Introduction

It is a joy and a privilege for me to submit this chapter in honor of the pioneering mission work of Jerald Whitehouse. From the moment we first met I have been intrigued by his creativity and felt the conviction that he was led by God. That conviction was grounded on two things; the witness of his own life and walk with God, and the testimony of the Scriptures that I had been studying long before we met. When read in its context, the Bible offers many statements and examples that show God’s approval for methods of mission that may go against the grain of our comfortable practices. Broad reading and the clear texts of the Bible (Paulien 2004:83-85) suggest that God is more open and creative than we are. If that is the case, we should not be quick to condemn that which is different or uncomfortable.

Gods ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa 55:8-9). We must keep this reality in mind as we seek to avoid the dangers

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1"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your
of religious syncretism. While syncretism is a grave danger to mission (see Owens 2007:74-80) its equal and opposite danger is the tendency to bind up outreach work in ways that limit God’s freedom of action in the name of doctrinal and lifestyle purity. The Bible is full of examples where God acted in ways that orthodox believers would not have expected or allowed. To use the words of Joshua Massey, “His ways are not our orthodoxy” (2004a:296). I will list some OT examples in canonical order, and then do the same with the New Testament.

The Unpredictable God in the Old Testament

In Genesis 22:2 God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, creating a major test of Abraham’s faithfulness. If I were God, I wouldn’t have done that. After all, according to Jeremiah 32:35, sacrificing one’s son or daughter is taken for granted to be a detestable and sinful act.

If I were God I would have chosen Joseph rather than Judah to father the line of the Messiah. Not only did Judah sleep with his daughter-in-law Tamar, but that action produced a son who would be an ancestor of the Messiah (Gen 38:13-30; cf. Matt 1:3). The messianic line also includes Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho, and Bathsheba, the adulterous wife of Uriah (Matt 1:5-6). God is more tolerant and forgiving than we are, and does not avoid guilt by association.

One of the many challenges of 2 Samuel is the way God related to David’s family. In one text (2 Sam 12:8) it is implied that polygamy was God’s will for David. Rebuking David for seducing Bathsheba, God says, “I gave2 . . . your master’s [Saul’s] wives into your arms.”3 We would not expect to hear God asserting that he “gave” David more than one wife. After all, the grand

ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:6-9 ESV). The specific context here is that God’s compassion and his willingness to pardon extends to people we would not expect. He reaches out in compassion to those who are “wicked” and “unrighteous.” How much more will he be willing to pardon and include those who follow him with all their hearts, even though their knowledge of him is limited?

2 The term translated “gave” here has the strong and active meaning of “handed over” (see Keil and Delitzsch 1973:389-390).

3 2 Sam 12:7-9, NIV: “Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites’” (emphasis mine).
biblical principle is clearly stated in Genesis 2:24. It is two that become one flesh, not three or four. Yet God did not rebuke David or even the patriarchs for their multiple wives, a practice with tragic consequences for family life in both instances. Whatever we make of 2 Samuel 12, God proved himself well able to work with people involved in a marital system contrary to his ideal. It took time for God’s original ideal in marriage to be restored.

Another startling story is found in 2 Kings 5. Naaman, military chief of staff to the Syrian king, is afflicted with leprosy. Upon the advice of an Israelite servant girl he goes to Israel to find healing. After washing seven times in the Jordan at the instruction of Elisha, he is healed and returns to the prophet with a strange request for two mule-loads of earth from Elisha’s property. He then declares his intention to worship no other God but Yahweh while asking for an exception. Would it be all right for him to bow down in the temple of Rimmon when he escorts the king of Syria there? “Go in peace,” is Elisha’s surprising reply.

There is a connection between the two mule-loads of earth and ancient religious beliefs. In all of known human history the era of the most radical religious change occurred in the first millennium B.C. (see Ellen White’s interesting comments on this historical period in White 1898:31-38). During this period people in general moved from a devotion to what we would call heathen religions, where religion was associated with the land and the forces of nature (Cogan and Tadmor 1988:11:67), to the philosophical or world religions we are familiar with today. All the great world religions of today either had their origin between 800-200 B.C. (Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism) or are directly dependant on those that did (Christianity, Islam, Sikhism). These religions have largely displaced the primal religions although the primal religions still have influence below the surface in many parts of the world (Geering 1978:215-223).

For the primal religions of Naaman’s day, all gods were associated with one land or another (Cogan and Tadmor 1988:11:67; Montgomery 1951:377). That meant that Naaman could not worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, in Syria unless he brought with him Israelite dirt to spread in his garden. When he wanted to worship Yahweh, he would kneel on the Israelite soil (Cogan

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4See note on 5:17 in Montgomery 1951: “In [regard to] the transfer of the holy soil Thenius notes this as the earliest known example of a widespread custom; he cites the report of Benjamin of Tudela that the Jewish synagogue in Persian Nehardea was composed wholly of earth and stone brought from Jerusalem; the empress Helena similarly transported the holy soil to Rome.”
and Tadmor 1988:67; Montgomery 1951:375). When he entered the temple of Rimmon with the king, he would bow his head but not his heart. Elisha agrees with this arrangement, somewhat to our surprise (Montgomery 1951:375; but see some equivocation on this in Nichol 1955:2:878).

