentaries on Revelation, among them: G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 44–49.

<sup>39</sup> Marvin C. Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Revelation 1:1, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Revelation 22:6, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 41.

“consequently must lie in our distant past.”<sup>44</sup> Those opposed to the preterist approach are quick to point out that “Jesus taught ‘soonest’ without setting a limit on how soon his return would come.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, the connection made between the universal turmoil of Revelation and the early Christian’s experience is problematic because of the absence of extra-biblical evidence indicating an empire-wide persecution of the first-century church.<sup>46</sup>

**Historicist.** A second major approach to Revelation is the historicist method. This method views Revelation as “a symbolic presentation of the prophetic outline of the future course of history from the apostolic times until the end of time.”<sup>47</sup> It builds on prophetic timelines of the book of Daniel and looks to Revelation as a continuing source of divine guidance. Historicism appears to have the earliest of origins among the major approaches, being embraced by Irenaeus of Lyon in the 2nd century.<sup>48</sup> It was abandoned during the Middle Ages, before being embraced once again by Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in their conclusions that equated the beast with the Catholic church.<sup>49</sup>

The main strength of the historicist approach is its encouragement to consider the continuing presence of a prophetic voice in Revelation, one that extends beyond the first few centuries. It embraces the ancient tradition of trusting in the predictive power of God

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>46</sup> Ranko Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See footnote 22 in Jacques Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 2003), 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

through the prophet's pen, as demonstrated in books like Daniel, when he recognizes the fulfillment of the 70-year prophecy of Jeremiah,<sup>50</sup> and later receives the 70 weeks prophecy pointing to Christ's incarnation and earthly ministry.<sup>51</sup> However, this expectation of prophetic fulfillment is embedded with the approach's greatest weakness. Far too often these applications of prophetic fulfillment find their culmination in the interpreter's day, attaching end-time significance to whatever startling events are currently capturing the attention of the public. Supporters of the approach have admitted that the approach can be "prone to excess" and "*has* been applied to texts where it probably doesn't belong."<sup>52</sup> Conversely, opponents have noted that "such a projection of future history would have had little relevance to the first-century readers of Revelation."<sup>53</sup> Historicists can have difficulty at times addressing this deficiency while holding to their interpretative framework.

**Futurist.** A third approach to Revelation, known as futurism, views the visions from Revelation (Ch 4 through 22:5), as exclusively pointing to the future and looks to the closing moments of earth's history for their fulfillment. They argue that Revelation declares itself prophetic and should be interpreted literally.<sup>54</sup> Futurism can be traced to the dispensationalism introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and articulated by the Irish Anglican clergyman John Nelson Darby. Popular tenets of this perspective include maintaining a distinction between prophecies made about Israel and the church in the New Testament, a

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<sup>50</sup> Daniel 9:1, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel 9:24-27.

<sup>52</sup> Paulien, "The End of Historicism? Part One," 20.

<sup>53</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 181.

belief in a pre-millennial return of Christ and a pre-tribulation rapture.<sup>55</sup> A modified version of futurism has emerged in more recent times that does not necessarily hold to these tenets and believes that visions pertaining to the final tribulation begin in Revelation 8:2.<sup>56</sup>

Like the preterist approach, futurists find their bearing in the opening passages of Revelation, and like historicists they link the prophecies back to the book of Daniel, albeit with a different emphasis in each case. The futurist highlights the phrase, “things that must happen” from Revelation 1 and link it with the same phrase in the Greek version of Daniel 2:28.<sup>57</sup> They also note the appearance of this phrase at the end of Revelation, and give great emphasis to the climactic tone of the book. However, in contrast to the more optimistic outlook of preterism, the futurist assumes a disintegrating view of human history. Evaluating such premillennial theologies, Stanley Grenz notes that they “emphasize the discontinuity, or even the contradiction between, the present order and the kingdom of God, and they elevate the divine future over the evil present.”<sup>58</sup> In addition to this negative tone, the futurist has even greater difficulty than historicists in establishing a relevance for the first-century audience.

**Idealist.** Idealism is a fourth approach to Revelation that views it as a symbolical, timeless portrayal of the war between good and evil. From this view, the scenes of Revelation represent the continual battle between good and evil but make no historical

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>56</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Pate, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, 182.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 31.

connection to current social or political events.<sup>59</sup> Idealism can be traced back to the Alexandrian church fathers, in particular Clement and Origen who assigned a spiritual significance to the apocalypse while rejecting any literal applications.<sup>60</sup>

The strength of idealism is its ability to find meaning in any time or circumstance. Throughout the ages, people of varying backgrounds and experiences are able to identify with the images of persecution, endurance, and the hope for triumph. However, it also robs Revelation of any prophetic element and is unable to attach definitive significance to any particular historical setting. An adapted approach to this is what Smalley identifies as “modified idealist” which contends that “Revelation is a symbolic portrayal of the timeless conflict between the forces of good and evil, God and Satan. But this involves a final consummation in judgement and salvation, even if that finality is not depicted in terms which are precisely chronological.”<sup>61</sup>

### *Analysis*

While the four major approaches to Revelation all have a level of validity, embracing any one of them as the sole interpretive framework has led to an unbalanced application of the text. All four interpretations emphasize surviving persecution as the purpose of Revelation, focusing on the images of judgment and renewal of the Kingdom of God as a source of hope. However, these attempts tend to minimize the initial audience for John’s apocalypse and his purpose in writing to those 1st Century churches in Asia.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>61</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 16.

The concerns addressed in those churches were not primarily about persecution without, but rather the threats from within, as seen in the corrective messages to the seven churches.<sup>62</sup> Smalley contends that this is because “the prophet-seer is even more concerned about theology, and indeed Christology, than eschatology.”<sup>63</sup>

Such an understanding requires a different predominant approach to interpreting Revelation. It necessitates a framework that maintains an emphasis on John’s priority in addressing his originally audience, as well as providing room to appreciate how this 1st century book becomes “a document which is relevant to all churches for all time.”<sup>64</sup> For this task, the narrative approach is uniquely equipped. It would allow John’s original story of God’s redemptive purposes in the world to receive primary attention, while creating space for application in the present moment, as well as the life to come. In doing so, it holds together the strengths of the other traditional approaches, without being confined by their limitations. But how natural of a fit is a dramatic reading of the book of Revelation?

### **Narrative Outline of Revelation**

Traditional approaches to Revelation disagree over what time takes precedence in interpreting the true meaning of the passages. Does one look to the early centuries of Christianity, to the eschatological future, or to current events in the newspaper to find proper application of the text? Or, is any time and setting an appropriate context for

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<sup>62</sup> Note the continual call for the churches to repent in Revelation 2 and 3.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John’s Revelation and John’s Community* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994), 147.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

applying lessons from Revelation? Despite the longstanding dispute over the proper approach to understanding the timing of Revelation, each method holds to an often-unspoken truth: there is a significant story being told.

Most readers of John's apocalypse will recognize the elements of story within. Revelation contains a variety of characters such as a seven-horned, seven-eyed lamb,<sup>65</sup> a seven-headed, ten-horned dragon<sup>66</sup> and a blood-thirsty, drunken prostitute.<sup>67</sup> Each character is found in a specific setting, whether that be in the heavens, confined to the earth, or out in the wilderness. In addition, every character is eventually drawn into the plot, compelled to choose between the lamb and the dragon.<sup>68</sup> Of course the story concludes when the protagonist triumphs and establishes his eternal kingdom once and for all.<sup>69</sup>

Despite how obvious these elements of story may be, many readers are prone to miss the plot development throughout. Narrative is not merely a literary form found in Revelation, it is the foundation of Revelation. This narrative of Revelation unfolds through distinct scenes, much like an ancient drama. Throughout, the action is organized around a central concern of God's people: "How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"<sup>70</sup> While the central character of the book is undeniably the lamb, his response to this question is the main point of tension. As one

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<sup>65</sup> Revelation 5:6.

<sup>66</sup> Revelation 12:3.

<sup>67</sup> Revelation 17:3-6, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Revelation 13-14.

<sup>69</sup> Revelation 21:9-21.

<sup>70</sup> Revelation 6:10.

scholar notes, “the description of God’s judgment takes up such a large space in Revelation that its whole eschatological presentation culminates in judgment and salvation.”<sup>71</sup>

### *Seven Scenes of Revelation*

After identifying the main theme that drives the story of Revelation, recognizing the narrative becomes a simpler task. The book is organized into several major scenes with identifiable transitions and interludes. As the story unfolds around the ongoing response of Jesus to injustice in the world, it builds towards a climactic center in Revelation 12-14.<sup>72</sup> This central scene provides assurance that the loving, gentle way of the lamb will lead to ultimate triumph over evil. The scenes unfold through the activity of Jesus in establishing justice.<sup>73</sup>

**Prologue: The Oracle is Disclosed (1.1-1.8).** This brief introduction is loaded with imagery that sets the stage for the judgement and deliverance to come. Among those

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<sup>71</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 47. This may be a surprising theme to modern readers, but within the context of an increasingly oppressive environment, the desire for justice is a natural response. In reality, this question is more than a philosophical concern about injustice, it is the heartfelt expression of an eternal human desire. As Eugene Peterson points out, “It is not a ‘concern’ at all, it is a cry: hurt people want relief, the bullied want fairness, the pushed around want dignity . . . How long do we have to put up with might-is-right arrogance? The question echoes through cultures, reverberates through centuries.” Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 137.

<sup>72</sup> For illustration of how this progression works see Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation*, chapter 1.

<sup>73</sup> This is adapted using the titles from Stephen Smalley’s narrative outline. His outline is more complex, including intervals between each scene. Although a strong case can be made for these intervals, for the purposes of this outline, it unnecessarily divides the action within a scene. For more see Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 21–22.

images, Jesus is introduced as “ruler of the kings of the earth”<sup>74</sup> and blessing is offered to those who hear and keep to the words of this divine message for “the time is near.”<sup>75</sup>

**Scene 1: Seven Oracles (1.9-3.22).** Jesus comes with a message to each of the seven churches of Asia as one prepared to judge, thoroughly acquainted with their every deed and motive. His judgment is fair, but grace-filled. While he calls for the wayward to repent,<sup>76</sup> even more often he affirms the faithful<sup>77</sup> and offers hope to those who respond to the Spirit’s prompting.<sup>78</sup>

**Scene 2: Seven Seals (4.1-7.17).** This scene opens in the throne room of the creator and leads to the coronation of the risen Christ in chapter 5. Two questions move the action of this scene along and emphasize the central theme of judgment. The first comes from an angel in heaven just before the coronation: “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?”<sup>79</sup> Once the lamb is identified as the heir of the throne, he receives the scroll and begins to unseal it. At the opening of the fifth seal, a question returns from the fallen saints of earth who earlier had celebrated the new king: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”<sup>80</sup> This second question is answered with a hopeful vision of future glory that concludes the scene in chapter 7.

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<sup>74</sup> Revelation 1:5.

<sup>75</sup> Revelation 1:3.

<sup>76</sup> Revelation 2:5, 2:16, 3:3, 3:19.

<sup>77</sup> Revelation 2:6, 2:9-10, 2:13, 2:19, 2:24-25, 3:4, 3:10.

<sup>78</sup> Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26-29, 3:5-6, 3:12-13, 3:20-22.

<sup>79</sup> Revelation 5:2.

<sup>80</sup> Revelation 6:10.

**Scene 3: Seven Trumpets (8.1-9-11.19).** While the previous scene ends with the hope of future glory, the saints on earth have yet to realize it. These prayers spark a divine response to the injustice on earth, symbolized by the blowing of the seven trumpets. Following previous biblical usage, the sounding of the seven trumpets alerts the listener to “interventions by God in response to the prayers of his people.”<sup>81</sup> The prayers of the saints mentioned in this scene are no doubt the lingering question from chapter 6. The conclusion of the scene shows that deliverance is coming soon: “The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets, and saints.”<sup>82</sup>

**Scene 4: Seven Signs (12.1-14.20).** Following the chiasmic structure, Revelation’s climactic scene is the fourth and central scene of the drama. This scene forms a microcosm of the battle between good and evil from the first advent of Christ to the final one.<sup>83</sup> Despite its broad scope, this scene centers on the trials of earth more than the visions of judgement or glory to come. It highlights the challenges to faith in the present age, the temptations to compromise, and the extreme persecution saints must at times endure from the enemy. In the end, it does bring hope as the people of Christ, inspired to worship him no matter the costs, are delivered and stand secure with their savior.

**Scene 5: Seven Bowls (15.1-18.24).** In the scene of the seven bowls, God’s response to injustice comes in full force. As would be expected in a chiasmic structure,

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<sup>81</sup> Stefanović, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 283.

<sup>82</sup> Revelation 11:18.

<sup>83</sup> Some scholars argue that this historical progression unfolds in the other scenes, particularly the seven churches. While this progression is clear in Revelation 12-14, it is more obscure, if present at all in the other scenes. For an example of this approach see Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation*, chapter 1.

this judgement echoes the warning of the seven trumpets, but is more complete in its scope. It is worth noting that the eventual end of Babylon comes as a result of self-implosion. The rulers who profit from her injustices will eventually, “hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.”<sup>84</sup> In these consequences, God’s people acknowledge his grace and power: “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!”<sup>85</sup>

**Scene 6: Seven Visions (19.1-20.15).** Though the corrupt systems of earth have met their inevitable demise in the fifth scene, work still remains in establishing the King of Kings as King of earth. What the coronation of the King promised in scene two, the return of the King delivers in scene six. Jesus establishes justice and order in the new kingdom, as the rightful heirs receive their thrones.<sup>86</sup> The true enemy is finally identified and eradicated, making the way for the eternal kingdom of justice and peace.

**Scene 7: Seven Prophecies (21.2-22.17)** At this point, the opening scene of Revelation may seem like a distant memory. Yet in this final scene, all that has been promised to the struggling saints of the seven churches becomes reality. No more pain or sorrow, and perhaps just as important, nothing that is “cowardly, faithless or detestable.”<sup>87</sup> Perhaps the greatest triumph is that the reluctant kings of the earth, those who long opposed Christ, have their hearts turned as well. They now bask in the light of

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<sup>84</sup> Revelation 17:16.

<sup>85</sup> Revelation 15:3.

<sup>86</sup> Revelation 20:4. This imagery is no doubt the inspiration behind C.S. Lewis’ legendary *Chronicles of Narnia* series.

<sup>87</sup> Revelation 21:8.

Christ coming from his holy city, and willingly come into it with “the glory and the honor of the nations.”<sup>88</sup> The judgment of Christ restores order in every corner of the world and every heart.

**Epilogue: The Oracle is Complete (22.6-21).** The drama concludes where it began, with a blessing: “Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”<sup>89</sup> Inspired by the vision of a just and peaceful world, the reader is invited one more time to live into this reality, to heed the call of the Spirit. With his final encouragement, John brings attention to what will sustain the faithful in this endeavor: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.”<sup>90</sup>

### *Concessions*

Despite the dramatic features in Revelation, questions linger about employing narrative as a sole approach. As Smalley notes, “scholars have seemed reluctant to explore the idea that the Apocalypse *in toto* has been arranged as a sustained and carefully constructed dramatic presentation.”<sup>91</sup> One of the important contentions of the narrative approach is that the story emerges quite naturally from the flow of Revelation. However, there are an abundance of proposed outlines to the book of Revelation, and even among proponents of narrative, there is little agreement about whether the book should be divided in two parts or seven, whether it is arranged fully in cycles of seven or

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<sup>88</sup> Revelation 21:26.

<sup>89</sup> Revelation 22:7.

<sup>90</sup> Revelation 22:21.

<sup>91</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 20.

only when they are explicitly mentioned, and whether to separate the letter and apocalyptic portion or to see them as a united whole.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the general consensus in identifying narrative as a component of the apocalyptic genre,<sup>93</sup> means further research could help bolster the approach outlined above.

Second, the narrative approach may easily be confused with the idealist. This creates a potential for alienating those who value the prophetic aspects of Revelation, particularly as it relates to current or future world events. Throughout inspired history, God has used real life – historical events – as markers of his work in the world, such as the fulfillment of the 70-year prophecy of Jeremiah and returning his people from exile.<sup>94</sup> While the narrative approach suggested in this essay does not exclude the possibility of prophetic interpretation and application, its similarities to idealism may hinder those favoring the prophetic emphasis from a full engagement.

### **Conclusion**

The current chapter has explored the rationale behind a narrative approach to understanding Scripture. This included a special emphasis on using a narrative approach for understanding and teaching the book of Revelation. Several key points were made to support this approach.

First, the case was made for a “drama-of-redemption” framework for approaching the Bible as a whole. An overview demonstrated the way successive writers of Scripture

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<sup>92</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, 21–22.

<sup>93</sup> See definition under The Apocalyptic Genre section above.

<sup>94</sup> Daniel 9:1, 2.

built on this story over the centuries. Additionally, scholarly support offered evidence that the narrative approach is a beneficial way to understand and interpret Scripture. Despite detractors' concerns about specificity, it was concluded that a narrative framework is a unifying approach to Scripture that honors its authority and invites the reader to full engagement with the word of God.

Second, attention was given specifically to the book of Revelation for its place in the drama, as well as the case for understanding the book as a narrative within itself. First, the debate around the genre of Revelation was briefly considered, concluding that it is best identified as apocalyptic in the sense that John Collins defines. This includes the key designation of the narrative aspect that drives apocalyptic literature.

Next, the four traditional approaches to Revelation (historicist, preterist, futurist and idealist) were briefly explored. Each of these positions are normally chosen over and against one another. While each of these approaches contribute positively to understanding Revelation, it was also shown that each contains weaknesses which create imbalance when any of them are used alone.

In response to that gap, the case was made for instead seeing Revelation as a narrative or dramatic presentation. After identifying the key theme of judgment within Revelation, the structure was considered for its potential as a self-contained drama. A seven-scene outline was offered that identify the dramatic flow of Revelation based on this theme. This method provides unity to the book, while allowing for the possibility of applying other approaches as the text demands.

Considering the above arguments, the conclusion was reached that the most unifying and complete approach to understanding Revelation within the biblical canon, as

well as a single book, was to take a narrative or dramatic approach. As one proponent of the narrative approach says, reading Revelation this way “throws floods of light on John’s central testimony.”<sup>95</sup> Without making philosophical demands of the reader that other approaches tend to do at the outset, it allows the work of Christ to become central. From his interaction with the churches, to his sacrifice that opens new realities in heavenly places, to his presence through darkest hours, to final establishment of his kingdom, Jesus is continually the hero bringing justice to a world in distress. This is a story that any follower of Christ can appreciate and creates a powerful synergy with the rest of the Scripture.

The overarching narrative of Scripture provides a solid framework for engaging the biblical text. Furthermore, a narrative approach to Revelation fits within this framework, matches the flow of John’s apocalypse, and can provide ample material for inspiring the imagination of contemporary Adventists. The question that remains, however, does the Adventist theological framework offer space for this approach to Scripture and Revelation? This is the subject of Chapter 3.

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<sup>95</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 21.

CHAPTER 3:  
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A NARRATIVE APPROACH WITHIN AN  
ADVENTIST CONTEXT

**Overview**

In the last chapter the case was made for embracing a narrative approach as an alternate way of interpreting the book of Revelation. This shift has the potential for invigorating a missional imagination among contemporary Adventists, whose theological foundations are based in the book of Revelation. It was demonstrated that the narrative approach is a reasonable interpretative approach for the overall structure of Scripture. In addition, strong support was offered for reading the book of Revelation as a narrative on its own.

With that in mind, one of the key issues that must be addressed is whether or not Adventist tradition is open to consider a different interpretative approach to Revelation. In other words, even if the case can be made biblically for the validity of the narrative approach, is the Adventist theological system willing to consider such a shift in thinking?

