
The Crisis of Reality

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Abstract

In our modern world we are faced with virtual realities on every side. In the realm of faith, young people are offered a virtual Christianity. What makes God real rather than virtual? What is reality? The Word of God expresses and defines what is reality for Christians. It defines a real gospel of power, calling the sinner to repentance, confession, and a turning away from sin. It then offers a real relationship with a real God, transforming our sinful hearts through His character of love.

Reality or Virtual Reality?

As I sit looking out my window I am faced with a world of reality. There are real trees covering the hillsides, real flowers gracing the front flowerbed, and real clouds floating in the sky.

Contrast that with the impact of current culture, technology and science that permeates much of our world with virtual realities. People live in air-conditioned homes, drive to work in air-conditioned cars, work in air-conditioned offices, then return home to watch sports on a large screen TV. Even “reality TV” gets staged.

Many students may express a disconnect from reality in their studies. For some people their world is a virtual reality barely extending past their iPhone or computer. Facebook may say you have 567 friends, but how many of those would you really call in a time of need? How many of them really know your heart—the things you are going through in life, how you are doing on a deeper level? Would they wish you a “Happy Birthday” if they hadn’t been prompted? We are beginning to realize that what we thought was real, may actually just be virtual—a façade that can vanish in a moment.

Could the same thing be said about faith? Is faith real or virtual? Stated another way, “Are youth today being confronted with a Christianity that is virtual?” How many 2nd and 3rd generation Seventh-day Adventist youth grow up with a cultural and intellectual religion, but have no personal experience with God? Young people

today have a heart cry for a religion that is real, something they can call their own.

Jesus said, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3 KJV). What does it mean to know God—to really know God? What makes God real? As a 5th generation Adventist myself, a fire burns in my soul for the thousands of 2nd and 3rd generation Adventist young people who long for something deeper, something real. We desire to simply know God’s presence, to walk with Him throughout the day. We long for comfort from the true Comforter and peace in the presence of God.

“We long for a gospel of power—power over our debilitating addictions and failure, power for victory, power to obey.” Charles Fitch (1839) illustrated this desire when he wrote:

“I have, I can have, I ought to have no expectation of dwelling where God dwells—of being an object of His love forever, and a sharer of the eternal blessedness which He only can give, unless I have a character fully assimilated to His—unless I love, with a full and undivided heart, what He loves, and hate what He hates, and all that He hates, with a hatred, full, entire, uniform, perpetual, like His own. There must not be in me an approach to any thought or feeling which is not in perfect, full-hearted and joyous agreement with everything that God is, and with everything that God does. This must be my character, or I will never see God’s face in peace” (Fitch, 1839, p. 6).

A Real Religion

We desire a real religion that reaches the heart and changes the inner motivations of a person, a religion that grants power to overcome sin, and a true personal relationship with our living Savior. We want a religion that plants in our hearts the character of God. Yet, as already mentioned, it often seems like we tend to have somewhat of an intellectual and cultural religion rather than a vital, living religion. We may make a mental ascent to truth, but it seems that it often eludes the core of our heart. Truth must change the inner person.

Evidently this need and desire aren't limited to our current time. More than a century ago, Ellen White wrote, "The tremendous issues of eternity demand of us something besides an imaginary religion—a religion of words and forms, where the truth is kept in the outer court (White, 1907, p. 8). In another publication she penned, "[With many] there has been no genuine conversion, no positive work of grace done in the heart. Their desire to do God's will is based upon their own inclination, not upon the deep conviction of the Holy Spirit. Their conduct is not brought into harmony with the law of God. They profess to accept Christ as their Savior, but they do not believe that He will give them power to overcome their sins. They have not a personal acquaintance with a living Savior, and their characters reveal many blemishes" (White, 1904, p. 7).

Defining Reality

Where can we find reality? What defines reality in the world around us? And, on a deeper level, what defines reality in one's personal, Christian life? What defines reality to 2nd and 3rd generation Adventist youth?