God uses Esther to accomplish his purpose (Esth 2:10, 14-17) in spite of the fact that she had not practiced her Jewish faith for years (Paton 1908:175, 179, 180; Clarke 1831:688). No matter how familiar we may be with Scripture we cannot totally predict how God will act in any given circumstance.

Things get really bizarre at times in the prophets of the Old Testament. God told Isaiah to wander the streets of the city naked for three years proclaiming a message of doom for the allies of Judah (Isa 20:2-4). Would we want to work with a mission partner who claimed God had told him to preach naked for three years? This command was not calculated to enhance Isaiah’s reputation (or even God’s reputation) among the people, yet this extreme action served God’s revelatory purpose to get the people’s attention (Wright 1964:61). While Isaiah must have been embarrassed by this command, Micah became even more of a laughingstock. He not only walked around naked, he was howling like a jackal and moaning like an owl (Mic 1:8).²

²Note the concept of “holy land” in Zech 2:12. “Although Naaman had recognized the fact that outside of Israel there was no God, he had not entirely divested himself of the view that the God of Israel was in some special way attached to the land of Israel, and in his own country he wanted to worship that God on Israelite soil” (Nichol 1955:2:878).

⁶The reason Haman and the king did not realize they were betraying the king’s wife was because they did not know she was a Jew. That would not have been possible had she been living according to the Torah! Sabbath keeping and kosher eating are pretty hard to hide, especially in a marriage. On top of that, Esther 2 in the Hebrew makes it clear that Esther and the other candidates for queen left “the house of the virgins” to spend the night with the king, and then went to the “house of the concubines.” Translations usually gloss over that aspect of Esther’s behavior. Clearly something more than a beauty contest was occurring here. The story of the book of Esther is less about Esther’s faithfulness in a crisis than it is about God’s faithfulness in spite of human faithlessness. Esther’s obedience to her cousin and courage in a moment of crisis are definitely commendable. But we miss the deeper story of God’s character when we gloss over the flaws in the human characters of the story.

⁷“At that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, ‘Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,’ and he did so, walking naked and barefoot. Then the LORD said, ‘As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt’” (Isa 20:2-4, ESV). While the Hebrew words in this passage normally have the meaning of absolutely naked, they are sometimes used for “half clad,” naked from the genitals to the feet, like wearing only a T-shirt. This would be appropriate to verse 4, where the Egyptian and Cushite peoples are led into captivity. Such captives were often dressed in a way to expose the genitals and lower half of the body. Either way was an embarrassing experience for Isaiah, especially since the Hebrew implies that his action is not explained to the people until the end of the three years (see Gray 1912:345, 346)!

⁸Because of this I will weep and wail; I will go about barefoot and naked. I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl.
God asks Ezekiel to deliberately defile himself by eating food cooked over human excrement (Cooke 1936:55 and Greenberg 1983:99), and when Ezekiel protests, God allows him to use animal dung for fuel instead (Ezek 4:12-15) (Nichol 1955 4:591). Each of God’s actions above is a surprise when read in the context of God’s larger principles written elsewhere in the Bible.

The story of Daniel 2 is widely known and appreciated, yet its implications for our thesis are often missed. Before God ever approaches the faithful Hebrew Daniel with a vision, he gave one to Nebuchadnezzar the pagan king, the enemy of God and his people. A careful look at the Aramaic of Daniel 2 and 7 makes clear how radical this action was. Most readers of Daniel think Nebuchadnezzar had a “dream” in chapter 2 and Daniel had a “vision” in chapter 7. But the Aramaic of Daniel 2:28 and 7:1 is essentially identical (Stefanovic 2007:248). Both men saw a “dream and visions of (their) head as (they) lay in bed.” Whatever it was that Daniel experienced, Nebuchadnezzar also experienced. In other words, God treated a pagan king, who did not believe in him and warred against his people, as an object of revelation on the same terms as a Hebrew prophet, and “the mode of revelation in these two cases was the same” (Shea 1996:155). This is hardly the kind of behavior most of us would have expected from God. His ways are not our ways.

These Old Testament references help us to see that while God never contradicts himself, he is never totally predictable either. We can often fit his words and actions into our understanding only with a great deal of discomfort. This has led me to a much more open mind in regard to creative approaches to God’s mission. Just when I think I have God figured out, he does or says something that surprises me. The unpredictable God is likely to be at work in our world in the places where we would least expect it.