Answering this in full will require addressing several key items. First, Adventism's official positions on the interpretation of Scripture need to be explored, highlighting significant features that may complement a narrative approach, as well as considering recent scholarly work that may offer support to this approach. Second, challenges to a historicist only interpretation of Revelation, Adventism's traditional approach, will be considered. Third, space will be given to explore the views of Ellen White, a co-founder of the Adventist church and a key theologian within the

denomination. Special attention will be given to her approach to the topic of inspiration, potential contributions to a narrative approach to Scripture, and her preferred interpretive approach to Revelation.

### **Adventist Perspectives on Biblical Inspiration**

Adventists place a high value on the internal validity of Scripture and its ability to precisely define God's will, as seen in the recommendation from official documents to "recognize that the Bible is its own interpreter and that the meaning of words, texts, and passages is best determined by diligently comparing scripture with scripture."<sup>1</sup> In many ways, Scripture is put on equal footing with Christ, as Ellen White explains: "thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, this has meant support for more of a principle-based approach to interpreting Scripture, one that emphasizes the pursuit of a definable and certain expression of truth. As the last chapter discussed, it is the purpose of this study to promote a shift to a narrative view of Scripture, and in particular the book of Revelation. The question that arises: does the Adventist theological framework allow for this kind of shift?

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<sup>1</sup> "Methods of Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, and Methods," Official Website of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Adventist.Org, last modified January 12, 2018, <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/-/methods-of-bible-study/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (eBook Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., 2010), 8.

### *Official Statements*

On the Adventist church website, the official belief about addressing Scripture is prefaced with this heading: “Ancient and timeless, a masterpiece of literature, the Holy Bible reveals God’s role in human history, our place in God’s plan, and truth to guide us and shield us from deception.”<sup>3</sup> It expands this idea in the officially voted and approved belief:

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration. The inspired authors spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.<sup>4</sup>

A few things are worth noting about this stated belief. First, Adventists do not support the view of the verbal inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> From its origin, Adventism has taken a more moderate position on the inspiration of Scripture, although a brief foray into fundamentalist thought during the mid-20th century did produce a shift in thinking among some Adventist that still lingers in smaller circles today.<sup>6</sup>

Second, Adventists place a high priority on affirming the Bible as a faithful witness to God’s activity in human history. This manifests itself in the church’s

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<sup>3</sup> “God: Holy Scriptures,” Adventist.Org, last modified October 4, 2016, <https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/god/holy-scriptures/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Verbal inerrancy refers to the belief that the words of Scripture themselves are without error.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller exploration of this topic see Nicholas Miller, “Adventism, Fundamentalism and the Bible” (presented at the Situating Adventist History, Takoma Park, Maryland, 2018), 25, <http://www.stuffadventistsshouldknow.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Adventism-Fundamentalism-the-Bible-GC-Archives-2018.pdf>.

longstanding approach to interpreting biblical prophecy. It is also notable in the frequent mention of the “Great Controversy,”<sup>7</sup> such as in this advice from an official church statement on biblical study:

Seek to discover the underlying major themes of Scripture as found in individual texts, passages, and books. Two basic, related themes run throughout Scripture: (1) The person and work of Jesus Christ; and (2) the great controversy perspective involving the authority of God’s Word, the fall of man, the first and second advents of Christ, the exoneration of God and His law, and the restoration of the divine plan for the universe. These themes are to be drawn from the totality of Scripture and not imposed on it.<sup>8</sup>

Third, Adventists place a high value on the authority of Scripture in the life of the Christ-follower. In turn, they stress its unity and harmony over the differences within it. Scholar Richard Davidson puts it this way: “since all Scripture is inspired by the same Spirit, and all of it is the Word of God, therefore there is a fundamental unity and harmony among its various parts.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to say that the NT writers’ use of OT writings reveals how “scripture is regarded as an inseparable, coherent whole.”<sup>10</sup>

Considering these points alongside the narrative approach presented from Chapter 2, reveals some obvious things. First, Adventism is not congruent with any view that demands verbal inspiration, which would eliminate any principle-based perspectives that oppose narrative reading.<sup>11</sup> Second, God’s activity in human history is an important part

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<sup>7</sup> “The Great Controversy” is a term referring to the ongoing conflict between Christ and Satan for the allegiance of humanity. It is core theme of Adventist theology which forms a unifying understanding of human life and history, particularly as it relates to end-time events.

<sup>8</sup> “Methods of Bible Study.”

<sup>9</sup> Richard M. Davidson, "Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures: Toward an Understanding of Seventh-Day Adventist Hermeneutics," (Geneva, May 20, 2003), 6, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/interp%20scripture%20davidson.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the “Redemptive Historical Model” found in Gary T. Meadors, ed., *Four Views on Moving Beyond The Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

of any framework to be endorsed from an Adventist perspective, which supports Vanhooser's Drama-of-Redemption model for its participatory emphasis.

This leaves the issue of authority and unity of Scripture. In the last chapter, it was noted that while narrative approaches offer a cohesive understanding of the whole of Scripture, they often come under fire because of the question of authority. With that in mind, can a narrative framework provide the support necessary for Adventists to embrace it as a primary approach to Scripture?

### *Bible as Actual History*

The first part of answering this question involves the emphasis of Scripture as a witness to God's activity in the unfolding of human history. Because of this emphasis, Adventist theologians have battled for some time against the *historical-critical* method as an interpretive approach to Scripture. Historical-critical is a method of interpretation in opposition to the *historical-Biblical* method long supported by the Adventist church. Historical-critical, opposed in Adventist circles, is defined as a process where interpreters "attempt to verify the truthfulness and understand the meaning of biblical data on the basis of the principles and procedures of secular historical science."<sup>12</sup> Historical-Biblical on the other hand seeks to use "methodological considerations arising from Scripture alone."<sup>13</sup>

Adventists specifically object to historical-critical because of the minimizing or elimination of the supernatural element of Scripture through criticism. This critical

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<sup>12</sup> Davidson, "Interpreting Scripture According to Scripture," 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

posture is viewed as a threat to the authority of Scripture in the believer's life. In the official Bible study document mentioned earlier, it states that "even a modified use of [the historical-critical] method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists."<sup>14</sup>

When these methods of study have at times been associated with a narrative approach to understanding Scripture, they are often questioned in Adventist circles.<sup>15</sup> Even though the narrative approach addresses one primary concern for Adventist in interpreting Scripture (unity of the canon), when joined with the historical-critical process it directly undermines another (God's activity and authority). Davidson explains these attempts,

Adventists welcome this renewed interest upon the synchronic analysis of the received canonical form of the biblical text and appreciate many of the tools of analysis developed within these approaches. Unfortunately, however, in these approaches as commonly practiced by critical scholars, the literary productions of the Bible are usually divorced from history and regarded as works of fiction or myth, with their own 'autonomous imaginative universe' and 'imitation of reality.'<sup>16</sup>

Davidson emphatically concludes, "Such presuppositions that ignore, or go against the historical claims of the biblical texts are rejected by Adventist interpreters."<sup>17</sup>

When considering a narrative hermeneutical framework that will fit in an Adventist context then, it must maintain a place for the activity of God in human history

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<sup>14</sup> "Methods of Bible Study." Despite this concern about making human reason primary, the Adventist church has struggled to maintain consistency over what holds ultimate authority in the church: Scripture, reason, or the prophetic teachings of Ellen White. For a helpful overview of the ongoing tension in the Adventist church over the source of ultimate authority, see Bull and Lockhart, chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, "Interpreting Scripture According to Scripture," 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

and the authoritative role of Scripture in expressing his will for our lives. In that regard, one Adventist scholar has already paved the way for further development. The paper will now shift to consider the contribution of Alden Thompson's Casebook/Codebook approach to Scripture.

### *Casebook and Codebook Approach*

Alden Thompson is a long-time Adventist pastor and professor who has spent decades exploring difficult concepts related to the inspiration of Scripture. Coming from the Adventist presupposition of the unity of Scripture, he has long wrestled with questions about apparent inconsistencies and outright contradictions within Scripture.

His key contributions on this matter can be found in the book *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*. In this book he introduced a unique perspective called a Casebook/Codebook approach that contains important similarities to narrative approaches that have been explored above. He had two main propositions for framing his approach:

- 1) Except for the law pyramid,<sup>18</sup> Scripture is more like a casebook than a codebook, and
- 2) Believers are reluctant to admit the casebook model for fear of undermining the Authority of Scripture.<sup>19</sup> These two propositions deserve further examination.

Thompson's first point contains two important keys for guiding a narrative approach among Adventists. First, Thompson's main contention is that the Bible is more casebook than codebook. Whereas a codebook will dictate the precise regulations for a

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<sup>18</sup> The Law Pyramid, developed by Thompson, organizes the law of God from the most important principle of divine law, down to the most specific applications of this law. See discussion below.

<sup>19</sup> Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2016), 115–116.

particular situation, a casebook offers examples of how someone actually interacted with that particular situation. It may offer insight for a reader in a similar situation, but it will not provide the specificity of a codebook. Thompson explains it this way: “Instead of [the Bible] mandating a single, clearly defined response as a codebook would do, a casebook describes a series of examples which reflect a variety of responses under varied circumstances.”<sup>20</sup>

The second part of Thompson’s first point addresses a major concern for Adventists around the issue of biblical authority, which is the law of God. Adventist theology views the ten commandments, and specifically the 4th commandment, with a Seventh-day Sabbath emphasis, as still binding for Christians today.<sup>21</sup> This is often argued from a principle-based approach to Scripture, and the narrative approach may leave room for interpretations that feel uncomfortable to some Adventists.

To answer this concern, Thompson introduces something he calls “The Law Pyramid.” With this pyramid, he proposes what one would do about biblical law within a casebook approach. What do you do about the parts of Scripture that function more like a codebook, or a divine mandate to humanity? For these passages, Thompson suggests viewing a progression between the one, the two, the ten and the many of biblical law.<sup>22</sup>

First, there is the command to love, which is the essence of God’s law. Then, there is the expansion from Jesus to the two major commands: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Next, there are the ten

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>21</sup> “28 Fundamental Beliefs,” 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> For full discussion on this approach see: Thompson, *Inspiration*, chapter 8.

commandments given at Sinai, an eternal application of the law of love. Finally, there are the many laws which are given within time and culture and vary according to needs of a particular context. Or as Thompson says, “The One, the Two, and the Ten – that’s the Law Pyramid. It never changes. Everything else in Scripture illustrates and applies the One, the Two, and the Ten in more specific times and places.”<sup>23</sup>

Thompson’s second major proposition about undermining the authority of Scripture is a concern among those outside Adventist circles. This concern often assumes that other approaches (such as a principle-based framework) more clearly define God’s will. Thompson counters that these often become an actual cover up for asking someone else (i.e. pastor, scholar, respected author) to explain the Bible in such a way that we can perfectly discern God’s will from the written text. He explains “An authoritarian approach to Scripture, one that assumes that all our thinking has been done for us, results in perhaps the greatest irony of all, *in the name of God, we end up relying on an arm of flesh.*”<sup>24</sup> Instead, Thompson asserts that the answer is found in realizing, “We cannot just know Scripture, we have to know God.”<sup>25</sup> To that end he concludes: “The casebook approach allows us, indeed, forces us to recognize that revelation and reason must work together. Revelation always deals with specific cases. Reason, in dialogue with the Spirit, determines which of those cases are most helpful in informing the decisions we make day by day.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *Inspiration*, 124. (Emphasis in Original)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 127.

Thompson argues that this Casebook/Codebook is a valuable contribution not only for Adventists, but for the broader Christian community when it comes to the authority of Scripture. Whether this is truly the case or not, what is even more important for this study is the recognition of the narrative quality of Scripture that Thompson acknowledges with his Casebook approach. This appreciation for the narrative quality of Scripture will be addressed further in the section on Ellen White, but first, we address a pressing issue in seeing Revelation through the narrative lens: Adventism's preference for the Historicist school of thought.

### **The Role of Historicism in Adventist Theology**

One of the more promising opportunities for a shift toward the narrative approach comes in the academic conversations regarding a historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation. When early Adventists adopted the view of the Millerite movement<sup>27</sup> – that Jesus would return in 1844 – they were approaching the interpretation of biblical prophecy from the historicist school of thought.<sup>28</sup> When those who would later become Seventh-day Adventists continued to search for additional answers to what other events these prophecies might point to, they maintained this historicist approach. To this day, almost 160 years after the founding of the Adventist church, this approach still holds a

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<sup>27</sup> The Millerite movement was a group of Christians in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century America who eagerly awaited the imminent return of Christ. They were named after William Miller, a farmer turned preacher who, based on his interpretation of prophecy from Daniel 8, proclaimed that Jesus would return to earth sometime around the year 1843-44. This topic will receive more in-depth attention in chapter 4.

<sup>28</sup> As addressed in Chapter 2, Historicist refers to the belief that these prophecies spoke predictively about events playing out from the time of the author's day until the coming of Christ.

central place in the formation of Adventist theology, but questions are beginning to emerge.

### *Support for Traditional Historicism*

General Conference President Ted Wilson has been unequivocal in his support of the historicist approach: “It is so important that we base our beliefs on the Word of God, using the historical, biblical method of studying the Scriptures, and approaching prophetic understanding from the historicist perspective ... This will help us strongly establish our Seventh-day Adventist identity.”<sup>29</sup> Wilson’s stance is in sync with traditional approaches within Adventism from its early days. An example of this is Leroy Froom, an Adventist scholar and historian, who after dismissing other approaches for their inadequacies concludes, “Historicism sees that the Revelation had its function first in counseling and encouraging the early Christians in the vicissitudes through which they were passing, while at the same time extending its prophetic pictures beyond their range of vision to the final victory.”<sup>30</sup> Another Adventist scholar, William Shea, affirms the position of many Adventist theologians when comparing the standard interpretive approaches to Revelation by asserting, “no combination of these three methods has ever been successful.”<sup>31</sup> After making his case for choosing a single approach to the text, he

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<sup>29</sup> Ted Wilson, “An Urgent Prophetic Calling: A Message from the General Conference President,” *Adventist Review*, last modified November 14, 2013, <https://www.adventistreview.org/an-urgent-prophetic-calling>.

<sup>30</sup> Leroy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1950), 89.

<sup>31</sup> William Shea, “Historicism, the Best Way to Interpret Prophecy,” *Estudios Bíblicos* blog, <http://oscarismendoza.blogspot.com/2012/07/historicism-best-way-to-interpret.html>. Shea only recognizes 3 major interpretive processes because he rejects idealism as “wholly unsatisfactory.”

goes on to conclude that historicism is the superior choice, the one that comes “most directly from Scripture itself.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite these staunch positions, other Adventist scholars have been less robust in their support, especially in light of historicism’s weaknesses. Historicist interpretations can be very adaptable in making current events fit a certain prophetic application, even when they do not reach the expected fulfillment.<sup>33</sup> The inadequacies with this traditional historicist approach have been evident within Adventism’s history, most notably in the failed prediction of the Second Coming of Christ by William Miller.<sup>34</sup> While most Christians openly embraced the historicist approach in times past, few do today, and much of this may be due to Miller’s excesses discrediting the view among scholars.<sup>35</sup>

Recognizing these issues, as well as insufficient evidence within the text for the traditional position, recent Adventist scholars have advocated for a varied historicist approach to reading Revelation, one that places the onus on the interpreter to defend their historicist approach, rather than assume it.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>33</sup> For extended discussion on this see the book by Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> While many Adventist apologists may point out that this prediction predated the founding of the official Adventist church, it is the opinion of this author that this is irrelevant. The Millerite movement was undeniably a formative event in the history of Adventism and the church would not be here without the teachings in that movement. The Adventist movement that became the Seventh-day Adventist denomination rose out of the insistence that there must be another correct historical application to the text. This was a response to the misapplication of a historicist reading of Daniel 8. Certainly, this is important to recognize for any Adventist scholar who advocates a historicist reading today and proper humility is thus advisable.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed treatment of the marginalization of historicism, see the book by Kai Arasola, *The End of Historicism: Millerite Hermeneutic of Time Prophecies in the Old Testament* (Uppsala, SE: K. Arasola, 1990).

*Questions About Historicism*

**Balancing Historicism.** Ranko Stefanovic makes a slight adjustment to the historicist reading of Revelation to try to answer some of the textual criticisms of this approach. He disagrees with the idea that one must completely reject an entire school of interpretation simply because of its weakness. Stefanovic notes that in interpreting Revelation “all of these approaches have some elements of truth” but are likewise “vulnerable to criticism” and therefore none are sufficient on their own.<sup>36</sup> Because of this need for balance, Stefanovic argues that “the exposition of the text and the approach applied must be controlled by the intent of its author, who should tell us what we are supposed to find in it and whether to apply it to the past, present, and future.”<sup>37</sup>

Based on this perspective, Stefanovic concludes that prophecies of past, present, and future exist throughout the book, but it can nevertheless be neatly divided based on some textual clues. In receiving the vision, John is told to “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.”<sup>38</sup> Stefanovic takes this as an organizational clue for the material that follows. He believes this designates two main categories of what the vision reveals: “The things which are” and the things which are about to take place after these things.”<sup>39</sup> According to this thinking, Revelation 1:9-3:22 is the direct corollary to the “things which are,” while Revelation 4-

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<sup>36</sup> Stefanović, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Revelation 1:19.

<sup>39</sup> Stefanović, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 14.

22:5 “largely concerns events that were to take place in the future ... from John’s perspective.”<sup>40</sup>

This conclusion leads Stefanovic to assert that “Revelation itself points to historicism as the most appropriate approach to a fair interpretation of the book’s contents.”<sup>41</sup> While this position does not vary greatly from the traditional approach, it does open itself up to further textual critique by placing the importance on the intent of the author and rejecting the presupposition that the text must be interpreted from a historicist perspective, as well as eliminating the demand of interpreting the seven churches in a historicist manner.

**Historical Apocalyptic.** Paulien goes a step further than Stefanovic in questioning a full historicist approach to Revelation. Paulien does contend that historicism “offers the best way to read many texts in Daniel and Revelation,” and argues that “totally abandoning the method would cause us to misinterpret these portions of the biblical message.”<sup>42</sup> But he shares the concerns of historicism’s critics regarding excessive historicist applications to the text. In response, he presents a more nuanced approach to applying historicist interpretation on a text by text basis within Revelation.

In an initial step to outlining this approach, Paulien notes the position taken by Adventist scholars in the past, of two types of predictive prophecy: general and apocalyptic.<sup>43</sup> This argument identifies general prophecy as short-range, immediate, and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>42</sup> Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Part One,” 20–21.

<sup>43</sup> Paulien actually borrows these from an anonymous article, “The Nature of Prophecy” published in ministry magazine in October of 1980 following an internal theological crisis with a former Adventist Scholar Desmond Ford.

conditional, represented by such books as Isaiah and Jeremiah and other Old Testament books. On the other hand, Apocalyptic prophecy such as that found in Daniel and Revelation is identified as long-range, end-time focused, and unconditional.<sup>44</sup>

However, Paulien augments this view by pointing out two kinds of apocalyptic literature: historical and mystical. While historical tends to be highly symbolic and represent a grand sweep of history, mystical contains a closer connection to reality with fewer symbols and a focus on the “ascent of the visionary through the heavens.”<sup>45</sup> Paulien brings these ideas together in suggesting a slightly different prophetic continuum. He places general prophecy on one end and his new label, historical apocalyptic on the other, contending that “a variety of apocalyptic expressions” can be found anywhere along this prophetic spectrum, including finding both types within a single work.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to this perspective, he recognizes that “Seventh-day Adventist interpreters have had the tendency to treat most or all of Daniel and Revelation as historical apocalyptic, without specific attention to the textual markers that would indicate such interpretation.”<sup>47</sup> He goes on to elaborate, “Rather than exhibiting a consistent use of historical apocalyptic, as many Adventists assume, Revelation seems to smoothly blend characteristics of general prophecy, mystical apocalyptic, and historical apocalyptic. One can also find the genres of epistle, and perhaps even narrative.”<sup>48</sup> Paulien concludes, “The appropriateness of historicist method for Revelation, therefore is

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<sup>44</sup> Paulien, “The End of Historicism?” 28.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 34.

much less obvious than is the case with the visions of Daniel. Most Seventh-day Adventist have not yet felt the force of this difficulty.”<sup>49</sup>

While it may seem as though this confession undermines the theological foundation of Adventism based on the historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation, this is not the case. Paulien’s solution is in interpreting Revelation according to its individual parts, borrowing from another scholar’s recognition of the difficulty in fitting Revelation into a single genre.<sup>50</sup> In part two of his article, he suggests four features that can be found within a text which identify it as historical apocalyptic, using them to identify both Daniel 2 and 7, as well as Revelation 12 within that genre.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, his analysis highlights the weaknesses of traditional Adventism’s support of historicism as a singular approach to understanding Revelation.

**Historicist or Historicism?** Reimar Vetne is another Adventist theologian who, recognizing the weakness of a full historicist approach to Revelation, challenges the traditional Adventist approach. Speaking from an apologetic standpoint, Vetne acknowledges that embracing historicism alone “has the benefit that it emphasizes the important distinctions of the Adventist approach, [particularly] belief in the possibility of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>50</sup> See J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation. Guides to New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 29–33.

<sup>51</sup> The four markers Paulien suggest are based on: 1) Textual Sequence; 2) A consistent sequence of Symbols and Explanation; 3) A comprehensive sweep of events; 4) Parallels with Earlier Historical Apocalyptic. For more discussion on these markers and his rationale, see Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Part One,” 180–208.

true predictive prophecy.”<sup>52</sup> This offers support to believers within the Adventist community, since so many non-Adventist interpreters do not share this belief.

However, Vetne also recognizes that demanding absolute loyalty to one position, to the exclusion of others, comes with its drawbacks. While forming a protective barrier for believers within the community, he notes that “because Adventists raised the fence and offered a take-it-or-leave-it approach, interpreters outside Adventism mostly stopped listening.”<sup>53</sup> Vetne sees opportunity to improve this dialogue by removing the either/or dilemma and echo the approach of Paulien. He likewise suggests “using the term historicism as a label only for some parts of the prophecy.”<sup>54</sup>

To facilitate this shift, he provides his own definition of historicism: “Historicism reads historical apocalyptic as prophecy intended by its ancient author to reveal information about real, in-history events, in the time span between his day and the eschaton.”<sup>55</sup> This fairly straightforward definition emphasizes a couple of key points for the current discussion. First, it places emphasis on the approach to interpreting a given passage (historicism), rather than the individual interpreter (historicist). This helps avoid the all-or-nothing approach Vetne warns about earlier. The second point worth noting is his limitation of this approach to certain kinds of apocalyptic literature, namely that which can be demonstrated as “historical apocalyptic,” as Paulien defined above. This

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<sup>52</sup> Vetne, "Vetne, A Definition and Shorty History of Historicism as a Method for Interpreting Daniel and Revelation," 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. While he says this in reference to the academic community, this can also be seen in the experience of everyday members, as has been discussed previously. This is a key component on the issue of conflicted witness.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 7.

places the onus on the interpreter to argue the case for applying historicism in a given situation and excludes this kind of application from most genres in Scripture.<sup>56</sup>

**Challenge to the Remnant.** Interestingly enough, each of the previous approaches lay the groundwork to challenge Adventism's traditional historicist applications of Revelation, but create caveats to maintain that approach when dealing with the key passage for Adventist remnant theology, Revelation 12:17. However, without directly questioning historicism, Mark Turner addresses a more pressing question for Adventist theology: Does Revelation 12:17 actually point to the Adventist church as its historical manifestation? In his essay he assumes the historicist perspective but concludes that the text does not point to the Adventist church for a number of reasons.<sup>57</sup> If this interpretation were accepted, it has the interesting result of making the defense of a historicist interpretation of Revelation irrelevant as a means of supporting the self-identity of the church. This could aid Adventists in embracing a more wholistic approach to Revelation that may still help define their identity.

### *A Modified Historicism*

These challenges to the traditional historicist approaches have the potential to invite a new way forward for contemporary Adventists. On one hand, they allow for a continued belief in the role of predictive prophecy in Scripture and offer helpful tools for

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<sup>56</sup> Vetne includes a phrase by phrase analysis of this definition in his article which proponents of a limited historicist approach may find helpful. Space does not permit a detailed revisiting of those points here, but they may also be helpful for those who are open to the narrative approach being suggested in this essay but not willing to entirely abandon the historicist method.

<sup>57</sup> Mark Turner, "An Evaluation of the Traditional Seventh-Day Adventist Understanding of the Identity of 'The Rest of Her Seed' in Revelation 12:17" (Master's Theses, Avondale College, 2015).

identifying passages where this may be the intent. In putting the onus on the interpreter to defend rather than assume an historicist reading of the text, there is potential to avoid the excessive applications of such an approach.

On the other hand, these scholarly contributions also reveal the need for a more cohesive approach to the book of Revelation. In disavowing a singular school approach, the reader of Revelation lacks clarity in how to engage the material as a whole. This modified historicism opens the door for adaptive approaches that may better equip contemporary Adventists to engage the text of Revelation as a whole, as well as those with alternative interpretive approaches.

One example of a potential new conversation partner comes from G. K. Beale's treatment of the 4 major interpretive approaches discussed in chapter 2. He does not prefer any of the 4 approaches, but instead offers a modified version of the idealist perspective that he calls *Redemptive-Historical* form.<sup>58</sup> This view holds that beyond a few exceptions, the only truly prophesied historical event is the final coming of Christ with judgment and the intent to establish his Kingdom in the new creation.<sup>59</sup> Within this view, Beale concedes that "historicists may sometimes be right in their precise historical identifications" although he disagrees with their assigning it "only to one historical reality."<sup>60</sup> Instead, he sees them as applicable to events throughout the "church age."<sup>61</sup> He

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<sup>58</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 48–49. See also Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 50–51. He also borrows from multiple approaches but prefers the term eclecticism.

<sup>59</sup> As an example of these exceptions, Beale notes Revelation 2:10, 22 and 3:9-10 as local, unconditional prophecies to be fulfilled in their respective 1st century communities.

<sup>60</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

concludes, in a similar fashion to the Adventist scholars above, that the interpreters challenge is “to identify through careful exegesis ... those texts which pertain respectively to past, present, and future.”<sup>62</sup>

Although some Adventists may disagree with Beale’s broader approach to prophetic fulfillment in Revelation, one can also see possibility for more open dialogue. This is particularly true for those who embrace narrative as the main interpretive framework. Beale’s label of Redemptive-Historical form may even be a helpful term for describing an approach that emphasizes the dramatic elements of Revelation, while allowing for other approaches, like historicism to be applied as the text demands it.

### **Key Issues with Ellen White**

One final issue to address regarding the shift being suggested in this chapter, relates to the influence of Ellen White on the Adventist church. As a co-founder of the denomination, and one who is accepted as a prophetess of God,<sup>63</sup> Ellen White’s perspective carries weight on theological matters such as these. Ellen White wrote extensively on a wide range of topics including healthful living, civic responsibility, personal piety, as well as church history and theology. According to the fundamental beliefs of the Adventist church, these writings “speak with prophetic authority and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>63</sup> Ellen White’s prophetic ministry emerged in the aftermath of the 1844 disappointment when she was only 17. She became a guiding voice of the church for more than 70 years, until her death in 1915. Her extensive writings maintain a steady influence over church doctrine and policy today. For more on her life see: Terry Dopp Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers, *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). White’s cultural influence was also recognized by the Smithsonian in 2015 when they designated her one of the 100 Most Influential Americans Ever. See T. A. Frail, “Meet the 100 Most Significant Americans of All Time,” *Smithsonian*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonianmag/meet-100-most-significant-americans-all-time-180953341/>.

provide comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church.”<sup>64</sup> A shift in the reading of Revelation must take into consideration how it relates to White’s theological perspective.

### *Ellen White’s Understanding of Inspiration*

Like other founders of the Adventist church, and theologians throughout Adventist church history, Ellen White held a very high view of Scripture. No doubt she was opposed to approaches that would undermine divine authority or supernatural participation in human history. This warning at the opening of her book *The Great Controversy* is indicative of her view on the matter: “When men venture to criticize the Word of God, they venture on sacred, holy ground, and had better fear and tremble and hide their wisdom as foolishness.”<sup>65</sup>

Sentiments such as this could be used by some to discourage any critical thought in how one approaches the interpretation of Scripture. However, as even this quote goes on to illustrate, Ellen White’s greater concern revolves around a respect for the authority in the whole of Scripture. As she elaborates, “God sets no man to pronounce judgment on His Word, selecting some things as inspired and discrediting others as uninspired.”<sup>66</sup> As discussed above, when it is not connected to a historical-critical method, a narrative approach does not question the inspiration of Scripture, but can instead protect Scripture against this concern, since it embraces the whole narrative and celebrates its underlying

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<sup>64</sup> “28 Fundamental Beliefs,” 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ellen White, *Selected Messages Book 1* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing, 1958), 23.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

unity. Ellen White offered a similar perspective of Scripture, explaining: “The illuminated soul sees a spiritual unity, one grand golden thread running through the whole, but it requires patience, thought, and prayer to trace out the precious golden thread.”<sup>67</sup>

Not surprisingly, Ellen White complements this idea of unity of the Scripture with the idea of a very proactive approach of God in bringing the whole of it together. “God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and He Himself, by His Holy Spirit, qualified men and enabled them to do His work,” she writes. “He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write. The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, none the less, from Heaven.”<sup>68</sup>

This does not mean Ellen White supported verbal inspiration. Several times she indicated her rejection of such an approach. Note a few examples below:

The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God; and the obedient, believing child of God beholds in it the glory of a divine power, full of grace and truth.<sup>69</sup>

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen not his pen.<sup>70</sup>

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>69</sup> White, *The Great Controversy*, 8–9.

<sup>70</sup> White, *Selected Messages Book 1*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

It is not hard to make the transition in language between God as author of Scripture through his penman, to God as Director working through his actors. This is in fact the very natural transition that Ellen White made in publishing her *Conflict of the Ages* series, and promoting the concept of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan, the topic we turn to next.

#### *Ellen White's Great Controversy Theme*

Another important element to consider is Ellen White's emphasis on the great controversy theme that was woven throughout Scripture. This can be seen in her *Conflict of the Ages* book series, which culminates in a book entitled *The Great Controversy*.

Ellen White explained her inspiration for these works this way:

Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the scenes of the long-continued conflict between good and evil have been opened to the writer of these pages. From time to time I have been permitted to behold the working, in different ages, of the great controversy between Christ, the Prince of life, the Author of our salvation, and Satan, the prince of evil, the author of sin, the first transgressor of God's holy law.<sup>72</sup>

The Great Controversy narrative describes how the war between Christ and Satan has played out from the creation of the world. Ellen White follows this idea through her 5 volumes, providing commentary on biblical stories. The series progressively follows the movement of God through his people, from creation to cross to resurrection. The climactic book of the series entitled *The Great Controversy*, begins with a recap of several key biblical stories, but then moves on to extra biblical accounts of heroes of

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<sup>72</sup> White, *The Great Controversy*, 12.

faith. It compels people to consider how that story was continued beyond the first century church and through the centuries of the church until this day. In other words, it sees the story as still unfolding today.

This is very much in line with Craig Bartholomew's dramatic approach to Scripture, particularly the 6th act of the drama. This act would naturally line up with the Adventist concept of Revelation, addressing the last events in earth's history and the special calling of God's last day church. While this conclusion has often led Adventists to more partisan understandings of themselves as it relates to mission and identity, the unfolding of the drama within the Great Controversy also provides a foundation for a more inclusive, wholistic work of God throughout all his people in all generations.

Malcom and Bull note that "Ellen White's earliest work shows an intuitive awareness of the dramatic potential of narrative that is obscured by the sentimental and moralizing tone of her later books."<sup>73</sup> This shift in tone may have more to do with forces of the economy than an actual shift in White's writing style. There was a high demand for content in that era to keep an author before their readership. Keeping up with these demands required White to employ research aides and assistants in preparing her works. Many of these later works incurred the accusations of plagiarism.<sup>74</sup>

But despite the shift in tone of her later works and the questions around plagiarism, her approach in the *Conflict of the Ages* series still demonstrates a high priority on narrative theology. This can be especially demonstrated at the time where her command of language had grown, but the demand for publication was not overwhelming

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<sup>73</sup> Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

so that her more authentic voice was retained. With the Bible as the best-selling book in American and the biblical novel rising in popularity after the late 1850's,<sup>75</sup> White's series was a fitting addition to the literature of the time. Within in her writings it was clear that she had "acquired many of the techniques of contemporary religious novelists."<sup>76</sup>

This is most clearly seen in the Conflict series that continues to hold significant influence over the church today. This does leave the question however, even if Ellen White promoted a narrative framework for understanding Scripture, would she offer any support to a modified historicist approach to Revelation?

### *Ellen White and Historicism*

While recent Adventist scholarship presents challenges to the traditional historicist approach to Scripture, Ellen White gave her full support to this approach in understanding Revelation and the prophecies within it. Describing the experience of John on the Island of Patmos she wrote, "In the revelation given to him there was unfolded scene after scene of thrilling interest in the experience of the people of God, and the history of the church foretold to the very close of time."<sup>77</sup> She goes on to elaborate: "Some of the scenes depicted in this prophecy are in the past, some are now taking place; some bring to view the close of the great conflict between the powers of darkness and the Prince of heaven, and some reveal the triumphs and joys of the redeemed in the earth

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<sup>75</sup> Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culutre, 1840-1861* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1959), 142–148.

<sup>76</sup> Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 24.

<sup>77</sup> Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles, Conflict of the Ages 4* (N.p.: Pacific Press Publishing, 2002), 583.

made new.”<sup>78</sup> This understanding is demonstrated extensively in the closing chapters of her final book of the conflict series, *The Great Controversy*.

Although Ellen White carries this historicist approach consistently throughout the book of Revelation, she does provide a level of creativity in applying the meaning of the seven churches. In line with the traditional historicist approach to Revelation, Ellen White taught that “The names of the seven churches are symbolic of the church in different periods of the Christian Era.”<sup>79</sup> However, she also affirmed a local meaning for the churches in their day, as well a spiritual application for all churches throughout history.

It is the latter aspect of spiritual application that is of special interest to this study, particularly as it relates to a modified historicist approach to Revelation. As Denis Fortin writes in an evaluation of her usage, “Ellen White combined prophetic historicism with contemporary spiritual insights,” which is a common Adventist practice. However, he further notes that “for the most part, her numerous references to the seven churches highlight the spiritual insights found in these letters.”<sup>80</sup> He adds that Ellen White “understood contemporary spiritual applications of these messages as complementary to the prophetic historicist interpretation of the messages to the seven churches.”<sup>81</sup> He concludes, “She was more pastoral and homiletical than exegetical or theological in her

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 584.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 585.

<sup>80</sup> Denis Fortin, “Ellen White’s Interpretation and Use of the Seven Letters of Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 18, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): 207.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 221.

use of these letters. Yet, she nonetheless used the messages of these letters within a clear historicist interpretive framework.”<sup>82</sup>

As demonstrated from these quotes, Fortin makes a special effort to emphasize Ellen White’s support of the historicist framework. However, this is not surprising considering the time in which she lived, and particularly her specific theological context. It is also worth noting, as Fortin does, that her approach was not an exegetical evaluation of the text and she does not try to specifically defend the historicist approach to the seven churches of Revelation, even if she does recognize that interpretive approach at times. Instead, her usage would indicate that the contemporary spiritual lessons tended to be more pressing, allowing consideration of a modified historicist approach from Ellen White as well.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this chapter was to explore the possibility of employing a narrative reading of Scripture, and in particular Revelation, within an Adventist context. Under consideration was how Adventism’s view of inspiration, its emphasis on the use of a historicist approach to understanding Revelation, and the influence of Ellen White may impact this shift. After examination, it is clear that the Adventist theological framework provides ample opportunity for a narrative approach to Scripture, with some qualification.

First, Adventism’s understanding of Scripture emphasizes the unity and authority of the Bible, while rejecting a verbal inspiration understanding. The emphasis on the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

unity of Scripture pairs well with a narrative approach, and such an approach has even been hinted out by previous Adventist scholars.

Second, the role of historicism, the traditional interpretive approach used by Adventism for the book of Revelation was further analyzed. After considering the position of Adventist scholars, it was demonstrated that a modified historicist approach is becoming preferred when interpreting Revelation. While the historicist approach was still defended by these scholars on key passages in Revelation, the need for a more comprehensive approach to Revelation was demonstrated. G. K. Beale's approach was offered as an example of how a merging of multiple approaches was possible, suggesting an Adventist approach of making narrative primary, and historicist considerations allowed for, as the text demands it.

In the final section, the influence of Ellen White, co-founder and renowned prophetess of the Adventist church, was considered. Her perspective affirmed the same priorities of upholding the unity and authority of Scripture. Additionally, she gave ample support of an overall narrative approach to Scripture through her development of the Great Controversy theme, particularly in her *Conflict of the Ages Series*. Finally, she frequently employed a spiritual application approach to understanding the seven churches of Revelation, lending support to a modified historicist approach to Revelation.

In conclusion, there is definitely room for a shift of this kind within the theological framework of Adventism. Not only does the emphasis on biblical unity and the continual usage of a Great Controversy theme support the possibility of an overall narrative approach, but current scholarship is bringing to light the deficiencies of an "all-or-nothing" historicist approach to Revelation. When this is considered, along with Ellen

White's modified approach to applying Revelation, and the previous insights from Chapter 2 on the possibility of the narrative approach, there is evidence that this could be a positive contribution to Adventist theology in helping reshape missional imagination. But to substantiate that claim, one must first explore "What does it mean for an Adventist Congregation to form a missional imagination?" The answer to the question is the subject of Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4:  
MISSIONAL IMAGINATION IN AN ADVENTIST CONTEXT

**Overview**

The previous chapters have introduced the problem of conflicted witness within the Seventh-day Adventist church and the potential of a narrative teaching of Revelation for helping renew its missional imagination. Thus far, it has been demonstrated that such a narrative approach fits well within the overall unity of Scripture and is present in the dramatic nature of the Book of Revelation. Evidence has also been presented that such an approach may fit well within Adventist theology to adjust the imbalance of previous interpretive approaches and provide fertile ground for shaping missional imagination. This chapter is dedicated to exploring the forming of missional imagination within an Adventist local church.

The first section will offer an overview of the missional church movement. This begins with defining the key terms – missional and imagination – then offering a brief history of the missional movement, before identifying its key theological components. This will provide clarity when considering missional imagination within an Adventist context.

Another step in providing this clarity is to explore the topic of the missional church as it relates to denominations. In the second section of this chapter, the concept of denominations will receive greater attention as they relate to the missional church. It will be made clear how the DNA of denominational churches tend to differ from the missional

church. It will also be shown how many of the factors that motivate church groups to organize have been mitigated, creating an identity crisis for many denominations.

The third section will address various questions regarding the topic of missional imagination in an Adventist context. Specifically, in a church that has been so focused on mission and evangelism, what does it mean to become missional? How have the church's current organizational efforts differed from a church that is formed missionally? What can be done to help embrace this change? Once these are addressed, the chapter will offer some preliminary answers to the question what does it mean for an Adventist congregation to form a missional imagination?