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9Deut 23:13 warns the Israelites to take great care in avoiding contact with human excrement (see Keil and Delitzsch 1973:1:415). Leviticus 5:3 and 7:21 are not clear on what they mean by “human uncleanness,” but it likely concerns human excretions, which should not come in contact with food (see Keil and Delitzsch 1973:9:81, 82). Defilement occurred in OT times when a person touched something unclean. Food would be defiled when it touched anything unclean or when someone touched something unclean and then touched the food (see Keil and Delitzsch 1973:1:310-311, 325-326). If human excrement was considered unclean in the context of food, it would be understood that it could not be used for fuel when cooking food.

10Lucas notes one point of difference between the experiences of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar was a passive observer of the vision, a mere spectator, while Daniel (Dan 7:16) participates in his vision by speaking with a member of the heavenly court (see Lucas 2002:20:177).

11I am indebted for the basic ideas above to Massey 2000:5, 6. According to Montgomery 1951:375, this text in 2 Kgs 5 has been a stumbling block to many orthodox scribes and scholars through the centuries.

12Traditionally, Adventism has tended to evangelize on a single-method principle. I have addressed the inadequacies of that approach in earlier works (see Paulien 1993 and 2008). I direct readers there for practical consequences in the Western context of the approach taken in this chapter.
The Unpredictable God in the New Testament

Some might argue that the revelation of God in the Old Testament is fragmentary and distorted by the primitive nature of Israel’s response to God there. It is true that the New Testament provides the clearest revelation of God’s way through the incarnation and earthly ministry of Christ. But the clarity of the revelation in Christ only highlights the unpredictability of God as something essential and inherent to his character. Several New Testament texts that bear on this issue will be examined below in canonical order.

John 1:1

It is felt in some circles that the Christian use of Allah as a name for God is a mark of syncretism. And there is a certain appeal and logic to this position or few Christians would hold to it. Guilt by association, right or wrong, is a major way that people negotiate their way through the various spiritual options available to them. Christian apologetic literature, therefore, notes the associations of the term Allah with the paganism and polytheism of pre-Islamic Arabia to draw the conclusion that both Christian and Islamic use of the term is unacceptable. But the unpredictable God of the New Testament seems less concerned with guilt by association than most Christians are. An example of this is found in John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word (logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (theos).”

By the time the Gospel of John was written, pagan philosophers such as Heraclitus and Plato had long used the Greek term logos (Word) as a name or title for a “second god” who functioned as the creator and sustainer of the world and then as a mediator between the great God (theos) and the created, material world. Philo, a Jewish philosopher in Alexandria and a contemporary of Jesus, sought to make Greek philosophy palatable to the Jews and the Old Testament palatable to the Greeks. He applied this Greek term logos to the God of the Old Testament, the One who gave the law on Mount Sinai. For Philo the Word was a “second God,” the high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, an intercessor with God, the lawgiver, the mediator of creation, the mediator of revelation, and the sustainer of the universe. Philo also called him God’s firstborn, his eldest son, the image of God, and the second Adam.

There are strong parallels between Philo and Plato, on the one hand, and the New Testament descriptions of Jesus, on the other. When John called Jesus “the Word,” readers of the Gospel who had been influenced by Greek philosophy would have recognized the term as expressing everything they
knew about Jesus. John, a disciple of Jesus (John 21:24), had no problem using this Greek term in order to communicate important truths about Jesus. John was contextualizing the message and actions of Jesus in terms that made sense in the Greco-Roman environment.\textsuperscript{13} John's reference to \textit{logos} is explicit and unmistakable.\textsuperscript{14}

In a more general way the same pattern occurs with the biblical use of the Greek term for God, \textit{theos}. In the pagan environment the term \textit{theos} was used to denote a polytheistic totality of gods. Zeus was the father of the gods as well as the human race. One might expect that the God of the New Testament would encourage his people to stay as far away from this term as possible. Nevertheless, New Testament writers used that term for the true God some 1,300 times (Massey 2004b:285). The Muslim and Christian use of \textit{Allah} may have some unfortunate associations in the Arabic language, but Muslims never use it in a polytheistic sense, it is only used with reference to the one true God (Massey 2004b:284). Even the English term “God” has plenty of associations with the paganism and polytheism of pre-Christian Europe.\textsuperscript{15}

Human language is an imprecise and problematic tool, but it is the tool God has chosen to reveal himself to the human race. The unpredictable God seems less concerned with “guilt by association” than many of his followers are.

\textbf{John 16:12}

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear” (John 16:12). This startling saying of Jesus makes it clear that it is not syncretism to say less than you know in a given situation. Jesus is clearly aware that there are many aspects of his message that his listeners “can't handle now” (my translation). In the sharing of truth there needs to be great sensitivity to the standpoint of the listener at a given time. Truths that may be sweet at a later time can provoke unnecessary opposition when given before the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13}For more on this see Paulien 1995:39-41; Beasley-Murray 1987:lv, lv.