## **The Missional Church**

### *Defining Missional Imagination*

Following the publication of *Missional Church* in 1998, many leaders in the church of North America became enamored with the missional movement. In recent years the term 'missional' has exploded in published works of Christian scholars and

pastors and has captured the imagination of the church.<sup>1</sup> What that term actually means, however, has been another subject entirely. As Darrell Guder, editor of *Missional Church* notes: “It began to appear in a vast range of publications, many of which had no connection with the basic claim, made by the project, that there were major theological issues that needed to be engaged if the church in the West was to be faithful to its calling.”<sup>2</sup> In short however, the term missional simply refers to the missionary essence of God and therefore the missionary essence of the church.<sup>3</sup> Put another way, missional answers the question “If one were to do one’s ecclesiology missiologically, what would it look like?”<sup>4</sup>

The second part of the term ‘missional imagination’ also deserves attention.

Imagination has been previously defined in this essay as “the human capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance

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<sup>1</sup> This can be demonstrated in noting the titles of several recently released books: J.R. Woodward, *The Church as Movement: Striving and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016). Scot McKnight, *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life: Ethical and Missional Implications of the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016). Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015). Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). J. R. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012). Dwight J. Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Willima B. Eerdmans, 2012). Elaine A. Heath and Larry Duggins, *Missional, Monastic, Mainline: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014). Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012). Ruth A. Meyers, *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission: Gathering as God’s People, Going out in God’s Name* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014). Kim Hammond, *Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014). This brief and incomplete list includes only a handful of the titles addressing the missional church with that specific label. There are many more creative approaches to this topic employing slightly different language.

<sup>2</sup> Guder, *Called to Witness*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 11.

when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens.”<sup>5</sup> Missional imagination then, is the capacity of the church to fully experience life as a community, sent by God, even in a setting directly opposed to these objectives. It empowers the church to live out its calling as “a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste of the kingdom”<sup>6</sup> in a way that meets the reality of any given cultural context. The topic of imagination will be explored more fully in the following chapter, particularly as it relates to the practice of storytelling.

In the meantime, the background to the emergence of the term ‘missional’ needs to be more fully explored. Because of the wide variance in church ministries and models claiming to be missional, and the contention of the original proponents of the term that theology was the driving force, understanding the theological foundations behind this definition becomes paramount, beginning with the history that led to its use.

#### *A Brief History of the Missional Movement in North America*

Before the 1998 publication of *Missional Church*, which in many ways brought the missional conversation into mainstream Christian thought in America, a combination of key entities, individuals, and events contributed to the setting that would make this rise possible.

**Princeton Seminary.** In his 2015 book, *Called to Witness*, Darrell Guder points out the significant role that Princeton Seminary played at the forefront of the conversation on mission and theology. Almost two centuries before missional became a popular term in Christian circles, Princeton Seminary began conversations around

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Newbigin as quoted in Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, 53.

mission and theology as a part of their ministry training. Princeton Seminary's design included the intention to prepare students to be "eminently qualified for missionary work."<sup>7</sup> This led, in 1830, to the missional affirmation that "the spirit of the religion of Jesus Christ is essentially a spirit of Missions," and the conclusion that the church should "make all her establishment tributary to [this spirit's] advancement."<sup>8</sup> According to Mykelbust, "these are the first courses on the subject given in a theological seminary or school in the USA and, in fact, anywhere."<sup>9</sup>

While missions as an offering in the curriculum took a backseat at times during Princeton Seminary's history, the missionary spirit remained alive and well. By 1914, the subject of mission finally emerged as its own area of study, particularly under the influence of missiologist-presidents J. Ross Stevenson and later John Mackay. Mackay was appointed Professor of Ecumenics, a special interest of his. Of this label he commented, "In Princeton we have established a new course for which we have minted a new name. We call it ecumenics. By ecumenic we mean 'The Science of the Church Universal,' conceived as a world missionary community; its nature, functions, relations, and strategy."<sup>10</sup> With perspectives such as these, Princeton became an early contributor to the conversation that birthed the modern missional movement. This influence continues to this day with Darrell Guder, a key figure in the missional conversation, serving as the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Olav Myklebust, *The Study of Missions in Theological Education; an Historical Inquiry into the Place of World Evangelisation in Western Protestant Ministerial Training with Particular Reference to Alexander Duff's Chair of Evangelistic Theology*, vol. 1, 1955, 149.

<sup>10</sup> Guder, *Called to Witness*, 2.

Professor of Missional and Ecumenical Theology Emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary.

**Karl Barth.** Karl Barth is often recognized as a leading voice of missional theology, although he never used the term himself. His observations of the end of Christendom, coupled with his thoughts about mission and theology, helped provide the natural next step for creating a missional theology. In particular, Barth's presentation to the Brandenburg Mission Conference in 1932 is often recognized as a key catalyst for missional theology. In particular, when Barth declared regarding the church community that "they are not a mission association or society, not a group that formed itself with the firm intention to do mission, but a human community called to the act of mission,"<sup>11</sup> he was recognizing the essential reality of missional theology. This thinking was preparing the way for a change in understanding from a "church centered mission ... to a mission centered church."<sup>12</sup>

**The Influence of Leslie Newbigin.** When Leslie Newbigin made his missionary journey East from his homeland of the United Kingdom in 1936, he had no idea what an impact his decision would have on missions in the western world. For the greater part of the next four decades, he served churches throughout India and distinguished himself both as a missionary and an advocate for unity throughout the church.<sup>13</sup> But it was the contributions he made after returning home that would shape the conversation of missions in America to this day.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>12</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 379.

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

Returning home after his retirement as a missionary, Newbigin undertook five years of teaching missiology and ecumenism in the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham,<sup>14</sup> before accepting the call to pastor an inner-city church in England, known officially as Mary Hill, but popularly described as “Merry Hell.”<sup>15</sup> The moribund nature of this congregation was sadly all too characteristic of the churches encountered more and more throughout the West. It was during this time, with the background of his decades long missionary experience in a foreign culture, that Newbigin began to conceive of a new mission field, identified by this stirring question: “What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the gospel and this whole way of perceiving, thinking, and living that we call ‘modern Western culture’?”<sup>16</sup>

**The Fall of Christendom.** The decline of the church in the UK that prompted Newbigin’s question was the result of a major shift in the prevailing worldview of Western Culture that changed the influence of the church on society. This is often referred to as the postmodern mindset that challenges the previous notions of truth, self, and society. Movements toward relativity questioned the church’s authority on matters of truth, stretching it to leave behind the security of rational ways of knowing in favor of more community-based methods.<sup>17</sup> Discoveries about the modern self and the social aspect of decision-making called into question the idea of “rational choices as

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>16</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Darrell Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 41.

determinative of human action.”<sup>18</sup> On top of this, the continued increase in global migration, combined with the explosion in communication facilitated by technology, resulted in an environment that left many feeling strangely isolated and threatened by the “social and ethnic diversity” that was supposed to be a spring of hope.<sup>19</sup>

The sum of these results is that the Church no longer exists in an environment that favors involvement in a Christian faith community as the default orientation for an individual. People in the Western world today do not see the church as a place where their thoughtful questions can be engaged, their humanity understood, or where true connection can be found. This is seen not only in the lack of participation in Church community, but in the shifting beliefs and values that shape cultural morality. In other words, Christendom has fallen, and the United States is now a Post-Christian culture where only 30 percent of those identified as “churchless” think of the Christian identity as a positive association.<sup>20</sup> North America has emerged as a primary field for missionary effort in this post-Christendom context.

**The Birth of the Missional Church.** As the emerging challenges for the church in the West took hold in United states, several theologians and practitioners collaborated together on a project taken up by the Gospel and Our Culture Network, intended to answer the challenges raised by Newbigin’s exploration of these post-modern problems almost two decades earlier. The result of this project was the creation of a seminal work for the missional movement in the United States, *Missional Church: A Vision for the*

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>20</sup> George Barna and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014), 49.

*Sending of the Church in North America.* The main thrust was the recognition that the West, as a Christendom culture, had marginalized mission and consequently the church had lost touch with its true identity. As Darrell Guder explains regarding the title of the book, “The ‘al’ added to ‘mission’ was intended to focus attention on the essentially ‘missionary nature’ of the church.” He goes on to explain that this approach was “directed against the absence of mission as a major theological theme in the centuries of doctrinal work addressing the nature and purpose of the church in Western Christendom.”<sup>21</sup>

This brief history demonstrates a shift in thinking of theologians throughout the west. Perceptions about the role and reality of the church were drastically changing, and it was not simply a matter of methods or forms. The theological moorings were being scrutinized and reimagined. These key tenets of missional theology are vital to a full understanding of the term missional. This is the topic this chapter addresses next.

### *Missional Theology*

Missional theology originates out of the concern so well expressed by Leslie Newbigin’s question, “What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the gospel and this whole way of perceiving, thinking, and living that we call ‘modern Western culture’?”<sup>22</sup> In the aftermath of Christendom’s rise and fall in the west, a setting in which mission and theology had become unnaturally separated from each other, the need arose for the development of a distinct “missional theology.” The reintegration of a

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<sup>21</sup> Guder, *Called to Witness*, xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 1.

missionary practice into systematic theology gave birth to this new discipline in the field described this way:

A missional approach to theology arises from the conviction that the triune God is, by God's very nature, a missionary God and that therefore the church of this God is missionary by its very nature. From this perspective mission defines the church as God's sent people and is therefore at the very core of the church's reason and purpose for being and should shape all that the church is and does.<sup>23</sup>

The clear desire reflected here is to place mission back at the center of theology on the basis of two main ideas: The identity of the Triune God and its implications for the identity of the church.

### *Trinitarian Renewal*

With good reason, this new field of theology brought a renewed interest in the study of the Trinity, emphasizing the role of Father and Spirit, as opposed to a simply Christocentric view. Newbigin highlights this in his response to the crucial question at the heart of missions, "Who is Jesus?" Building off the opening lines of the Gospel of Mark, he explains: "In this brief introductory paragraph, Jesus is introduced as the one who announces the coming of the reign of God, the one who is acknowledged as the son of God, and is anointed by the Spirit of God."<sup>24</sup> This Trinitarian perspective was crucial in promoting an entirely new way of understanding the world and God's involvement in it for the initial followers of Jesus. Rather than viewing divine activity as emanating from a distant, uninvolved God, the Trinitarian engagement becomes intensely personal through the incarnation of Jesus. Newbigin goes on to credit Augustine's treatment of the Trinity

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<sup>23</sup> Guder, *Called to Witness*, xi.

<sup>24</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 23.

for crystallizing this new perspective by articulating his conviction “that the being of the Son and the being of the Spirit are the very being of the Godhead and are not something intermediate between a remote and ultimately unapproachable Supreme Being in the known world of nature and history.”<sup>25</sup>

Missional theology adds another layer to this conversation. Theologians such as Augustine of Hippo helped differentiate the nature of the triune God by distinguishing between his identity and activity. Applying this perspective, Thomas Aquinas located the “mission” of God in the sending activity related to the Son and the Spirit, but still distinct from his identity. Missional theology is born from the marriage of these two ideas, bringing the sending activity to the center of God’s identity. As one author puts it, “Mission is not an appendage to divine nature nor is it possessed only by a part of, or some Persons in, the triune God. God is missionary in his very being. By saying God is missionary by nature, we refer to God’s essential being as missionary.”<sup>26</sup> This connection of sending to the identity of God is a foundational element, as well as an area for continued growth in understanding missional theology.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>26</sup> Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Evolving Theology of Mission: Its Conceptualization, Development, and Contributions,” *Theology Today* 73, no. 4 (2017): 357, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573616669564>.

<sup>27</sup> An example of the area for growth can be seen in this question: In identifying the Triune God as a “sending God” are we thereby overemphasizing his activity as a means of knowing Him? As Girma Bekele notes in critiquing David Bosch’s missional hermeneutic, “‘Being’ is as important as ‘doing,’ if one is to fully explain mission in the broadest sense. By placing the emphasis on the ‘sending’ aspect of mission, Bosch discounts a missiological reading of the Old Testament.” Girma Bekele, “The Biblical Narrative of the Missio Dei: Analysis of the Interpretive Framework of David Bosch’s Missional Hermeneutic,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 3 (2011): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693931103500309>.

*Missio Dei*

Out of this conversation about the identity and activity of the triune God, another term emerged to play a crucial role in missional theology: *missio dei*. This is a term often used to refer to “The mission of God.”<sup>28</sup> According to John Hoffmeyer, this term’s “first theological usage was to denote trinitarian relationships.”<sup>29</sup> One example can be found in the aforementioned application by Thomas Aquinas to the activity of the triune God (i.e. God sending the Son and the Spirit on “mission” into the world).<sup>30</sup> The term was embraced by missional theologians based on assertions like this from Newbigin: “The mission is not ours, but God’s ... we are invited to participate in an activity of God which is the central meaning of creation itself.”<sup>31</sup> This idea is an echo of Karl Barth’s rejection of mission as being a human activity (in 1932), where he said, “The church can be in mission authentically only in obedience to God as *missio*.”<sup>32</sup> Two years later, Karl

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It stands to reason that those who are sent are those who have first been drawn in. Like the breathing in and out, God draws us in and sends us out. We will live as witness both in being sent and living as those who are drawn to the father. Augustine points us to a text that makes sending and drawing interdependent movements: “No man can come to me except the Father, who has sent me, draw him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone that has heard from the father, and has learned, comes to me.” Darin Sarisky, “The Meaning of the *Missio Dei*: Reflections on Lesslie Newbigin’s Proposal That Mission Is of the Essence of the Church,” *Missiology* 42, no. 3 (2014): 257–270, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829613497465>.

<sup>28</sup> For a summary of the development of the term *missio dei* in 20th-century missiology, see Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389–93.

<sup>29</sup> John F. Hoffmeyer, “The Missional Trinity,” *Dialog* 40, no. 2 (2001): 108–11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0012-2033.00063>.

<sup>30</sup> See previous paragraph.

<sup>31</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today’s Mission* (Richmond, KY: John Knox Press, 1964), 78.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today. American Society of Missiology Series*, American Society of Missiology Series 30 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 290.

Hartenstein added to this concept and coined the term *missio dei* to distinguish God's mission in the world from the church's participation in that mission.<sup>33</sup> *Missio dei* arose out of renewed interest in trinitarian theology, and led to renewed reflection on ecclesiology. This core attribute of missional theology moves mission from the periphery of the church to the center of its nature and activity, giving rise to the emergence of the missional church movement.

### *Missional Theology and Scripture*

Once this theological foundation is accepted, it transforms the life of the church and every activity within it. In particular, the church begins to understand the Bible as a missional document from beginning to end. The question is asked in the reading of Scripture, "How did this written testimony form and equip God's people for their missional vocation then, and how does it do so today?"<sup>34</sup> Guder expands this question by adding: "All the resources of historical, critical, and literary research on the biblical testimony can and must contribute to the church's formation by illuminating all the dimensions of this fundamental question. The goal of the process is the continuing formation of the church so that it 'leads its life worthy of the calling with which it has been called.'"<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Guder, *Called to Witness*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

### **Missional Imagination and Denominations**

According to Craig Van Gelder, the main obstacle to denominations, in forming a missional imagination, is the challenge of shifting in focus from the functional aspects of church life to its very essence.<sup>36</sup> Van Gelder contends that denominations in America have formed on the basis of an “*organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent,*” whereas missional communities form on the “*understanding of the church as being created by the Spirit and thus missionary by nature.*”<sup>37</sup> Whether emerging from European state churches or their persecuted sects denominational churches in America had to make significant adjustments in the new environment of religious freedom. This meant changes in church polity as well as a shift to voluntary understanding of participation. In some cases, this also included the sense of a divine destiny or civic responsibility to be fulfilled to society and the world.<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of the particulars, Van Gelder contends that denominational expression in the United States all organized around a “purposive intent” as opposed to the missional understanding of church. Many attempts to revive the church in North America ignore this key difference. Programs and methods tend to focus on the outward expression of church life and how to become more attractive to a wider audience. The

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<sup>36</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “An Ecclesiastical Geno-Project,” in *The Missional Church & Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 43 (emphasis in original).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–27.

Willow Creek seeker-sensitive model<sup>39</sup> is a prime example of this approach, as are others who have followed their lead such as Northpoint Community Church in Atlanta.<sup>40</sup>

Although these churches and others like them operate under the nondenominational label, as Van Gelder explains, “they are, in fact, denominations in functional terms relative to their inherent organizational logic.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, denominations that embrace this programmatic approach to church renewal face the danger of losing denominational loyalty, and thereby losing their influence on society.

### *Identity Crisis for Denominations*

The issue of loyalty becomes especially crucial as it relates to the church’s sense of identity. A challenge for denominations in a post-modern context is the sense of lost identity. The stories that formed many North American denominations in the 19th century no longer capture the imagination. Nevertheless, these denominations can be vitally important to the work being undertaken by the missional movement. Alan Roxburgh explains, “If our concern is for a multigenerational innovation of missional life among local congregations, then the locus of energy and engagement is not primarily in an individual local church. Rather, it is in the systems of relationships that sustain and

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<sup>39</sup> While Willow Creek has shifted aspects of its approach over the years, it’s mission is still to “turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ” and it emphasizes that “We believe the church should be culturally relevant . . . This includes the concept of sensitively relating to our culture through our facility, printed materials, and use of the arts (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). “Core Values, Beliefs, & Traditions,” WillowCreek.org, <http://www.willowcreek.org/en/about/beliefs-and-values>.

<sup>40</sup> Its stated vision has always been “creating churches that unchurched people love to attend. “North Point Ministries,” <http://northpointministries.org/>.

<sup>41</sup> Van Gelder, “An Ecclesiastical Geno-Project,” 19.

nourish the common narrative life among a set of congregations. This is what denominations provide and will continue to provide.”<sup>42</sup>

As Roxburgh points out, this calls for significant adaptive change within denominations, which tend to confuse the language of missions as an issue of activity, rather than identity.<sup>43</sup> This is a common challenge for congregations and leaders seeking missional renewal. One way of framing this challenge is by considering the four branches of missional thinking identified by two thought leaders in the missional movement, Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile.<sup>44</sup> They label these four branches as: 1) Discovering, which tends to embrace a more traditional understanding of mission as a separate activity of the church; 2) Utilizing, which focuses on the sending activity of God and how it relates to the church; 3) Engaging, where the emphasis is on a particular dimension of church life as being missional; and 4) The Extending branch, which makes efforts to further develop the theological frameworks supporting the missional conversation.<sup>45</sup> The tendency of denominations to confuse missional as a merely a matter of activity leaves the fourth branch as the one that needs the most attention in the conversation of denominational renewal.

Since denominational churches are organized around a purposive intent that lends itself to emphasis on activity, the need runs deeper than the programmatic level.

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<sup>42</sup> Alan Roxburgh, “Reframing Denominations from a Missional Perspective,” in *The Missional Church & Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 79.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 71.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Roxburgh affirms this when he concludes that “the formation of missionally shaped denominational systems requires a fundamental reframing of imagination” which cannot be done without addressing “the question of legitimacy.”<sup>46</sup> This need for renewed imagination that addresses the ongoing legitimacy of the organizational structure is prevalent in American denominations awaiting missional renewal. As this chapter addresses next, despite its originating sense of mission and ongoing emphasis on world evangelism, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is no exception.

### **Missional Imagination in an Adventist Context**

Many Adventists would be inclined to think of their denominational church as missional, based upon its longstanding evangelistic fervor. However, to truly understand the denomination’s struggle to embrace a missional imagination, it would be better to differentiate Adventism’s mission as an “organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent” in the language of Van Gelder discussed above. Adventism has simply embedded missional language in describing its purposive intent and created a narrative that isolates itself as the only church capable of being on God’s mission.<sup>47</sup> Understanding this dynamic requires further examination of the theological and organizational development of the Adventist church in the aftermath of its formative event known as “The Great Disappointment.”

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<sup>46</sup> Roxburgh, “Reframing Denominations from a Missional Perspective,” 80.

<sup>47</sup> The reader may recall an earlier sentiment from chapter 1 that, “God has committed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church the last task to save the world. We have God’s package deal...the Gospel from beginning to end.” Provonsha, “The Church as Prophetic Minority,” 18.

### *Millerite Movement*

Adventism's story begins in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, with the church “drunk on the millennium.”<sup>48</sup> Based on the 20th chapter of the Book of Revelation, many Christians looked expectantly for an ushering in of the Kingdom of Christ and the beginning of a 1,000-year reign of peace and prosperity. The hope in the millennium's arrival was nearly universal among Christians, but its timing was a matter of debate. While the prevailing view had been that Christ would return at the end of the millennium, it was a revival of premillennial thought following the French Revolution that would be instrumental to the birth of Adventism.<sup>49</sup>

Among premillennialists preachers in America, William Miller<sup>50</sup> emerged as the most famous, based on some astonishing conclusions he reached in studying the prophecies of Daniel. In 1818, after years of personal study, Miller, a farmer by trade, came to believe that the “cleansing of the sanctuary” at the conclusion of the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8, was a reference to the fire sent to cleanse the earth at the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>51</sup> He also believed that the 2300 “evenings and mornings” of Daniel 8 were actually prophetic days representing 2300 years.<sup>52</sup> After concluding that the

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<sup>48</sup> Gary Land, ed., *Adventism in America: A History* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Born in Massachusetts in 1782, Miller grew up in a Christian household but became a deist after being exposed to more educated. Largely influenced by his experiences in the military, he turned back to Christ after the war of 1812 and became an avid student of the Bible. Though his profession was that of a farmer, he eventually felt compelled by God to share the message of Christ's soon return and dedicated the remainder of his life to this endeavor. *Ibid.*, 3–7.

<sup>51</sup> Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 43–45.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

prophecy began with the decree of Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem in 457 BC, he calculated the end of the world to come around 1843.<sup>53</sup> Miller began preaching this message whenever and wherever he was asked to do so. Initially the interest generated by Miller's message was welcomed by local pastors of various denominations, presumably because it drew so many people into the church pews. But by 1843, Miller's message became more disruptive and led some churches to disfellowship those who defended it.<sup>54</sup>

While many churches were beginning to question the value of the Millerite movement, more ardent Millerites were also beginning to distance themselves further from their home churches. As the days passed, their tone became decidedly more divisive. Charles Fitch, a leading Millerite preacher, delivered one of the most adversarial messages in a sermon entitled, "Come out of her my people," in which he modified the predominant Protestant view of the Catholic church as Babylon.<sup>55</sup> Fitch contended that those Protestant churches who rejected the premillennial reign of Christ were also fallen, and faithful followers of Jesus needed to leave them behind immediately if they did not want to be deceived.<sup>56</sup>

As the calendar turned from 1843 to 1844, questions arose about why Christ had not come. Miller had not set an exact date, but based on his understanding of the biblical calendar, he believed Christ's return would happen sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. When that time passed, anxiety and disillusionment began to grow.

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<sup>53</sup> Land, *Adventism in America: A History*, 4–5.

<sup>54</sup> Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 48–49. Also Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2 (eBook Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., 2010), 21–26.

<sup>55</sup> Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

That is until a Millerite by the name of Samuel Snow infused the movement with new hope when he began to teach that the Old Testament ceremonial days were types of which Christ was the fulfillment.<sup>57</sup> He believed every type would be fulfilled at the exact right time and connected the cleansing of the sanctuary to the Jewish Day of Atonement.<sup>58</sup> Based on this understanding, he published the *True Midnight Cry* explaining that the 2300 days would conclude precisely on October 22, 1844.<sup>59</sup>

Of course, this day also came and went without the return of Christ and the expected end of the world. The resulting disappointment splintered the Millerite believers. Many entirely rejected their belief in the 1844 message and returned to their home churches. Others insisted that Jesus had come in a spiritual sense, leading to a wide range of fanatical practices.<sup>60</sup> Those who continued to expect a literal return of Christ, but believed the date was wrong, came to be known as the “moderates” within the movement.<sup>61</sup> They gathered for a Mutual Conference of Adventists on April 29, 1845, in which they achieved a greater sense of unity among themselves, but made the line of division with the “extremists” – those entertaining new ideas and practices – more pronounced.<sup>62</sup> Among those left on the outside of this meeting were the Sabbatarian

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<sup>57</sup> Land, *Adventism in America: A History*, 27.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 245–266.

<sup>61</sup> Land, *Adventism in America: A History*, 33.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Also, Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 57.

Adventists, from which emerged the largest and most widespread of the Millerite Adventists. This group would later become known as the Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>63</sup>

### *Developing the Sanctuary Doctrine*

Since Jesus didn't come, but these Sabbatarian Adventists believed the time of prophecy had been fulfilled, what exactly did happen on October 22, 1844? The answer came in relocating the sanctuary from Daniel's prophecy. Instead of the popular belief of the earth being the sanctuary, these Sabbatarian Adventists came to believe that the sanctuary being referred to was actually located in Heaven, according to Revelation 11:19.<sup>64</sup> Hiram Edson, a Methodist farmer, claimed to have seen a vision which brought clarity to this issue, in which instead of Jesus coming down from Heaven, he for the "first time entered the second apartment of that sanctuary" where the cleansing was to take place.<sup>65</sup>

This shift in location for the prophecy's fulfillment would have a significant impact on the development of mission for the Seventh-day Adventist church. As time moved on, and these Sabbatarian Adventists continued to embrace the validity of the 1844 date, they needed a way to explain the delay. This need was addressed by the teaching of the *investigative judgment*, a belief developed in the 1850's by Joseph

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<sup>63</sup> Land, *Adventism in America: A History*, 38.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 63.

Bates,<sup>66</sup> Uriah Smith,<sup>67</sup> J. N. Loughborough<sup>68</sup> and James White<sup>69</sup> that Christ's "cleansing" from Daniel's prophecy was actually a trial considering the case of professed believers in the Heavenly realms.<sup>70</sup> Ellen White would further expound on this process, explaining that "every name is mentioned, every case closely investigated. Names are accepted, names rejected. When any have sins remaining upon the books of record, unrepented of and unforgiven, their names will be blotted out of the book of life, and the record of their good deeds will be erased from the book of God's remembrance."<sup>71</sup>

Such vivid descriptions captivated their imagination and motivated these Sabbatarian Adventists to be on mission for God. The sanctuary became more than a unique teaching,<sup>72</sup> it became a hermeneutical tool for their understanding of Scripture and the world.<sup>73</sup> The beliefs that emerged would become a new paradigm for engaging life on earth, while awaiting the return of Christ.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 31–32. A former ship captain who became a founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Noted among other contributions, for introducing James and Ellen White to the Seventh-day Sabbath teaching.

<sup>67</sup> Land, *Adventism in America: A History*, 50, 63. An early Adventist theologian who served as one of the first editors of the *Review and Herald*, the flagship paper of the blossoming denomination. Later became first secretary of the General Conference.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 77. An early Adventist leader who was among the first to proselytize in the Western United States.

<sup>69</sup> One of the main founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church and husband of Ellen White, a recognized prophet in the denomination.

<sup>70</sup> Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 76.

<sup>71</sup> White, 483.

<sup>72</sup> Calling the Sanctuary doctrine unique is not to credit Adventists with its origination. For further discussion on the Puritan roots of this doctrine see: Bryan W. Ball, "A High Priest in Heaven," in *The English Connection: The Puritan Roots of Seventh-Day Adventist Beliefs*, 102-119 (Cambridge, UK: James Clark & Co, 1981).

<sup>73</sup> Fernando Canale, *Vision & Mission: How a Theological Vision Drives the Mission of the Emerging Remnant* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2015), 33.

Connecting the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel and their belief in an investigative judgment to the message of Revelation 14:6-7, Adventists embraced their calling to warn the world of the “hour of judgment.” This became more than a matter of how the church behaved, it was its organizing identity. As such, the book of Revelation, even more than prophecies of Daniel, became their founding document. They believed God had called a remnant church, spoken of in Revelation 12:17, as those appointed to warn the world of this judgment and prepare the world for Christ’s soon return. This involved an embrace of the two key characteristics found of those mentioned in Revelation 12:17: “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” The creation of a new denomination was almost complete. The only thing left was to address the pressing issue of organization. With that came an important question: what would it mean to come together formally when this group had identified other organizations as Babylon? How they answered 170 years ago is still impacting Adventist theology and mission today.

### *Opposition to Creeds*

Not surprisingly, when it came time to formally organize a denomination, these Sabbatarian Adventists placed special emphasis on the 4th commandment and a biblical observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath. They believed the restoration of Saturday Sabbath was a vital preparation for the return of Christ. Additionally, they identify the “testimony of Jesus” as the “Spirit of prophecy” based upon the equation found in Revelation 19:10. The confluence of these factors led to a paradox of a formational principle for the denomination. In 1861, the church became officially organized around a brief, one sentence covenant, loaded with history and theological implications: “We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together as a church, taking the name Seventh-

day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ.”<sup>74</sup>

Embedded in this statement is a tension between two priorities. On one hand, it was intentionally brief, with language that was more voluntary than compulsory in the attempts to avoid the credal tendencies of other churches.<sup>75</sup> Adventist pioneers felt this was the very problem that led to their expulsion from these churches when they discovered new truths of Scripture. They did not want to organize themselves against any new movements of God and thus become partakers with Babylon.

On the other hand, the very name chosen was a result of a carefully constructed theological position that set Adventists at odds with the rest of their Christian family. They still proclaimed the soon return of Christ at a time when others had become alarmed at the fallout of failed predictions of the past, and they distinguished themselves on the issue of the Seventh-day Sabbath from the rest of Christendom.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> S. Joseph Kidder, “Creeds and Statements of Belief in Early Adventist Thought,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 47, no. 1 (2009): 111, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3054&context=auss>.

<sup>75</sup> Elder Loughborough is noted for expressing his concern in this area. He believed the other churches to have failed in this regard and expressed it through this now oft-repeated process: “The first step of apostasy is to get up a creed, telling us what we shall believe. The second is to make that creed a test of fellowship. The third is to try members by that creed. The fourth to denounce as heretics those who do not believe that creed. And fifth, to commence persecution against such.” Arthur L. White, Alan Forquer, and Woolsey. *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Association, 1981), 453.

<sup>76</sup> This was a strong dividing point, regardless of what concerns may have existed towards a creed. James White, one of the church founders, made this clear during the organizational meetings when he said, “Now let others who choose push the battle in confusion, but we are making all preparations for a safe retreat till the army of Sabbathkeepers be organized, and the rebels against organization be purged out.” *Ibid.*, 451.

Seventh-day Adventist theology developed out of the firm belief that the bible should be the believer's only creed, and that each generation had its own "present truth" which was dynamic in nature.<sup>77</sup> Early pioneers in the church opposed any formal creed, fearing it would end up leading to persecution of those who did not agree with it, much as happened to some of them before and after the great disappointment.<sup>78</sup> Their concept of "dynamic truth" meant they believed that "truth is capable of constant expansion"<sup>79</sup> and that they would amend "points of faith if they could see good reason to do so from the Scriptures."<sup>80</sup>

This background is interesting to note when considering the development and formalization of Adventism's belief system as it relates to contemporary issues of discipleship. In 1872, the first list of twenty-five beliefs were published with the understanding that they were "not put forth ... as having any authority with our people, nor ... designed to secure uniformity ... as a system of faith, [but rather as] a brief statement of what is, and has been, with great unanimity, held by them."<sup>81</sup> This was done with the hopes of making the Adventist position more well understood by the general

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When the question extended to the issue of standards, even Loughborough, so passionately against creeds seemed to contradict himself. He insisted smokers were not allowed. "As to taking in members and laboring with them, the very time to commence to labor is when their names are proposed for membership. Then if they cannot be brought to terms, it will be best to let them stand outside till they can come in right." The author of the biography concluded: "One cannot miss the points made by Loughborough. No one, not even those who had been united in worshiping on Sabbath with a company of believers, should be taken into the church as a member unless he or she was in full harmony with the beliefs of the church." *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>77</sup> Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> Kidder, "Creeds and Statements of Belief in Early Adventist Thought," 111.

<sup>79</sup> Knight, *A Search for Identity*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Kidder, "Creeds and Statements of Belief in Early Adventist Thought," 112.

public. Almost 60 years later, in 1931, a similar effort took on a more formal nature when 22 beliefs were published in the church's yearbook. Much as the 1872 list had in the preceding years, this new list became the foundation for all confessional statements in the Seventh-day Adventist church until it was replaced in 1980.<sup>82</sup> The 1980 version contained 27 fundamental beliefs, which has met certain revisions and now contains 28 fundamental beliefs.<sup>83</sup> The preamble to the fundamental beliefs still maintains the original spirit of openness with its promise for revision "when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."<sup>84</sup>

Unfortunately, this open-ended posture has been challenged by a parallel development in Adventism's discipleship process. Nearly 80 years after the church was founded, Adventist leaders decided to address "a great need of uniformity in the matter of receiving persons into the fellowship,"<sup>85</sup> with the implementation of a baptismal vow in 1941. Hoping to systematize the discipleship process, the approved vows served to cement the fundamental beliefs as a creed for Seventh-day Adventists. In the 1941 version, the prospective new member had to affirmatively respond to this question: "Knowing and understanding the fundamental Bible principles as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is it your purpose, by God's grace, to order your life in harmony

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew McChesney, "Delegates Approve Landmark Update of Fundamental Beliefs," Adventist.org, <https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2015-07-07/delegates-approve-landmark-update-of-fundamental-beliefs/>.

<sup>84</sup> "28 Fundamental Beliefs," 2.

<sup>85</sup> W. H. Branson, "Autumn Council Highlights," *Ministry Magazine* (February 1942): 5.

with these principles?”<sup>86</sup> While the use of the word “harmony” may be intended to soften the creedal overtones, the most recent church manual makes the connection explicit: “The Church has adopted its 28 fundamental beliefs, together with the baptismal vow and Certificate of Baptism and Commitment, as a baptismal covenant.”<sup>87</sup> With such a definitive position espoused in an official church publication, any remaining denial of the creedal place of the 28 fundamental beliefs would seem to be merely an issue of semantics.

### *Adventism’s Remnant Identity*

This movement towards a more creedal belief system has coincided with a high degree of organizational allegiance. It is just as leaders warned almost 40 years ago: “If our ecclesiology fails to reflect the notion of unity in diversity, we become guilty of what has become known as ‘structural fundamentalism’ which identifies the structure with fundamental or absolute truth.”<sup>88</sup> For the Adventist church, the exploration of developing belief, a hallmark of the early faith, has become somewhat stifled, as the structural boundaries and policies make a shift in theology more difficult. The systematic approach for protecting the church’s remnant identity<sup>89</sup> impairs the denomination’s ability to fully embrace a missional re-birth by the Spirit. Although the theological heritage of the

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<sup>86</sup> “The General Conference Committee Minutes Autumn Council, 1941,” n.d., <http://docs.adventistarchives.org/docs/GCC/GCC1941-10-AC.pdf#view=fit>.

<sup>87</sup> Secretariat General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual* (Nampa, ID: Review and Herald Publishing, 2016), 47.

<sup>88</sup> Walter B. T. Douglas, “The Church: Its Nature and Function,” in *Servants for Christ: The Adventist Church Facing the 80’s* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1980), 74. Quoted in Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 51.

<sup>89</sup> See chapter 1 above for more detailed exploration on this.

church has welcomed a wide range of academic challenge and leaves open the possibility of a sustained push in a new direction, this parallel denominational allegiance well establishes the Adventist church's own challenge with an organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent.

### **Conclusion**

With this background in place, a few observations can be made. Regarding the missional movement, it should be noted that it was an issue of theology and the establishment of the identity of the God and the church as missionary in nature.

Denominations need renewal of their missional focus but find inherent difficulty with it because their organizational focus sometimes supersedes the origin of the spirit-birthered missional church. Most churches, even non-denominational ones, prioritize functional changes without addressing the root problem of missional theology and imagination.

This leads to a few observations for an Adventist context. First, Adventism carries a missional element to its DNA that emerged from the Millerite movement. The church affirms that it was called and birthered for the purpose of witness for Christ. This means the Adventist church very readily identifies with certain missional aspects, within its theology and structure.

Second, these missional tendencies can be helpfully classified, based on the four strands offered above. Adventism may mostly be seen in the Discovering strand, focused on God sending the church with a message to the world, in particular the 3 Angel's message of Revelation 14. Adventism is not as noticeably involved with the engaging

strand and participating in the broader missional conversation, a necessary step for missional renewal.

Third, these organizational struggles of the Adventist church reveal an uncomfortable reality for those clinging to a remnant identity. It is quite possible that God's spirit was alive and moving within the Millerite movement and even in the aftermath that led to the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist church. The resulting entities have produced meaningful contributions worldwide in education, health, humanitarian efforts, and spiritual literature. However, this does not mean that the Adventist denomination is substantively different from other denominations organized around a purposive intent, namely in this case to share its unique message with the world. At best, Adventism's organization is a response to the sending activity of God, at worst a theological system intended to obscure that and even minimize God's work among others. In either case, contemporary Adventists could benefit from renewed theological conversations that help establish a truly missional identity.

Forming a truly missional imagination would require Adventism to recognize the fuller work of God in all creation. This imagination challenges the exclusive understandings of God's purpose through the church and the larger community. Furthermore, a true missional mindset would require questioning the denomination's organizational intent and critiquing it in the light of God's formational intention of the church, inviting Adventists into a fuller participation with God's work in the universal church, as well as outside the walls of the church. The power to take this step can be unlocked through the renewed imagination and missional identity formed through the work of the Holy Spirit. Having already suggested a narrative approach to Revelation as a

valuable tool in this process, the next chapter will consider at length the power of Storytelling to shape identity and community through imaginal renewal.

CHAPTER 5:  
THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

**Overview**

The previous chapter described the lack of missional imagination present in the Adventist theological framework. This lack of missional imagination also contributes to the issue of conflicted witness among contemporary Adventists. Recognizing the book of Revelation as a formative document to Adventist theology, this dissertation proposes that a shift to narrative approach in teaching Revelation would aid in imagination renewal, especially as it relates to Adventist self-identity. This chapter will explore the intricate relationship between narrative, or storytelling, and imagination.

In the first section, this chapter will address the role of storytelling in society. This will include a survey of developing research in the field of “narrative identity.” It will demonstrate how story plays a central role in assisting people to understand who they are, throughout the lifespan, and plays a vital role in developing a strong sense of personal well-being.

Having established the value of storytelling to our identity and well-being, the next section will address the topic of imagination renewal. This will explore the interplay between imagination and narrative identity, a vital aspect of Christian formation in the midst of a dominant culture that opposes a Kingdom mindset.

Finally, this chapter will describe the role of storytelling in community. It will consider a case of organizational change and how narrative and story can be helpfully employed within the local church.

## Narrative Identity

From his studies of the interaction between Anglos and First Nations people in Canada, J. Edward Chamberlain noted a difference in cultural perspective emerging from their dispute over land. Anglo settlers relied on a title to determine land ownership and the rights one had to it. On the other hand, First Nations people could not understand the concept of owning the land. When Government officials claimed the right to the land, the natives were astonished. Using the little English he knew, one of the elder's expressed what was bothering his people: "If this is your land, where are your stories?"<sup>1</sup>

What is obvious in some cultures is only recently being rediscovered in modern America. Although it was once a fringe aspect of psychology, research into life story has increased over the last 50 years. Based on the chief's insightful question in Chamberlain's book (and other stories of First Nations' perspectives), multiple researchers have explored the power of story in shaping one's sense of self, navigating the unexpected challenges of life, and maintaining a healthy sense of well-being. In recent years, narrative has become a key area of interest in personal psychology, to the point where researcher Dan McAdams asserts it is "no longer a fanciful notion ... The psychology of life stories may be well situated today to play an important integrative role in the scientific study of human behavior and experience."<sup>2</sup>

This topic of research is often referred to as "narrative identity." Research focused on this concept has affirmed that a true understanding of how we form our identity must

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<sup>1</sup> J. Edward Chamberlain, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?: Reimagining Home and Sacred Space* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (June 2001): 101.

involve “how individuals craft narratives from experiences, tell these stories internally and to others, and ultimately apply these stories to knowledge of self, other, and the world in general.”<sup>3</sup> Surveying a sample of the leading researchers on this topic, Jefferson Singer identifies common principles that help establish the value of this practice. These include the centrality of narrative to identity formation, an emphasis on lifespan development, and the ability to employ these narratives in improved well-being.