\textsuperscript{14}In saying this I do not mean to imply that John was dependant on the Greek concepts for his picture of Jesus. His world is still a Jewish world. But that did not prevent him from using this charged Greek concept (logos) to connect with his non-Jewish readers (see Keener 2003:341-347).

\textsuperscript{15}The Islamic world is not the only place where the choice of words for "God" is a challenge. Whenever a new language or culture is approached, a decision has to be made regarding what to call "God" in that culture. One has to choose between local words for God with all of their local connotations and bringing in an unfamiliar name for God, which brands genuine Christian faith as foreign or colonial in that culture. As noted in the main text, even the English word for God has pagan origins and connotations (see \textit{The Oxford English Dictionary} 1961:4b:267).}
listeners are ready. In a hostile environment, particularly, it is wise to begin with things held in common and move to controversial topics only after a heart connection with another has been established. In the Gospel of John, Jesus knows what is inside others even before they speak (John 2:23-25). But the knowledge of what is inside another is available to us only after careful listening. To put it another way, we must begin outreach to any community with careful exegesis of their customs, beliefs, and practices. It is equally necessary to love the other the way the Lord loves them. Jerald Whitehouse has pointed out that every spiritual person has an argument need and a spiritual need. When we trigger the argument need by raising or responding to controversial issues between us and another, we may each feel good about “defending the faith” but no one will change for the better. When we avoid the argument need and supply something to the other’s spiritual need, a heart connection can develop, opening the way for spiritual growth in both directions. In John 16:12, Jesus recognized that there were truths the disciples were not ready for. He did not take them one step faster than they were ready to go.

Religious people often feel a strong incentive to give a “straight testimony,” telling people in no uncertain terms the truth exactly as they see it. In the process they damage many relationships and little spiritual good is accomplished. The unpredictable God revealed in Jesus Christ meets people where they are, not where we think they should be.

Acts 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 in Acts are particularly relevant to the issue of whether a timetable for transitioning an insider movement to a standard church context is advisable. In Saul of Tarsus and Cornelius, the church had evangelistic prospects that stretched the limits. As a member of the very Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus and prosecuted the disciples and as one who had murdered believers, Saul of Tarsus would be a challenging addition to any first-century Christian congregation. As a Roman centurion, like the man who crucified Jesus, and a Gentile, Cornelius’ entry into the church

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16 There is an interesting tension between John 16:12 and John 15:15, where Jesus tells them that he shared with them everything his Father had told him. In mission as in John there is a tension between openness and authenticity on the one hand, and sensitivity to what the audience can handle on the other (see Brown 1966:714; Beasley-Murray 1987:282, 283).
17 By “insider movement” I am referring to the result of efforts to build faith in non-Christian contexts where traditional evangelism is not possible or advisable.
would also involve significant adjustments on the part of the church.

What is interesting about these stories (Acts 9:11; 10:7-8, 24-25) is that both Saul and Cornelius were quite willing in their response to the heavenly visions (see Munck 1967:82; Nichol 1955:6:232, 251; Fitzmyer 1998:448, 461). This is in contrast with the difficulties God had in convincing both Ananias and Peter to overcome their fears and prejudices (Bruce 1988:187; Munck 1967:95, 96). James Park suggests: “The angel’s command to Cornelius, the revelation to Peter, the Spirit’s command to him and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house—all were necessary for the baptism of the first Gentiles” (2010:15). Ananias is quite willing to respond to whatever the Lord might ask him (Acts 9:10) until he learns what the mission is (Acts 9:11-12). Instead of trusting that God knows what he is doing, Ananias argues with God (Acts 9:13-14) on the basis of Saul’s reputation. “Ananias recoils from the implied command. His obedient but human spirit balks at the thought of ministering to one with Saul’s dreadful reputation. He respectfully remonstrates with the Lord (Nichol 1955:6:232). Only when God gives him a forceful command along with some explanation does he obey (Acts 9:15-16).

In Acts 10:9-20 the Lord had to startle Peter with a shocking vision, while carefully arranging the timing of that vision with the arrival of the envoys from Cornelius and the Spirit’s insistence that Peter go and meet with them. Only then was Peter convinced to comply with the request. Peter’s “resistance was because of conscience. Peter had not yet learned that the distinction between Jew and Gentile was done away in Christ (Gal 3:28-29). That Peter failed to learn this fully even after this vision is shown by his later dissembling at Antioch, for which Paul so frankly rebuked him (Gal 2:9-21)” (Nichol 1955:6:249). Although Peter does not seem to have raised an objection to going with Cornelius’ men (Acts 9:29), he is clearly out of his comfort zone (Acts 10:28) and only went because God had intervened (Bruce 1988:210; Park 2010:15). Ellen White says that “it was a trying command, and it was with reluctance at every step that he undertook the duty laid upon him; but he dared not disobey” (1911:137).