### *Definition of Storytelling*

Kendall Haven argues that while there is universal scientific agreement about the power of story to inspire and influence us, there is less clarity over what a story truly is. Dictionaries define story as “an account of imaginary or real people and events.”<sup>4</sup> This is agreed upon by several researchers, as Haven points out, but the definition is too generic to be entirely useful. Under this definition, something as mundane as “She took a walk outside,” could be considered a story. Haven therefore offers a more robust definition for story as “A detailed character-based narration of a character’s struggles to overcome obstacles and reach an important goal.”<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this study, this definition speaks equally well to the usage of the words “story” and “narrative,” and the two will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter. With that in mind, let us consider the central role of narrative in shaping our identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Jefferson A. Singer, “Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespan: An Introduction,” *Journal of Personality* 72, no. 3 (June 2004): 438, [http://www.self-definingmemories.com/singer\\_\\_2004.pdf](http://www.self-definingmemories.com/singer__2004.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> “Story,” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/story>.

<sup>5</sup> Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), 79.

*Centrality of Narrative*

Of primary importance in the current research is the centrality of narrative to identity formation. Instead of organizing around past theories of human desires, the emphasis is “almost an implicit endorsement of theories of personality that seek individuals as inherently meaning-seekers or symbol-manipulators.”<sup>6</sup> While other theories of desire may play into these approaches, they nevertheless focus on the power of narrative as an organizing principle to a person’s identity. In turn, these narratives become a means of explaining one’s behaviors: “Once we have filtered life experiences through the narrative lens, we can make use of the narratives we have created. We can employ stories to raise our spirits, guide our actions, or influence others as a tool of persuasion or rhetoric.”<sup>7</sup>

McAdams argues that our identity actually “takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme.”<sup>8</sup> McAdams has published multiple articles and books on the topic, including one book describing how “redemptive story” played a role in former President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq.<sup>9</sup> He explains that “more than traits, motives, values, and so on, life stories function to establish identity

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<sup>6</sup> Singer, “Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespan: An Introduction.”439.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>8</sup> McAdams, “The Psychology of Life Stories,” 101.

<sup>9</sup> Dan P. McAdams, *George W. Bush and the Redemptive Dream: A Psychological Portrait* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8-9.

... in that a story is the best available structure that persons have for integrating and making sense of a life in time.”<sup>10</sup>

These life stories are based upon true experiences of those involved, but they are not limited to a retelling of the facts. Since the individual is seeking to make sense of the disparate parts, they search for clues of connection, deeper meanings, and overriding themes. Instead of a simple rehearsing of life’s events, people edit the scenes of their life like a movie and “imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful.”<sup>11</sup> As MacAdams points out, researchers debate the objective veracity of these memories. However factually accurate these autobiographies may be, they reflect the intentionality that is “at the heart of narrative” and they help the individual “locate and define the self within an ongoing life story that, simultaneously, is strongly oriented toward future goals.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Life Development*

This way of framing one’s identity continues as a life-long development process, much like learning a language. The storying of one’s life is a practice that follows a predictable pattern, based upon cognitive development. It begins as a modeling process with children from their infancy. Parents will encourage children to reflect upon past

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<sup>10</sup> Dan P. McAdams, et. al., “When Bad Things Turn Good and Good Things Turn Bad: Sequences of Redemption and Contamination in Life Narrative and Their Relation to Psychosocial Adaptation in Midlife Adults and in Students,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27, no. 4 (April 1, 2001): 475, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167201274008>.

<sup>11</sup> McAdams, “The Psychology of Life Stories,” 101.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

events, such as visiting grandma's house, recalling what they had for lunch or an afternoon at the park. With children as young as 16 months, parents not only invite the child to respond to these moments, but to retell it in very intentional ways. Parents model and communicate that "there are certain ways to tell these kinds of stories, focusing not just on what happened but why it was interesting, important, and emotional."<sup>13</sup>

By the age of 3 to 5, children become increasingly capable of talking about their past. However, they still rely on adults to provide a coherent narrative for understanding and connecting these events.<sup>14</sup> As children become adolescents, they grow in their self-awareness and realize their life is constituted of diverse, and sometimes conflicting realities. Meanwhile, they sense a desire for integration, and encouraged in this desire by society, they look for ways to establish themselves, seeking to form "an integrative narrative of self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose."<sup>15</sup>

While younger children are incapable of such abstract thought patterns, these contemplations can be especially intriguing for an adolescent or young adult. McAdams proposes that "The idea that one's life, as complex and dynamic as it increasingly appears to be, might be integrated into a meaningful and purposeful whole may represent, therefore, an especially appealing possibility to the self-reflective emerging adult."<sup>16</sup> Even rather mundane rituals such as diary-keeping by pre-teen girls can play an important role

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<sup>13</sup> Robyn Fivush et al., "The Making of Autobiographical Memory: Intersections of Culture, Narratives and Identity," *International Journal of Psychology* 46, no. 5 (October 2011): 324.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," 101.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 103.

in understanding the performance of the unifying story that individual is learning to live out.<sup>17</sup>

Further research by Laura A. King and Joshua A. Hicks demonstrates the role of meaning-detection and meaning-construction among college students.<sup>18</sup> The presence of meaning is a key component of narrative, and their research highlighted the ability of these students to find meaning in both positive and adverse life circumstances. Meaning detection “involves assimilating ... new experiences into one’s pre-existing assumptions,”<sup>19</sup> often times around positive, but unmemorable daily events that affirm one’s worldview. Meaning-construction normally involves more effort in the face of challenges to their life assumptions “requiring a revision in one’s meaning structure themselves.”<sup>20</sup> This desire for meaning is evidence of the ongoing interest of individuals in establishing their life story.

Once initiated in adolescence, the practice of creating coherence through a unifying narrative continues throughout one’s lifespan. At each stage of life, individuals will experience events as meaningful either in the way they confirm their beliefs and expectations of reality or challenge them to rethink these perspectives. This ongoing process continually refines their sense of identity. In turn, how one interprets these

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<sup>17</sup> Note for example Barbara Crowther, “Writing as Performance: Young Girl’s Diaries,” in *Making Meaning of Narratives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999), 197-220.

<sup>18</sup> Laura A. King and Joshua A. Hicks, “Detecting and Constructing Meaning in Life Events,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 5 (September 1, 2009): 317–330, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760902992316>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

experiences and includes them in their autobiographies can significantly impact their quality of life.

### *Eudaimonic Well-Being*

By the time someone reaches middle-age, their life journeys have often taken unexpected turns and detours. Significant life episodes such as marriage or divorce, the birth of a child, or the loss of a parent, obtaining professional success, or unemployment and financial ruin all continue to shape the life narrative being told that forms their identity. Beginning with college undergraduates and going through the mid-life years (35-65), how one tells their life narrative has been shown to directly relate to their well-being.

Many times, individuals may think of their overall well-being as the net result of positive and negative outcomes in life. In reality, the key difference in the well-being of an individual is not so much the ratio between positive and negative life events, but the way in which these life scenes are understood within their life story. In particular, while some individuals tend to see positive results coming out of even adverse circumstances, others see good events in their lives as inevitably being ruined by negative outcomes that follow them. Those who see the redemptive aspect out of negative sequences in life employ “limitation-remediation scripts” whereas those who see positive events giving way to negative results favor “contamination scripts.”<sup>21</sup>

These practices speak to a discovery about well-being as it relates to one’s narrative identity. In addressing the power of narrative for shaping identity, Bauer speaks

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<sup>21</sup> McAdams, et al., “When Bad Things Turn Good,” 475.

of a particular kind of happiness in life: “Eudaimonic well-being” based on Aristotle’s idea of a greatest good consisting of pleasure and virtue.<sup>22</sup> This is contrasted with a hedonic well-being that consists solely in seeking pleasure since it also “emphasizes meaningfulness and growth - a more enduring sort of happiness. It tends to be more humanistic and based upon how meaningful one’s life feels in addition to simply how good it feels.”<sup>23</sup> Again, there is the consistent search for meaning which is the organizing principle of narrative. Even more crucial is how those with higher, more substantial form of well-being established it.

According to Bauer, those who charted the highest level of eudaimonic well-being “emphasized personal growth stories, [and] framed difficult life experiences as transformative ...[using a] culturally-shaped script of redemption” to create their narrative.<sup>24</sup> In other words, they understood their life within the framework of a story. This guiding narrative helped them cope better with unexpected life challenges such as divorce, loss of a loved one, or working through parenting a down-syndrome child. Those who productively engage with this framework were able to do more than simply resolve these threats to their well-being, and instead turned the experiences into a “narrative opportunity for the growth and transformation of self.”<sup>25</sup>

Further research has suggested an ability to engage in this process of redemptive storytelling as a continual form of adaption to unexpected life events. King and Hicks

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<sup>22</sup> Jack J. Bauer, Dan P. McAdams, and Jennifer L. Pals, “Narrative Identity and Eudaimonic Well-Being,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9, no. 1 (January 2008): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9021-6>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

looked at shifting expectations as life dreams became unattainable or revised. They discovered a great capacity to re-narrate these experiences, and a strong correlation to maturity for those who did. In conclusion they wrote, “We propose that the mature person is able to look on his or her multiple possible selves with characteristic fearlessness, to acknowledge life’s second (and third, and fourth ...) chances as part of the unfolding of a rich and valuable human life.”<sup>26</sup> As such, the story that is told continues to organize one’s identity and move one closer towards a redemptive conclusion.

From the beginning of our life journey, story plays a central role in helping us to understand our identity, determine our purpose and meaning, and find means for maturity and well-being. As one author put it, “We live in stories the way fish live in water, breathing them in and out, buoyed up by them, taking from them our sustenance, but rarely conscious of this element in which we live.”<sup>27</sup> Yet the more aware we become, the more significant stories reveal themselves to be. Because of this vital function, it should be no surprise that storytelling goes hand in hand with one of the main concerns of this study, the renewal of imagination.

### **Storytelling and Imagination**

One of the necessary, but easily overlooked aspects of identity forming stories is the role of imagination in creating these narratives. Although our autobiographies are non-fiction, imagination is a necessary means of healthy engagement with the different

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<sup>26</sup> Laura A. King and Joshua A. Hicks, “Narrating the Self in the Past and the Future: Implications for Maturity,” *Research in Human Development* 3, no. 2–3 (September 1, 2006): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2006.9683365>.

<sup>27</sup> Haven, *Storyproof*, 13.

scenes of our story. This is because telling our life story is about more than simply rehearsing the dry details of our daily experience. As McAdams points out, “Individuals’ life stories, or identities, are based on the facts of their lives, but life stories are not synonymous with those facts, because making one’s life into a story is as much an act of imagination as is the production of fiction, poetry, and art.”<sup>28</sup>

This act of imagination is crucial to our continual search for meaning-making in the world. As Bruner says, “Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. ‘Life’ in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as ‘a narrative’ is.”<sup>29</sup> Our unfolding autobiographies are not as much a real-time recording of the facts as an ongoing interpretation of our actual experiences. Where narrative is the method for making meaning out of these diverse life events, the research on this topic treats imagination as our capacity to do so. This makes imagination engagement paramount for life transformation.

In turn, the cultural background that serves as a foundation for imagination becomes crucial to our life and well-being. Every culture contains “narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life ... [including a full stock of] canonical life narratives.”<sup>30</sup> Who are our heroes? Who are the villains? What makes for a happy ending?

Singer explains that “narratives are inevitably created to meet the demands of social roles and historical-cultural niches; they force us to ask about their audience and

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<sup>28</sup> McAdams et al., “When Bad Things Turn Good,” 475.

<sup>29</sup> Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 71, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 692.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 694.

how their construction seeks to answer certain problems raised by the various subgroups to which we belong.”<sup>31</sup> This means that the issues raised by our surrounding culture become vital in shaping our own personal identity. As Bruner asserts, “we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives ... we also become variants of the culture’s canonical forms.”<sup>32</sup>

One example of this would be what Bauer describes as the typical “American Hero:”

In contemporary American society, life narratives of personal growth and redemption often feature a nearly-self-sufficient and morally-steadfast protagonist who keeps growing and expanding, even (and especially) in response to personal suffering and setbacks. Among the most powerful cultural discourses for personal growth in American society are those affirming upward social mobility, personal liberation, recovery, atonement, and self-actualization.<sup>33</sup>

This kind of imagination offers a formative influence in shaping one’s narrative identity. The powerful overtones of this image can provide inspiration for an individual to move toward a more stable, healthier, individual well-being. It can also inspire one beyond mere personal interest to pursue change in broad social issues that need redeeming. However, these cultural scripts can also become problematic when they run at odds with other values and beliefs.

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<sup>31</sup> Singer, “Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespan: An Introduction,” 444.

<sup>32</sup> Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” 694.

<sup>33</sup> Bauer, McAdams, and Pals, “Narrative Identity and Eudaimonic Well-Being,” 100.

*Prophetic Imagination*

No doubt, predominant cultural values and practices can have a major impact on this world within us. Common cultural rituals encourage specific kinds of ambitions, while questioning others. Cultural values paint a vision of a what a good life looks like and how one should define their well-being. For many theologians, this American vision of the life well-lived is a flawed one.

James K. A. Smith highlights a few symbolic public arenas where this vision is at odds with a vision of the kingdom: the mall, the stadium, and the university.<sup>34</sup> Each of these arenas present unique aspects of the dominant culture that seek to capture our imagination and alter our vision and definition of the “good” life.

The first example of the mall emphasizes many of the flawed aspects in the embrace of a consumeristic mindset. Advertising for clothing, automobiles, or the latest iPhone saturate the media and other sources of information that we turn to everyday. Smith notes that “marketing is the mall’s evangelism.”<sup>35</sup> The images portray a hedonistic vision of happiness for the consumer, inviting them to taste and see and touch and smell and hear the good news of “redemption in consumption.”<sup>36</sup> The emergence of the term “retail therapy,” and the psychological case for its value and understanding of its overuse, indicates how prevalent this practice is.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Wordview, and Culutral Formation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 93–121.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>37</sup> “Why ‘Retail Therapy’ Works,” *Psychology Today*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-why-behind-the-buy/201305/why-retail-therapy-works>.

A second arena for this faulty vision-making are the stadiums that host sporting and entertainment events across the country. Smith notes that beyond the mirrored practices of consumerism from the mall, stadium events in America are a common venue for promoting rituals of nationalism.<sup>38</sup> The invitation to stand for the national anthem is perhaps the most notable of these, and its importance has only been amplified by the public backlash to the peaceful protests of NFL players.<sup>39</sup> This pride of nationalism and even the willingness to pay the ultimate price is celebrated on the big screen through numerous war-themed movies such as *American Sniper* or *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*, infusing the viewers with an intense national loyalty. The result is a backlash if the reality of “liberty and justice for all” is questioned through the least bit of noncompliance to the accepted rituals. Even among Christians who should rightly question the republic’s “claims to have achieved the goal of *shalom*,” this fervor can often be seen.<sup>40</sup>

A third (although certainly not last) space that shapes culture’s predominant vision is the college campus. In particular, Smith notes the initiation process for freshmen (Fresher’s Week), courtesy of their senior counterparts, to the values and rituals that will guide them through their educational career.<sup>41</sup> These rituals involve “multi-sensory” experiences and often an exhausting and over-stimulating pace that is detrimental to true

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Wordview, and Culutral Formation*, 106.

<sup>39</sup> “The Real Reasons Why NFL Players Are Protesting and How Their Message Gets Lost in Politics,” SBNation.Com, last modified July 31, 2018, <https://www.sbnation.com/2018/7/31/17614874/nfl-national-anthem-policy-player-protests-reasons-trump>.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Wordview, and Culutral Formation*, 109.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–118.

health and well-being. While these practices are often at odds with the image portrayed by universities and promoted by professors, Smith points out that these happen with the full knowledge of the institution.<sup>42</sup> He concludes that, “despite widespread cynicism about the antics of Fresher’s Week, its rituals turn out to be good preparation for the kind of people that the university ultimately wants to produce: productive, successful consumers who will be leaders in society.”<sup>43</sup>

These are examples of the deficit in the popular imagination of American society. Since we are immersed in this culture, discovering the reality of its faulty vision requires what Smith calls, “cultural exegesis,” a process that reveals the identity-forming practices or liturgies of culture intended to mold us in ways that are often at odds with the vision God has for our lives.<sup>44</sup> Smith suggests a thorough analysis of our daily activities including asking questions such as “What vision of human flourishing is implicit in this or that practice? What does the good life look like as embedded in cultural rituals? What sort of person will I become after being immersed into this or that cultural liturgy?”<sup>45</sup>

Such questions form the basis for a renewed engagement with imagination. Imagination may be a tool for meaning making in the narratives we tell about our lives, but several theologians have noted it is more than that. Garret Green uses the term imagination as a way of “conceiving the point of contact between divine revelation and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

human experience.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense, imagination is a ground for sacred discovery and encounters. As such, the follower of Christ must engage the kind of cultural exegesis mentioned above on an ongoing basis.

This is also why imagination was previously defined in this essay as “the human capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens.”<sup>47</sup> This more forceful definition illuminates how important imagination is to our lived experience, while simultaneously addressing the direct challenges to engaging it in a holy way. The dominant culture, regardless of setting, employs all the structures of society to maintain its influence. Elements of social pressure, institutional education, and media coverage encourage the continued support of these perspectives, oftentimes stifling our humanity. Or in the words of Richard Stone, “each of us is to one degree or another a casualty of a culture that devalues what I consider to be the most important ingredient of human sanity: imagination.”<sup>48</sup> Particularly in regard to the Kingdom of God, as we reform our imagination, we restore our sanity and our proper identity.

How does one renew faulty imagination? Stone suggests that our transformation will come as we “affirm storytelling, reinstating it as a central motif in the framework of our lives.”<sup>49</sup> This echoes the value of narrative noted above in shaping identity and

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<sup>46</sup> Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling: A Sacred Journey of Personal Discovery* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), 15–16.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

providing “life with unity, purpose, and meaning.”<sup>50</sup> We may not be able to completely eliminate the influence of the surrounding culture, but we can be intentional about the story we choose to live, and what feeds the imagination that forms our narrative identity.

### *Scripture as Fuel for Imagination*

Storytelling and imagination fit hand in hand with one another and as the previously cited research indicates, our identity and well-being are closely related to our capacity to properly employ these tools. Because the predominant narrative cues for shaping identity are defective in honoring our humanity, an alternative source of imagination is necessary. Traditionally Christians have turned to the Bible “as the script ... that narrates the identity of the people of God ... and the fuel of the Christian imagination,”<sup>51</sup> and it is still a reliable source to do so. However, merely addressing beliefs and knowledge in the teaching of Scripture is not sufficient for change. Human beings are fully immersed in the culture they are a part of and any renewal of imagination will require a formational alternative that takes this reality into consideration.

The words from the Apostle Paul to first Century Christians captures this concept well when he commands them, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”<sup>52</sup> The word mind here refers to “power of spiritual perception,”<sup>53</sup> similar to the understanding of imagination developed in this chapter. The

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<sup>50</sup> Bauer, Mcadams, and Pals, “Narrative Identity and Eudaimonic Well-Being,” 82.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Wordview, and Culutral Formation*, 195.