In both cases the new believers, Saul and Cornelius, were more willing to connect with the church than the church leaders were to connect with them. The apostles did not expect that God would ask them to relate differently to Gentiles than their Israelite ancestors had done, they needed a special revelation to grasp that (Acts 10:28; 11:1-18), and even then it took time to sink in (Nichol 1955:6:249).

In the Roadmap for Mission adopted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Roadmap for Mission 2009), workers are advised
to set a timetable for bringing “special affinity groups” into traditional churches.\(^{18}\) This is wise counsel in general, but Acts 9 and 10 illustrate how problematic such a plan can prove in some circumstances, particularly on the side of the church. Four direct revelations from the Lord were needed to accomplish that task in Acts. And the two apostles were more reluctant to receive those revelations than were the new believers. Rather than setting timetables to bring murderers and Gentiles into the church, the apostles needed divine intervention to even begin to take up the challenge. So unless the idea of timetables is handled with great wisdom and flexibility today (being sensitive to the Lord’s timing) it could cause us to lag behind the Lord.

**Acts 15**

The early church faced a similar issue in Acts 15. Leadership was pressured to choose between structural unity and pragmatic diversity. Structural unity could easily have been achieved had the church remained a sect within Judaism. All Gentile converts would have had to become Jews in order to receive Jesus. The end result would have been a unified church that would have had little impact on the massive Gentile world.

There were many in the church who wanted to go in that direction. Representatives of that group went to Antioch and insisted that salvation was dependant on circumcision according to the laws of Moses (Acts 15:1-2). At the Jerusalem Conference as recorded in Acts 15, Christian Pharisees insisted not only on circumcision but entire adherence to the law of Moses (Acts 15:5) (Fitzmyer 1998:539, 540). In essence, Gentile Christians were to be treated the same as Jewish proselytes. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas argued against this position on the grounds of God’s acceptance of Gentiles through the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8), the role of grace in salvation (Acts 15:11), and the abundant evidence that God was working miracles in response to the Gentile mission (Acts 15:12) (Fitzmyer [1998:539-540] considers Acts 15

\(^{18}\)Adopted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on October 13, 2009. I particularly have in mind point 5 under section 20 15 in the Roadmap for Mission document: “Transitional Groups—In some situations, Seventh-day Adventist mission may include the formation of transitional groups (usually termed Special Affinity Groups) that lead the people from a non-Christian religion into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In forming such groups, a clear plan that emphasizes the end result should be followed. These groups should be established and nurtured only with the endorsement and collaboration of church administration. Although some situations may require an extended period of time to complete the transition, leaders of these groups should make every effort to lead the people into membership in the Seventh day Adventist Church within a deliberate time plan” (see also B 10 28 and B 10 30, emphasis mine).
to be the same event as that recorded in Gal 2:9-20, but see also Munck 1967:139 and Martyn 1997:200).

James added to these arguments the sense that the Gentile mission was a fulfillment of prophecy (Acts 15:13-18). He argued that Amos 9:11-12 predicted a time when a descendant of David would create circumstances in which large numbers of Gentiles would seek the Lord (Fitzmyer 1998:553, 555, 556; Nichol 1955:6:309). If that prophecy was being fulfilled in the mission of Paul and Barnabas, then the church should put no unnecessary barriers in the way of Gentiles receiving Jesus: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19; see also Dutch 2000:17-18). The strictures of Acts 15:20-21 were designed to make fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Fitzmyer 1998:556-557; Munck 1967:140; Nichol 1955:6:310-313). So unity in diversity was preserved.

In other words, the fundamental issue addressed at the council described in Acts 15 was less theological than a matter of community identity (Dutch 2000:18). Many agents of change in the Muslim world see God’s mighty hand in the outpouring of Muslim interest in Jesus. They feel that the church today needs to make accommodations similar to those of Acts 15 in relation to this new work of God.

Perhaps we could apply the situation of Acts 15 to the current situation in the following way. The issue of Acts 15 was: Does a Gentile have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian? The early church leaders answered, “No.” The issue today could be expressed: Does a Muslim have to become a “Christian” in order to become a Seventh-day Adventist? When becoming a “Christian” in the Islamic world includes eating pork, drinking alcohol, dressing immodestly, and having a lax attitude toward obedience, what does becoming a “Christian” have to do with Adventist faith? I believe the unpredictable God would encourage us to be creative in relation to movements we could not have imagined fifty years ago.

Acts 19:37

“You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess” (Acts 19:37). Paul and his companions began their work in Ephesus in the synagogue and later in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-10). Through miracles and exorcisms the gospel impacted the Ephesians with great power (Acts 19:11-22). The resulting downturn in sales of religious crafts provoked a riot (19:23-34) against the followers of Jesus.
What is significant for our purpose is the speech of the city clerk, who quiets the disturbance (Acts 19:35-41). He notes that the Christians “have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.” One might expect that Paul would have spoken out publically against such idolatry, and to not have done so might have left him open to charges of “syncretism!” Yet Paul seems to have acted with sensitivity to the local culture and sentiments. To quote Dutch, he chose “his battles wisely” (2000:21).

Once again, the temptation to give a “straight testimony” is present for all who have convictions based on their study of sacred texts. There is the feeling that if we do not deliver “the whole counsel of God” we will somehow have compromised our mission to a people group. But Paul was very sensitive to meeting people where they were (1 Cor 9:19-23) and building on the things he had in common with them. Like Jesus (John 16:12), he did not push them beyond what they could handle in the time allotted to him. At times in our zeal to deliver the truth, we make God over into our own image, which chafes at every misunderstanding or misrepresentation of our position. The unpredictable God seems well able to tolerate the misguided worship of him by those who do not yet know better.

1 Corinthians 7:17-20

Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. (1 Cor 7:17-20, emphasis mine)

The immediate context of this statement is the issue of marriage and divorce (1 Cor 7:10-16) with particular emphasis on mixed marriages between believers and unbelievers (Barrett 1968:167). Paul moves, however, from a particular situation to a more general principle when he states that new believers should “remain in the situation” they were in when God called

190The language of Paul and his companions had been chosen with care when they had spoken about the special worship of Ephesus. They had inculcated the great principles that gods made with hands were not gods, and had allowed that statement to do its work (v. 26). Paul put the same restraint on himself at Athens, though he was greatly moved when he saw ‘the city wholly given to idolatry’ (ch. 17:16)” (Nichol 1955:6:383).
them (Keener 2005:66). While verses 17-24 are related to what comes before, they do read like a digression from the ongoing point (Orr and Walther 1976:216; Robertson and Plummer 1911:145). This digression is triggered by the missionary implications of verse 16, where a believing wife who stays with her husband can be the means of his salvation (Barrett 1968:167).

Paul’s point seems to be that we are not to put unnecessary barriers in the way of people accepting the gospel. To leave the marriage (assuming there is no abuse or danger to the wife) is to abandon the husband in a lost condition. Leaving the marriage on account of the gospel would place a barrier in the way of the husband’s accepting the gospel. On the other hand, remaining in a less than ideal situation could be a means of saving another. So while the context of verses 17-21 is marriage, Paul is stating a much broader principle: “This is the rule I lay down in all the churches” (Barrett 1968:168; Keener 2003:66; Orr and Walther 1976:216).

In verse 18 Paul moves from marriage to circumcision to illustrate his general principle, and slavery and freedom further illustrate the principle in verse 21. Circumcision was a big deal in Old Testament times as well as in Paul’s day (Fee 1987:313). It was the decisive marker setting off Jews from Gentiles. Yet Paul makes the radical statement, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing” To the Jew this statement would have seemed absurd for circumcision was one of God’s commandments in the Old Testament (Barrett 1968:169). Circumcision becoming nothing could only be true in relation to the gospel. The gospel is so critical that circumcision is not to stand in the way of someone receiving the gospel. Likewise, “A man who was circumcised before his conversion is not to efface the signs of his Judaism” (Robertson and Plummer 1911:146). The gospel missionary is not to put unnecessary barriers in the way of the gospel.

This principle addresses the kinds of community that might result from the preaching of the gospel. There were at least two distinct branches of the early church, a Palestinian Jewish branch and a Gentile branch. It was more than a matter of taste or culture. To truly be a Jew one had to separate

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20 According to Grosheide, the topic shifts here from marriage to vocation (Grosheide 1953:168). However, as Bruce himself notes (1988:174), the chapter returns to the topic of marriage in verse 25, so verses 17-24 are more of a digression than a change of topic.

21 The concept of “call” in verse 17 and following is the equivalent of conversion (see Fee 1987:310).

22 Scholars have debated the degree to which there was a difference between Palestinian Judaism and the Judaism of the Diaspora. Traditionally, it was assumed that Diaspora Judaism (in places like Egypt, Asia Minor, and Rome) was far more open and syncretistic than that of Roman Palestine, but recent research has suggested that the lines of distinction should not be drawn so sharply. Hellenism had widely impacted Palestinian Judaism by the first century, particularly in Galilee, but also in Judea and Jerusalem, as evidenced in the early chapters of Acts (see Hengel 1981).
oneself from “unclean” Gentiles. Paul clearly understood the need to work differently in the two environments (Gal 2:7-9). Among the Jews he used Scripture and kept feasts and even temple rituals (Acts 13:16-41; 17:2-4; 18:21; 20:16; 21:20-26). Among the Gentiles he spoke on the basis of general revelation and quoted Greek poets and philosophers (Acts 14:14-17; 17:22-29). Compared to the pagan writings Paul quoted from,²³ use of the Qur’an in outreach does not seem a stretch.