<sup>52</sup> Romans 12:2a, ESV.

<sup>53</sup> G. W. Kittel, G.W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 952. “νοῦς.”

transformation is comparable to the process of metamorphosis a caterpillar undergoes in becoming a butterfly as they “change into another form.”<sup>54</sup> This indicates a comprehensive act involving thoughtful critique of the surrounding culture and intentional resistance against its detrimental influence on our internal world.

Such a change would include a full alteration of not only behavior or even beliefs but the actual desires at the core of our being. This is the powerful role the imagination can play in shaping identity. Indeed, Smith refers to this training of desire as not merely a matter of acquiring additional knowledge, but about the “pedagogical formation of our imagination.”<sup>55</sup> Smith explains further, “because we are embodied, affective, liturgical animals, our love and desire are shaped and directed by rituals and practices that work on our imaginary.”<sup>56</sup> This means that how we are spiritually formed centers on the rituals we engage in, not just as intentional religious practices, but also those encouraged by everyday environments like the mall, the stadium, or a university campus.

Keeping that reality in mind helps frame the expectation for the ritual of scriptural engagement. To perform its intended role in facilitating the proper formation of our desires, Scripture must capture our imagination. The story of God and humanity that it tells must challenge and, in many cases, replace the vision of our predominant culture. It must renew our “power of spiritual perception” if it is to facilitate our transformation. As

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 4:755. “μεταμορφόω”

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Wordview, and Culutral Formation*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 94.

Smith observes, “because we are story-telling animals, imbibing the story of Scripture is the primary way that our desire gets aimed at the kingdom.”<sup>57</sup>

In this regard, the narrative approach to Revelation is particularly useful, first, because of the primacy of storytelling in engaging imagination. Story is the default mode for finding meaning and organizing identity. The process of meaning making involves a continual search for scripts that will shape our desired narrative. Culture offers many options, but when those visions are discovered to be faulty, only a new story can take their place.

To engage this process of changing the script, Apocalyptic literature such as Revelation is particularly useful. Beyond the allure of its role as future predictor, Apocalyptic literature can “[unveil] the realities around us for what they really are.”<sup>58</sup> It does this not by simply listing the grievances of the empire, but by illustrating an alternative perspective in a manner that “effects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative visions of how the world is and will be.”<sup>59</sup>

Storytelling is not only central to establishing our identity, but a powerful resource for the renewal of imagination that leads to transformative engagement with the world around us. With narrative playing such a crucial role on a personal level, it should be no surprise that the stories also have a major impact on forming communities. The section that follows explores the role communities play in influencing our personal stories, including the need for a clear and compelling narrative that unifies such groups.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19–20.

## Community-Shaping Stories

The narration of our identity is an individualized process, with unique caveats and plot twists for each storyteller. However, the formation of imagination that brings meaning and understanding to our story looks to cultural influences for direction and thrives with community support. This is particularly true within the church, where the story of Scripture offers more than a script for individual identity renewal, but also “fills out and specifies what the kingdom ... of God’s people looks like ... and shows us the kind of people we’re called to be.”<sup>60</sup>

As noted earlier, our narrative identities depend on our environment to establish meaning. As we revisit different episodes of our story, the different cultures we inhabit provide ways to evaluate this story “including canonical cultural biographies, life scripts, and master narratives [as various tools that] ... inform the ways individuals narrate their own personal experiences within local social interactions.”<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, while we rely on story as a way of organizing identity, the practices that enliven imagination are often neglected. Stone laments particularly the loss of communal storytelling that “has depleted our culture of time-honored heroes and wisdom, robbing us of our deep connection to our ancestors and ancient guiding myths.”<sup>62</sup> This calls for our communities to reclaim the power of storytelling for our renewal, including the call for the local church to embrace a fully imaginative engagement with the biblical narrative at the heart of Christian

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Wordview, and Culutral Formation*, 197.

<sup>61</sup> Fivush et al., “The Making of Autobiographical Memory,” 322–23.

<sup>62</sup> Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, 13.

identity.<sup>63</sup> Churches that embrace the practice of storytelling will find not only that individuals are more fully formed by community values, but that these stories can also transform the community itself.

### *Springboard Story*

The overall objective of this study is to effect a change in identity and the imagination that shapes identity for contemporary Adventists. As demonstrated above, narrative and storytelling play a vital role in accomplishing this shift on an individual level. However, a shift of this kind in the Adventist church requires change at the organization level as well. As it turns out, storytelling can be a powerful tool in achieving both kinds of change.

Researchers and organizational leaders have begun to identify the power of storytelling in shaping organizations, particularly in reinforcing change. Many times organizations employ extensive abstract analysis of their problems. They collect data from individual surveys and financial reports in an attempt to clarify and analyze the problems. They then create solutions by answering in kind with well-reasoned, thorough explanations of the steps need to create systematic change. While such practices certainly have their place in a process of change, using them exclusively ignores the influence that stories can have on individuals and the organizations they are a part of. Stephen Denning, Program Director from the World Bank, discovered in his work that “Storytelling doesn’t replace analytical thinking. It supplements it by enabling us to imagine new perspectives

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<sup>63</sup> The connection between the biblical narrative and the designation of the word “myth” is not intended as a question to the veracity or truthfulness of the biblical accounts. Myths is a designation used to refer to ancient stories of truth embraced in a different culture.

and new worlds and is ideally suited to communicating change and stimulating innovation.”<sup>64</sup>

Through his research and experimentation, Denning discovered something he calls “The Springboard,” a use of story that “enables change by providing direct access to the living part of an organization.”<sup>65</sup> During the late 90s, Denning led the charge to systemize a process for knowledge sharing throughout the World Bank organization. This involved giving real-time access to vital information for decision making, not just to other employees, but also to the clients they served. The goal behind this was to increase the capacity to meet clients’ needs and get answers to their pressing problems in hours or days instead of weeks or months.

Denning’s efforts to employ this new approach met with much skepticism and resistance. Many colleagues expressed confusion about the project. Even in his numerous one-on-one conversations with colleagues, Denning had a hard time casting his vision in a compelling way. As a financial organization, many of his counterparts could not understand why or how this new concept of knowledge sharing impacted them or the bottom line of their 100-billion-dollar organization.

The breakthrough for Denning came in March, 1996 during a simple conversation with a colleague over lunch. In that conversation his friend shared with him the story of a health worker in Zambia trying to solve a problem in treating malaria. In June of 1995, this health worker found the answer he needed by visiting the Center for Disease Control

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<sup>64</sup> Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001), xvii.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

website.<sup>66</sup> This was a stunning breakthrough at a time before the internet had exploded, and Zambia itself was a country of extreme poverty. This astounding example of knowledge sharing across the globe gave Denning new hope. His following presentations would include this story, and as they did, he increasingly got better buy-in and less confusion about his new idea of knowledge sharing. In fact, people began making their own connections and drawing conclusions for how their departments and clients could benefit from such a process.

As Denning continued the process of implementing this concept organization-wide, instead of the standard charts and figures of many business presentations, he included more stories like the Zambia example to help convey the change process he was suggesting. He realized that these were more effective, not only for engagement with his audience during the presentation, but for the change process required following those presentations. In his book's introduction, Denning offered this observation about why this approach worked so well:

Storytelling gets inside the minds of the individuals who collectively make up the organization and affects how they think, worry, wonder, agonize, and dream about themselves and in the process create—and re-create—their organization. Storytelling enables the individuals in an organization to see themselves and the organization in a different light, and accordingly take decisions and change their behavior in accordance with these new perceptions, insights and identities.<sup>67</sup>

Denning's experience is a great illustration of the power of storytelling to create change within an organization, because of how stories can embody the not-yet-lived experience

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 9–10.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., xiv–xv.

that the individuals of a community are being invited into. But to be truly effective, these stories must consider the guiding narratives of the organization.

### *Storytelling Organizations*

Although stories have a great capacity for drawing a listener into a new reality, they are never told in a vacuum. Cultural expectations, beliefs, and values influence how the audience actually interprets and applies the story. A lack of awareness of these factors can lead to two vastly different understandings between the storyteller and the listener. The discrepancy between these perspectives creates a storytelling dilemma where “the narrators often end up telling a different story from that they imagined they were telling.”<sup>68</sup>

A central cultural influence in faith organizations such as the church is the guiding spiritual narrative that shapes the community. Informed by the community’s biblical worldview, and forged through a shared history, the narrative provides structure to the community’s identity and sense of purpose. Stories that invite a new understanding of identity are likely to be questioned, or worse rejected, if the new perspective is perceived as a threat. As a result, stories that invite positive change must emerge out of the values within an environment as much as they speak into it.

David Boje explores this interplay within Storytelling organizations by creating a distinction between the meaning of narrative and story. In Boje’s view, “narrative is a whole telling, with the linear sequence of beginning, middle, and end (BME); is usually a backward-looking (retrospective) gaze from present, back through the past, sorting

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 93.

characters, dialog, themes, etc. into one plot, and changes little over time.”<sup>69</sup> He goes on, “Story, in contrast to narrative (that is centering or about control) is more apt to be dispersive (unraveling coherence, asserting differences).”<sup>70</sup> As a result of this tension, “Narrative cohesion seeks a grip on the emergent present, which story is re-dispersing.”<sup>71</sup>

Although this study has used the terms narrative and story interchangeably, Boje’s distinction provides a way to think about the interplay between an individual narrative and the narrative guiding the larger community they are a part of. Applying this to a church context, one can easily see that the biblical narrative “centers” the faith community, while the individual testimonies of Christians are the stories that assert and, when healthy, celebrate differences. This means that a faith community that can adapt to the rapidly changing culture we find ourselves in must hold space for both forms of these meaning-making stories. Such a community will be rooted in the grand redemption narrative of Scripture, but continually readapting its understanding as it attentively listens to stories of individual life transformation that add to the narrative. Churches that wish to thrive in this environment will do as Kendall advises companies to do with this insight:

If you want your messages adopted by, and internalized into, those in your organizations, find or create an effective story (or a series of stories) to share with them that incorporates your core information into the characters and struggles of the story. Encourage employees to share their own stories and experiences. Build a set of common stories that reflect the values, attitudes, struggles, beliefs and accomplishments of the community you want to create. Let these stories create the personal involvement that will cause each individual to personally adopt the community.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> David M. Boje, *Storytelling Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2008), 7–8.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Haven, *Storyproof*, 113.

*Community Identity Frameworks*

Combining Denning’s insights about Springboard Stories and Boje’s emphasis on a cohesive communal Narrative can help address a major challenge in an Adventist context: the need for an alternative framework of identity. As indicated earlier, contemporary Adventists are at odds with the exclusive interpretations of remnant identity that have been promoted in evangelistic efforts and enforced through denominational policies. At the same time, there is also an understanding of the value that a structured identity provides. In observing this tension, Adventist scholar Jack Provonsha concludes, “We must accept both poles of the tension as necessary parts of a larger unity—hopefully providing the basis for a retrained sense of mission, without which the Adventist Church is done for, and a concurrent universal sense of brotherhood, without which we will slip into the ghetto mentality which result in the rejection of Israel, God’s ancient ‘chosen people.’”<sup>73</sup>

Provonsha makes an effort to introduce a new framework for this understanding in describing the Adventist church as a “prophetic minority”<sup>74</sup> or later as a “prophetic movement.”<sup>75</sup> Provonsha uses these terms to highlight that the purpose of the Adventist church is to present a special message to all of God’s people, rather than an identity marker as the exclusive people of God. In this context he explains, “specialness properly refers to role and function ... rather than divine favor.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Provonsha, “The Church as Prophetic Minority,” 19.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>75</sup> Jack Provonsha, *A Remnant in Crisis* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing, 1993), 50.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

Another framework for reshaping identity that compliments this broader perspective comes from Jon Paulien’s exploration of the eschatological remnant.<sup>77</sup> Building on Gerhard Hasel’s work on the remnant concept in the Old Testament, Paulien notes three ways that this term is used in referring to people of God: a historical remnant, those people of God left over after a tragedy; a faithful remnant, those who remain truly committed to God; and an eschatological remnant, or those who emerge victorious in the end-times.<sup>78</sup> Applying this concept to Adventist history, he connects historic Adventism with the historical remnant and the faithful remnant as the bearers of remnant identity within this movement.<sup>79</sup> He then suggests that this leads to the eschatological remnant which will be “bigger, more international, more unpredictable than we can currently imagine” exceeding the denominational boundaries of Adventism and including an influx of messianic Jews and Muslims.<sup>80</sup> Seeing the remnant of Revelation as a catalyst for fulfilling Christ’s prayer for oneness in John 17, Paulien explains that “being an Adventist is to have a sense of prophetic destiny ... [that works to] restore things that have been lost and reconcile people who have been at odds with each other for many centuries.”<sup>81</sup>

One additional contribution worth considering from outside Adventism comes from Walter Bruggeman’s understanding of prophetic imagination. Bruggeman identifies

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<sup>77</sup> Jon Paulien, “The Best Is Yet to Come: A Vision for the Eschatological Remnant,” March 31, 2007, 1-41.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–23.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–24.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Moses and the Israelites as an alternative community formed by the hand of God with the intention to call the world's attention to God's true vision. He describes later constructions, such as the kingdom of Solomon, as inferior imitations for God's intention. Complimenting Provonsha's idea of a prophetic movement, he contends that "it is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."<sup>82</sup> Paired with Paulien's more expansive remnant vision, this identity as a contrast community speaking to the world's holy imagination may hold great value to contemporary Adventists in search of a more compelling identity framework.

The above images offer the foundation of a new identity that the Adventist church can live into. Whether one of the above frameworks is chosen, or if another one is created, it must maintain the balance between a unique calling and a more inclusive approach. Used appropriately, it can offer the opportunity to ignite missional imagination within Adventism.

### **Formational Aspects of Storytelling**

This chapter explored the power of using storytelling for forming missional imagination in an Adventist context, identifying three key elements that contribute to this formation. The first element is narrative identity. Since narrative plays a key role in the formation of our individual identities, it must be taken into account in considering a community's shift in self-understanding. Each person's well-being within the community

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<sup>82</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 40.

depends upon how well they are able to adapt to this shift. Cultural surroundings influence how we craft our autobiographies, and not every individual will welcome this destabilizing shift. Helping to orient people to their own story and helping them to understand how these shifts impact them becomes vital.

Second, is the element of imaginative renewal. Although the concept may be new to some church members, imagination is vital in establishing the narratives that shape our identity, and in turn, narrative is vital for fueling this renewal. Imagination is a tool for meaning making, just as important in shaping our autobiographies as the actual “facts” of our life. The renewal of imagination occurs by counteracting the predominant views of culture that shape our self-understanding in a way contrary to God’s vision for us. For the contemporary Adventist, this imaginative renewal is needed to undo the eroding sense of identity within their faith community.

The third element necessary for forming missional imagination in an Adventist context is the integration of new identity frameworks. These frameworks are especially vital to consider in a community context. Although contemporary Adventists are uncomfortable with the traditional interpretations of identity within the church, they cannot survive without some sense of identity. While it may not be possible to designate the shape this identity will take, having images and stories of alternative ways of understanding one’s community are vital pieces in sorting out this process.

### **Conclusion**

In multiple ways, storytelling and/or narrative holds tremendous potential for renewing imagination in a local church community. For the individual, narrative provides the framework necessary for a healthy well-being and adaptation to life challenges. This

identity-shaping process both depends on, and fuels, a healthy imagination. Imagination is required for understanding one's own story in a redemptive way, and broader stories, such as the narrative of Scripture help properly form our imaginative process. In addition, communities thrive on stories both to help embrace change, as well as to stay rooted in their history.

All of this evidence points to narrative as a powerful resource in the desire to reshape missional imagination within an Adventist context. Considering Adventism's theological heritage, using the narrative framework for teaching the book of Revelation can be particularly helpful. In the next chapter, a proposal will be outlined for implementing this process in the local church.

CHAPTER 6:  
OUTLINING A MISSIONAL RENEWAL PROCESS FOR A LOCAL ADVENTIST  
CONGREGATION

**Overview**

As covered thus far, many contemporary Adventists suffer from the effects of conflicted witness. They love the community their denomination has created and appreciate many unique aspects of the SDA theological framework. However, they do not resonate with the exclusive mission often reinforced by the church. The traditional teaching of Seventh-day Adventists as “the remnant church of bible prophecy” no longer receives full support. While these Adventists still maintain a high degree of denominational loyalty, the vision of an exclusive remnant is not compelling to them. This discomfort often leads to dissonance with the stated mission of the church and an unwillingness to witness to their friends or neighbors about Christ. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a proposal for renewing missional imagination in a local Adventist church. This will begin by briefly reviewing what has been covered thus far.

**Summary**

As explored in Chapter 1, the issue of conflicted witness is an engrained, multilayered problem within the Adventist church. First of all, the remnant mentality is embedded within the overall theological framework, having been a key historical element in Adventism’s identity formation. It has also traditionally been a key element in Adventist evangelism, focused on the Three Angels message of Revelation 14 and the

call for other Christians to “come out of Babylon.” In addition, church polity around membership requires assent to this remnant perspective as a part of the baptismal oath of new members, even though many current members often reject or ignore it. At the heart of this issue is the church’s reading of the book of Revelation, dependent on a historicist interpretive approach. Chapter 1 concluded with the suggestion that shifting to a narrative approach offers the opportunity to renew imagination and form a missional identity within an Adventist framework.

Chapter 2 explored the biblical foundations for a narrative approach to Revelation. First, support was offered for viewing the whole of Scripture as a “Drama of Redemption,” unfolding the story of God’s love for humanity and our response to it. This approach provides a way of appreciating both the unity and authority of Scripture in the Christian life, while inviting active participation and engagement with the work of God. Second, the book of Revelation received special examination for its narrative aspects. This included a survey of the traditional approaches to interpreting Revelation, including each of their strengths and weaknesses. Following this, a narrative approach was offered as a new possibility to enhance one’s understanding of Revelation, even while allowing for interpretive approaches embraced by other schools of thought. It was demonstrated that the overall structure of Revelation allows for this possibility, including a handful of scholars who have suggested it as the preferred way to understand Revelation.

With the biblical case built for a narrative approach to Revelation, Chapter 3 sought to answer the question: “Is there room within Adventist theology to make a shift to this kind of approach?” To answer this question, key aspects of the Adventist approach to Scripture were considered, particularly the church’s concern for the unity and authority

of Scripture, as well as its emphasis on the bible as actual history. It was argued that a narrative approach can address these concerns, and an interpretive framework offered by Adventist scholar, Alden Thompson, was considered as an example to build on in embracing such an approach.

Following this, special attention was once again given to Revelation, this time to consider whether or not Adventist theology would allow for a shift away from an exclusive historicist approach in its interpretation. A sampling of Adventist scholars demonstrated various augmented approaches to Revelation. In addition, one scholar provided evidence that directly called into question the identity of the remnant church in Revelation as the Adventist denomination, a move in itself that may negate the appeal of the historicist approach for Adventists. It was argued that a modified approach to Revelation was possible within current Adventist theology.

A final consideration in Chapter 4 was the influence of the church's accepted prophetess, Ellen White. Because of her respected role as an authority in the church, Adventist scholars routinely take her views into account when considering theological positions. First, the chapter highlighted Ellen White's shared concern for the unity and authority of Scripture, while recognizing a dynamic process of inspiration. Further, it was demonstrated that her predominant approach to Scripture based on these principles was similar to a metanarrative approach, using something known among Adventists as "The Great Controversy Theme." Finally, her usage of the book of Revelation was considered. While she gave full support to historicist approach to interpreting Revelation, she also demonstrated a modified approach, particularly when speaking of the Seven Churches of Revelation where she favored what might be called a "spiritual application approach." It

was concluded that a modified historicist approach could be seen in the teaching of Ellen White.