In 1 Cor 7 Paul considers the distinction between Jews and Gentiles to be significant, even among followers of Jesus (Robertson and Plummer 1911:146-148). While the cross brings the two into a spiritual unity (Eph 2:11-16), they are to remain distinct for the sake of mission. There is no deception involved here, rather the recognition that God was working in two distinct environments. Rather than force an institutional unity, Paul preferred to maintain the distinction as part of his missionary strategy (1 Cor 9:19-23). Just as it was necessary to conduct two distinct missions in the first century, it may also be advisable at times for believing Muslims and Jews today to maintain some distance from traditional Christian communities.²⁴

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from Gods law but am under Christs law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor 9:19-23, emphasis mine)

This passage contains Paul’s clearest mandate for an outreach that accommodates itself to a variety of cultures and backgrounds. The more the

²⁴These two paragraphs are based in part on Jameson and Sczlevich 2000:35, 36. See also Parshall 2004:290.
gospel worker enters into the life and culture of the recipients, the greater the success of the outreach. In so doing, Paul is taking risks with his own spiritual experience (1 Cor 9:24-27). Paul is even willing to risk being misunderstood. I have written on this passage at some length elsewhere (Paulien 1993:23-27; Paulien 2008:13-18).

A fascinating point comes into play in verse 20. To the Jew Paul “became” (a Greek aorist) like a Jew. But Paul already was a Jew. Yet there was a sense in which his Judaism had been altered by the gospel. Judaism was something he could re-adopt for the sake of the gospel (Barrett 1968:211; Grosheide 1953:212, 213). The use of “became” with the article suggests that Paul was referring to a specific occasion, perhaps that of Timothy’s circumcision or an incident like the one mentioned in Acts 21:23-26 (Barrett 1968:211).

In verse 22 Paul sums up saying he has become “all things to all,” with the final “all” being the sum total of Jews, under the law, apart from law, and weak that he had described in verses 20-22 (Barrett 1968:215, 216). There is a driving principle in all of Paul’s mission actions: place no unnecessary barriers in the way of those who need to hear the gospel. It is the obligation of the one presenting the gospel to cross the divide between the presenter and those who need to hear the gospel. It is not the obligation of the hearer to bridge that gap.

For example, “To the weak I became weak.” The term weak here is not used in the physical sense, it had to do with people who were over-scrupulous in spiritual matters. Rather than condemning their scruples, Paul abstained from things they thought were wrong even though he did not consider doing them to be wrong (Grosheide 1953:213, 214; Robertson and Plummer 1911:192). He did not allow his freedom in Christ to get in the way of the “weak” coming to understand the gospel (1 Cor 8:4-13), which is the only way the “weak” could become “strong” anyway.

The passage suggests that we accommodate those who need to hear the gospel even to the point of seeming to become just like them. What the passage does not address is the extent to which resulting communities of believers can deviate from the accepted custom among Christian churches. Paul has already dealt with that point in 1 Cor 7:17-24, whereas in 1 Cor 9:19-23 he is focused on methods of outreach.

\[\text{Footnotes:}\]
\[\text{25 C4 and C5 missionaries tend to read “to the Muslim become like a Muslim” quite differently. Both use the text to validate their positions (Parshall 2004:290; see also Keener 2003:80, 81).}\]
\[\text{26 The first couple of chapters in 2 Cor make it clear that Paul’s flexibility in mission led to considerable tension with the church in Corinth. The Corinthians seem to be asking how they can trust someone who is constantly “changing his mind” (2 Cor 1:12-20), whose “yes” is really “no” and vice versa (see Barrett 1973:75-84; Keener 2003:159, 160).}\]
1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (1 Thess 4:11-12)

It has been said that knowledge is caught rather than taught. That certainly seems to be the case with regard to the gospel. In Paul’s day the church at Thessalonica had a number of members who used their Christian faith as an excuse to “freeload” off of pagan neighbors. This apparently made the church the object of disgust and derision in Thessalonica. The stated principle in this passage is also applicable today. As far as possible, we are to live our faith in such a way as to gain the respect of outsiders and avoid being disruptive of the social context in which a spiritual community is placed. Wanamaker calls it “maintaining a low profile” (1990:163).

In a Muslim society good relationships with neighbors are valued at least as much as truth, honesty, and wealth. When Christians ignore family and social responsibilities in order to “witness” for Christ they unwittingly communicate irresponsibility and social disdain in the Muslim environment. Paul would argue here that the first work of the follower of Jesus is to uplift family and community responsibilities. In that context the witness to Jesus has credibility.