Chapter 4 addressed the issues related to forming a missional congregation in an Adventist context. This shift would allow a release of the remnant imagination that has stifled a true missional identity. With this in mind, Chapter 4 explored the history and theology behind the missional movement, emphasizing that missional theology centers on the identity of the church, not merely its activity. This led to further reflection on how the organizational intent of some denominations stands in opposition to the formation of missional communities by the act of the Holy Spirit. In particular, even though Adventism has long employed a strong evangelistic bent, its identity was built on the same purposive intent of other denominations, and likewise is in need of missional renewal.

With the foundation set for employing a narrative approach to Revelation to meet the need for missional renewal in an Adventist context, Chapter 5 explored the potential of narrative or story as a catalyst for organizational change. First, it considered the important role of narrative in shaping our identity. It was demonstrated that narrative is a crucial aspect for understanding personal identity and establishing well-being. Further, storytelling was identified as the fuel of imaginative renewal, and the story of Scripture identified as the catalyst for kingdom engagement by the community of Christ. Finally, it was shown that storytelling and narrative have been used to leverage great influence in leading change within organizations. It was concluded that storytelling on a personal and corporate level is a powerful agent for enacting meaningful change.

### **Key Considerations for Missional Renewal in an Adventist Context**

The above review lays the groundwork for proposing a path towards the renewal of missional imagination in an Adventist context. This proposal takes these findings into consideration and suggests a process for using a narrative approach to Revelation as a Spirit-infused tool for forming local Adventist churches into missional communities, bringing the hope of Christ's returning kingdom. Before offering the details of the proposal, a few key considerations should be taken into account.

#### *Revisiting Remnant Identity*

First, this process of imaginative renewal necessarily centers on the matter of identity. As Chapter 4 addresses, this would be true regardless of denominational context because missional imagination itself centers on the identity of God, rather than mere activity. However, as Chapter 1 explained, Adventism's traditional understanding of their identity contains specific challenges when it comes to the ecumenical nature of missional theology. Other denominations may more readily embrace their place in the wider Christian world, but Adventism has always lived with a discomfort in this regard. Since identity formation is at the core of the issue of conflicted witness, any proposal must take into account the difficulties in challenging remnant identity in an Adventist context.

One of the most striking examples of questioning Adventist identity was noted in Chapter 3 from Mark Turner's dissertation on Revelation 12:17. Based on his conclusions that the Remnant referred to in Revelation 12:17 cannot reasonably be speaking about the Adventist Church, he openly wonders "on what then do Seventh-day

Adventists now base their self-understanding?”<sup>1</sup> Can this be relinquished and SDAs, as a denomination, still have a meaningful identity? As valuable as Turner’s observations are from an academic standpoint, it seems unlikely that most local Adventist congregations would be prepared to address this conversation without going to the extreme positions of rejecting the biblical insights he offers or completely losing their sense of a coherent Adventist identity.

Recognizing this danger, most Adventist scholars offer a more cautious approach, such as Jon Paulien’s introduction of the eschatological remnant.<sup>2</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, Paulien questions approaches to the Book of Revelation that assign a historicist reading to the entire text.<sup>3</sup> He suggests instead a selective historicist approach to interpreting Revelation.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, Paulien leaves aspects of the remnant identity intact by concluding that Adventism’s central passages, such as Revelation 12:17, are to be understood from the historicist position.<sup>5</sup> However, he also softens the exclusive aspects explored in Chapter 4 that conclude the Seventh-day Adventist church organization as the remnant people of God at Christ’s return.

Instead of denominational exclusivity, Paulien presents the idea of an “eschatological remnant,” that transcends the organizational boundaries of any church

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, “An Evaluation of the Traditional Seventh-Day Adventist Understanding of the Identity of ‘The Rest of Her Seed’ in Revelation 12:17,” 101.

<sup>2</sup> Paulien, “The Best Is Yet to Come,” 13-16

<sup>3</sup> Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Part One,” 20.

<sup>4</sup> Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Part Two,” 181.

<sup>5</sup> This includes Daniel 7, 8 and Revelation 12-14.

and emerges at a “time of renewed mission.”<sup>6</sup> Because of this understanding, Paulien supports a less condemnatory approach to teaching biblical prophecy out of such passages as Revelation 13 than what traditional evangelistic series have done.<sup>7</sup> While this approach may suit Adventists concerned with exclusivity within the church, it has been met with criticisms for diminishing Adventism’s role in fulfilling prophecy.<sup>8</sup> This demonstrates the challenge in questioning Adventism’s remnant identity even in minor ways.

Considering these examples, leaders advocating this identity formation process should prepare to face some form of resistance and recognize this as necessary for positive growth. As Timothy Dunfield notes, dissent has actually played a key role in the formation of Adventist identity over the years,<sup>9</sup> although often at the expense of the dissenter’s involvement. Dunfield contends “it is impossible to understand the history of the SDA organization both theologically and structurally without acknowledging the significant contribution that dissenters made to the organization.”<sup>10</sup> He makes the point by exploring three notable cases of former members challenging Adventist theology that led the organization to further exploration and more thorough explanation of its shared

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<sup>6</sup> Paulien, “The Best Is Yet to Come,” 13.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Paulien, “Revelation 13 and the Papacy by Dr. Jon Paulien,” February 9, 2016, video of lecture, 55:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tfhe6IYD-PM>.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Shepherd, “Response to Dr. Paulien (Revelation 13 and the Papacy) by Dr. Tom Shepherd and Questions & Answers,” February 9, 2016, video of lecture, 40:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3wdvW5XpXQ>.

<sup>9</sup> Dunfield, “The Role of Dissent in the Creation of Seventh-Day Adventist Identity,” 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

beliefs. Dunfield concludes, “without the constant attack of dissenters, the organization may have never officially outlined its core beliefs or felt the need to organize.”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, recognizing the inherent difficulty in challenging remnant identity, the advocate of change must accept this as a service to the greater organization. While certain aspects of the dissent may be embraced, and then used to initiate some form of change, there is also much reason to expect pushback on the ideas shared. This may even lead to an organizational disconnect for some of these advocates. But if this is done in the service of the organization, it can still influence its theological development and encourage the imaginative renewal it needs.

### *Identity Formation and Storytelling*

Since identity formation is so central to the change required to reshape missional imagination, any serious proposal should also consider the vital role narrative plays in shaping identity. Although the power of narrative in shaping identity wasn't formally addressed until Chapter 5, looking back, one can see how this study has progressively led to this discovery. Chapter 1 explored the problem of conflicted witness among contemporary Adventist, an issue related to the disconnect with remnant identity. At that time, it was suggested, because of its formative role in Adventism, a narrative reading of Revelation may help address this. The case was then built for this rationale.

Chapter 2 introduced narrative as a valuable way to understand Scripture and help Christ followers find their place in God's story. Chapter 3, demonstrated how the Adventist theological framework could allow for a shift to the narrative approach, even

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 136.

though its desire to protect remnant identity has led to the church's longstanding support of a historicist reading of the Book of Revelation. Chapter 4 demonstrated how the Great Disappointment of 1844 became a pivotal moment in the narrative that shaped Adventism and Revelation became a central document in informing the imagination shaping that narrative. Finally, Chapter 5 presented the vital role storytelling plays in fueling imagination and forming identities of individuals and communities. This progression supports the central, initial claim of this study, that a narrative reading of Revelation holds potential for imaginative renewal in the Adventist church.

The communal identity frameworks presented in Chapter 5 point to the broader vision this imaginative renewal might lead to. For example, Jack Provonsha noted, "In the final moments of earth's history, there comes into visible being something bigger than any denominational institution, the final remnant," but he also believed this was "partly because there is a catalytic presence around which the remnant become visible as a testimony to their trust in a trustworthy God."<sup>12</sup> In this vein, Revelation still becomes the prophetic material out of which the community lives and its calling is to tell the story in all its compelling grander that continually renews the imagination for spirit-filled engagement with the world and resistance against the powers of darkness. Adventist theologian, Roy Branson, muses about the impact of this kind of shift:

Consider what would happen if Adventists turned their talent and superb training from debating whether or not the sanctuary doctrine established that Adventism is the only true church, to making the Adventist experience not only reasonable, but memorable. Imagine the change within the church if Adventist scholarship and writing altered contemporary patterns of thought. Think how we would feel if musicians and artists, inspired by the Sabbath and the Apocalypse, created symphonies, paintings, and sculptures that moved whole cultures to experience

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

the grandeur of God. If only we had writers who could inflame the imagination of the listless and bored in society with the drama of the Adventist experience.<sup>13</sup>

These aspects highlight both the hunger and potential for a new shape to Adventist identity. Considering the centrality of narrative to forming identity, and the importance Revelation plays in Adventism, a narrative reading of Revelation can serve as a powerful tool in shaping this new identity.

### **Proposal**

Taking into consideration the above points, any attempt to encourage a truly formational encounter with the story of Revelation requires tools for such an encounter and a process that equips members in using these tools. The congregation would need to be prepared for living into the storied experience of Scripture in their lives. The journey may include several key phases similar to the outline below, but this outline is offered with the assumption that the pastor would prayerfully discern the actual timeline and methods necessary in a particular congregation. It also assumes the pastor will identify this as the pressing need in his particular congregation, like the fictional example of Pastor Mark from Chapter 1.

This following proposal would involve an 18-24 month process that includes measures for small group and corporate practices that train members in sharing their stories and discerning their place in the story of God. It would require room for leadership and members to re-imagine God's calling on their lives and the life of the

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<sup>13</sup> Branson, "Celebrating the Adventist Experience," 4–5.

church. In addition, much of the value of this process would be apparent in the fruit it bears in the months and years following its implementation.

*Step One: Recruit Missional Renewal Team/Leadership Story Group (4-6 months)*

In taking a journey like this, it is crucial to have the support and buy-in of the leaders in the church. As a first step in the process, the pastor would begin prayerfully identifying individuals who could be a part of a Missional Renewal Team. Depending on the size and makeup of the church, these leaders may be the pastoral staff, the elders, and members of the church board, or even other members without an assigned role, but a deep heart for the mission of God.<sup>14</sup> Once identified, the pastor would meet with each member, explain the desire to invigorate the witness of the church, and invite them to be a part of the Missional Renewal Team. Throughout the process, the role of this team would be as first engagers with the missional message of Scripture, and then as leaders to facilitate that experience with others.

Based on insights from Chapter 5, leaders seeking to create organizational change would do well to implement practices that explore personal narrative and storytelling in their approach. Therefore, the first suggested step with the Missional Renewal Team would be to initiate the leaders to their own life story as a part of God's grand story. This could be introduced during a weekend retreat as an orientation to the new group. During this weekend, the team would focus on discerning patterns in their own story influenced

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<sup>14</sup> The possibility of these individuals coming from outside the currently appointed leadership cannot be overlooked, since many Adventist members with a heart for God's greater vision may feel apathetic towards these roles under the traditional evangelistic expectations.

by redemption or contamination scripts.<sup>15</sup> They would spend time identifying key moments of consolation and desolation concerning God's presence in their life. Within this weekend they would be given simple tools<sup>16</sup> as well as ample opportunities for sharing their story. It would also be necessary to provide open space for reflection and processing, since some of the material could be sensitive.

With the foundation set, storytelling aspects would be built into the Missional Renewal Team's weekly meetings. Future leader's meetings would include regular opportunities for sharing and hearing each other's stories, before and after each meeting. This could be done by inviting different leaders to share about the movement of God in their life or engaging in an Examen prayer time before or after meetings.<sup>17</sup> One of the exercises could also include a reflective engagement with Scripture, such as *Lectio Divina* to foster opportunities for individuals to be drawn into the story. Whatever the exercises, the regular emphasis on a person's story would help foster greater awareness of the ways God is at work in their lives. This reflection, done in conjunction with discussion about mission, will help shape the leader's heart as they explore their identity in Christ, a key component of the shift being suggested in this study.

During these meetings, the pastor should take note of individuals capable of leading additional Story Groups for members throughout the church looking to go deeper in exploring their story. These Story Groups would mimic many of the practices of the

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<sup>15</sup> The Biblical story of Joseph would be an excellent passage for introducing this topic.

<sup>16</sup> Potential resources for this could be "Creating Your Life Plan – Donald Miller," <http://www.creatingyourlifeplan.com/>.

<sup>17</sup> Depending on the situation, different language may need to be used in referring to these exercises. Some congregations and members have a high degree of prejudice against practices related to spiritual formation or thought to be of Catholic origin.

Missional Renewal Team that help people live into the story God is telling through their life.<sup>18</sup> The higher percentage of members these groups can be made available to, the more impactful the journey will be that follows. However, these groups should only be started as quickly as there is the leadership capacity to do them well. If not enough capable leaders are identified, larger groups can be hosted at the church or in a home capable of hosting.

*Step Two: Share on the Seven Churches of Revelation (2 Months)*

Putting storytelling rituals in place among the leadership team lays the groundwork for a new kind of engagement with the book of Revelation. The next step in this process is introducing the church to a storied experience with the book of Revelation. One way to do so is by engaging the messages to the 7 churches of Revelation to help members identify with the different kinds of spiritual conditions illustrated there.

In the outline offered in Chapter 2, it was emphasized that the seven churches establish the audience that Revelation is written for. As such, they can be seen as different characters that might engage the story about to be told. This means that finding one's place in the story of Revelation starts with a true understanding of their spiritual condition.

To accomplish this step, it would be ideal to create a series focused on the seven churches to allow adequate time to reflect on the nuances of each condition. This could include a message flow such as this one:

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<sup>18</sup> Sites such as this one can provide ample resources for leaders with capacity to host and facilitate a group like this, but without a lot of time to prepare materials: "Live a Better Story," <https://liveabetterstory.com/>.

Week 1 – A Message to the Seven Churches

Week 2 – Fundamentalist in Ephesus: All Head, No Heart

Week 3 – Persecuted in Smyrna: Faithful No Matter What

Week 4 – Apostate in Pergamum: Good Deeds, Bad Doctrine

Week 5 – Progressive in Thyatira: : More Tolerant than God

Week 6 – Dead in Sardis: Stopped Caring or Trying

Week 7 – Missional in Philadelphia: Don't Give Up or Give In

Week 8 – Lukewarm in Laodicea: Comfort and Convenience Before Christ <sup>19</sup>

Utilizing a message series would provide shared content for this experience to keep the congregation connected. The Story Groups that are prepared, offer a safe place for individuals to explore some of the themes introduced. These open conversations may provide opportunity to explore one's own personality and inner world in greater depth. If this led to additional useful tools outside of the content from Revelation, this is fine. The intent is that people respond to the invitation to "hear the words of the Spirit."

Ideally, this engagement with the Seven Churches of Revelation would happen with the Missional Renewal Team before introducing it to the whole church. Following the retreat from Step One, the reflective scriptural exercises in the team could include these passages from Revelation. This would also help identify potential leaders for the Story Groups and make them more comfortable leading out with materials they already

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<sup>19</sup> These titles are taken from Mark Driscoll's series: "Revelation: The Seven Archives," Pastor Mark Driscoll, <https://markdriscoll.org/sermon-series/the-seven/>. Although Driscoll has come under fire in recent years, this series provides helpful historical insight, as well as the intended focus of how one responds to Christ. Nevertheless, both content and titles would need to be adapted according to the specific setting.

experienced in a group. This practice of engaging the Missional Renewal Team in the materials first could be continued through the remaining steps in the process.

*Step Three: Preach on Missional Metanarrative of Scripture (9-12 Months)*

As addressed in Chapter 5, the role of narrative in shaping identity and fueling holy imagination make it a powerful method for teaching Scripture with the intent of missional renewal. As Chapter 3 pointed out, familiarity with Ellen White's Great Controversy material may lead to a greater level of comfort with the narrative approach in an Adventist context. However, missional renewal requires a new engagement with the grand story of God in Scripture. Following the series on the Seven Churches, the next 9-12 months would be dedicated to corporately exploring the Biblical Narrative in preparation for a narrative engagement with Revelation. The main medium for teaching this approach would be through weekly sermons. Several materials such as Max Lucado's Story Bible,<sup>20</sup> the Narrative Lectionary,<sup>21</sup> the Immerse Bible Project,<sup>22</sup> or resources on the Bible Project<sup>23</sup> can aid in a church wide journey through the entirety of Scripture.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "The Story - One Continuing Story of God and His People," The Story, <http://www.thestory.com/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Narrative Lectionary Project" Luther Seminary, [https://www.luthersem.edu/lifelong\\_learning/narrative\\_lectionary.aspx](https://www.luthersem.edu/lifelong_learning/narrative_lectionary.aspx).

<sup>22</sup> "Immerse Bible – The Bible Reading Experience," Immerse Bible, <http://immersebible.com>.

<sup>23</sup> "The Bible Project Home," The Bible Project, <https://thebibleproject.com/>.

<sup>24</sup> These various resources present options for durations between 9 months and 3 years. The pastor would need to choose what their particular congregation required.

In-depth processing should be encouraged in whatever Story Groups have been established throughout the church through the previous steps. The previous preparation about the value and role of story should help shift the engagement in the group from a purely intellectual experience to a more immersive experience, one that focuses on the formation of our imagination not merely the engagement of intellect. This would involve regularly inviting members to consider how they are a part of the story, engaging in listening exercises. Although group leaders should be trained for this exercise, ideally the pastor would be in regular conversation with them to keep encouraging in-depth exploration, particularly if they are recruited from outside the Missional Renewal Team.

There is a second crucial aspect of the extended journey through the story of Scripture. This process of the story would offer ample opportunity to bring out the missional identity of God, throughout Scripture, one that emphasizes the nature of the church as inclusive and spirit-birther. While this is embedded in the narrative of Scripture, it may not be immediately noticed by the congregation. Using the corporate teaching setting to highlight these truths can help complement the personal engagement happening in the Story Groups.

*Step Four: Teach Narrative of Revelation (3-4 months)*

The natural final step in the storytelling of Scripture is a teaching series on the book of Revelation, based on the narrative outline from Chapter 2. However, instead of the traditional evangelistic meetings, the church would engage in an extended formational series from Revelation. Besides teaching this to the whole church, this series would be supported by Story Groups for people to go deeper and share with each other what God has been revealing. Leaving this series until this point in the process would hopefully

allow time for storytelling practices to be more embedded among the membership, as well as more Story Groups to be formed.

The series would include corporate testimonies from members of how God has impacted them through the story of Revelation, or the larger narrative of Scripture. This practice of personal testimony can actually begin during any of the previous steps and become an ongoing ritual for church renewal. Building off of Boje's insights from Chapter 5 – that organizations grow through the interplay between a centralizing narrative and the ongoing challenges of individual stories – this will be a crucial catalyst as the church establishes its new identity. Individuals can begin to express their doubts, questions and discoveries in a way that will bind the community together and help them forge a new way forward.

### **Conclusion**

For decades, scholars in the Seventh-day Adventist church in North America have recognized a need for missional renewal. Particularly among the younger generation, a theological disconnect remains that threatens full engagement with the denomination, creating conflicted witness for Christ among its members. Much of this conflict revolves around the issue of remnant identity based upon the church's historic understanding of the book of Revelation. The modest proposal above offers a starting point for renewing missional imagination that takes the Adventist theological foundation into account, employing Revelation as the central biblical influence on the process.

Using a storytelling approach to Revelation recognizes the value of narrative in shaping individual and communal identity and provides more fertile material for imaginative renewal within the congregation. While this modified approach departs from

the traditional historicist approach to Revelation, it builds upon the reflections of recent scholarship in the Adventist church that identifies a need for a more nuanced interpretive approach to Revelation. It also provides new means for engaging the upcoming generation in the ethos and passion of a church eagerly anticipating the return of Jesus Christ.

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