When a person is converted to the Adventist faith in the developing world our first tendency is often to pull them out of their family and their environment and send them off to school to learn how to be an itinerant pastor. Such an action may make perfect sense in terms of building up the church as an institution. But the consequent impact on family life can do great harm in terms of the credibility of the church in the Muslim community. Would an unpredictable God prefer short-term results at the cost of long-term hits to the church’s reputation?

2 Timothy 2:24-26

And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently...

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This was contrary to Paul’s own practice of working for a living even while preaching the gospel (Bruce 1982:91; Malherbe 1987:13; Wanamaker 1990:164, 281, 282).

Paul’s counsel is interesting, exercising “ambition” to live a quiet life apart from politics and popular social affairs (Malherbe 2000:247).
instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Tim 2:24-26)

Paul’s use of the phrase “the Lord’s servant” implies that followers of Jesus will teach others in the way that Jesus did (Nichol 1955:7:339). The words “gently instruct” are based on the Greek word for meekness (Matt 5:5). To quarrel is the opposite of meekness. The basis for a kind, teachable, and meek approach is the recognition that those in the trap of the devil cannot be freed by human coercion or cunning. They can only be freed by the power of God. That power is best brought to bear by a Christ-like spirit.

This text leads me to think it is unfortunate when confrontational styles of mission are held up as models and more passive ones lead to a charge of syncretism. The appropriate approach is the one that has the best long-term effect on mission. Paul here, contrary to his reputation, seems to side with the “laid-back” approach that shows respect to others, even when one perceives that they may have become captives to the Devil.

1 Peter 2:17; 3:15-16

Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Pet 2:17; 3:15-16)

1 Peter 2:17 is a summary of the previous four verses (13-16) (Johnston 1995:81). Peter here essentially offers the same strategy for mission that Paul does in 1 Thess 4:11-12. He encourages believers to show sensitivity and respect toward the civil authorities and toward those who believe differently, even when the strength of their pagan views provokes them to slander. In principle, Christians are free from the bonds of society, the social order pales in value next to Christ. Yet Christians are to show respect for the sake of the gospel, and to avoid behavior that could be criticized by outsiders (Reicke 1964:95). Not only so, Peter wants Christians, as far as possible, to behave in ways that the pagan society would regard as praiseworthy, although their ultimate loyalty is to God (Johnston 1995:78, 81, 82). 1 Peter 3:15-16 repeats many things already said in chapter 2 (Johnston 1995:92). If advice like this can be offered in the pagan environment of ancient Rome, it is certainly
appropriate in the monotheistic Muslim societies of today (Dutch 2000:21). This underlines a point made above under John 16:12. When truth is presented in an argumentative manner it loses its attractiveness. The object of truth is to make people more like Jesus, to share such truth in an unChrist-like manner is counter-productive (Nichol 1955:7:573). The key word here is respect. To approach others as if they know nothing of God, as if we are inherently superior to them, is to show disrespect and incline them to reject our message. But an open, respectful, teachable spirit is winsome and can bring people to conviction.

**Conclusion**

There is a natural human tendency to believe what we want to believe. That means that there is almost always a tension between what we believe about the Bible and what the Bible actually teaches. We get accustomed to certain conclusions based on “sound bites” drawn from familiar texts, while the vast reservoir of biblical truth is largely untapped. The goal of this brief article was to draw attention to overlooked texts and incidents in the Bible that have serious implications for the way we do mission to Muslims and other faith traditions. These texts suggest that God is more open-minded than I am. If I am serious about aligning my life with Scripture, I cannot ignore the picture of an unpredictable God who does things I would least expect on the basis of my comfortable selection of proof texts.

In sum, the above texts suggest a God who meets people where they are and is not limited by the reluctance of his own people to change. There will be many challenges in mission where the best course forward is not certain and it will be tempting to avoid change and favor the status quo. I believe the unpredictable God would urge us to take the risk of erring on the side of the people rather than plowing ahead on traditional grounds no matter the cost to those on the ground. This is the kind of approach Dr. Whitehouse has always taken. I honor him for his fearless action in service of an unpredictable God.

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29“In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people” (White 1948:21).

30To avoid any misunderstanding, let me be clear that I am not suggesting we throw off all restraint and do whatever we want in mission. While the Bible teaches that God is unpredictable, it also teaches that he is consistent, which is one of the bases for predictive prophecy. For a fuller development of this biblical tension between a God who is consistent and yet is unpredictable see Paulien 1994:43-64; Paulien 2004:33-61. We need to strike a balance between building mission on sound and consistent principles and striking out in creative directions to meet unusual situations. The fervor of this article is grounded in my conviction that in recent years we have gone too far in the direction of the former at the expense of the latter.
Works Cited


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