Let us go back to the very beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:1-4 KJV).

In this world where we are surrounded by the creations of the imaginations of men, there is only one place where we can turn that will truly define for us what real reality is, and that is the Word of God. The written Word of God opens our understanding to the very

character of God. This enables us to discover who He is. It defines for us what sin and righteousness really are. It gives us a clear picture of a very real gospel of power.

The written Word of God also tells about the Word of God "made flesh" in the person of Jesus Christ. This provided a real and living example of the character of God in human flesh. In Jesus we see an example of real victory and real, selfless love.

The "Word of God" has taken one other form. God spoke, and it was. The nature and creation that we see around us today is the very product of God's Word. thoughts and in studying the systems of nature we can catch glimpses into the mind and character of God. Yes, the Word of God expresses, explains and defines reality.

Facing Reality

The Word of God also exposes reality in contrast to what is virtual and imaginary. We may find ourselves believing we are safe, only for the Word of God to expose the reality of our sinful hearts. "But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible" (Ephesians 5:13 ESV). We also read in the Word of God, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God" (John 3:19-21 KJV).

If we believe we are living in the light when in reality we are living in darkness, in essence, we are living in a virtual reality. We believe something that is simply not true. Undoubtedly, people do this all the time. Unfortunately, it will often take a crisis to force us to face reality. For example should the trucking industry fail, people in large cities would soon be forced into the reality that real food grows in the ground and not on supermarket shelves, and that if they are not connected with someone who grows real food, or know how to grow real food themselves, they will be in real trouble. Hence we have the explosion of the "Real Food Movement" where people are choosing to embrace solutions to a real problem before they are forced to face it due to a crisis. Statistics show that local food is a rapidly growing movement in the United States (USDA, 2011).

In the church we are face a crisis of 2nd and 3rd generation Adventist youth believing they are all right while continuing in a helpless life of sin with no true conversion of the heart. Having grown up Adventist myself it was easy for me to believe I was all right, yet at the same time I knew my Christian experience didn't stand up against the Word of God. I did not have power to live a righteous life, victory was eluding me, and I subconsciously knew I was living in a virtual reality. Thousands of other 2nd and 3rd generation Adventist youth are crying out for authenticity. Far beyond merely an acceptance of "just be yourself," this true authenticity gets defined and measured by the Word of God. An authentic Christian is one whose heart has been changed. Far from cosmetic adjustments, a look at Christ on the cross leads a person to repentance for one's past and dependence upon the power of God for one's future. Both are works of grace.

A Call for Spiritual Leaders

In order to share the reality of the gospel with youth it must first truly be real in our own hearts and lives. They must see it modeled and manifested in us, lest we find ourselves "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (2 Tim. 3:5 KJV). I am reminded of my own Great Grandfather, E. L. Minchin, who not only called youth to repentance but also stressed the importance of spirituality in the minister:

"When God finds truly humble and dedicated instruments who are willing to pay the price that a truly spiritual ministry demands, He has mighty weapons in His hand for the breaking down of strongholds and the establishing of His kingdom in the hearts of men. The greatest preparation for any revival must take place in the hearts of the instruments God will use. It is the preacher's inner life that matters most, and largely determines the success or failure of any revival. It is not his education, his culture, or his organizing ability, important as they may be. If he is a born-again servant of God, and has a passionate love for Christ; if he has a tender and understanding heart in his dealing with souls, and a growing love for and familiarity with the Word of God; if he is an unworldly man whom the people know comes to his task from the higher levels of fellowship and communion with God, a vitalizing power will attend his ministry. If he does not have this, his ministry becomes mediocre and ineffective. Successful ministry is costly. It is a spiritual work. Find a man who will diligently cultivate his own soul and you will have an instrument of power.

Otherwise, we merely preach but we do not woo. We talk, but nothing happens. We pass multitudes of resolutions, but nobody quakes. There is no vital movement toward God. The simple fact is this: when for any reason we become separated from the God we vowed to serve, we cease to become effective channels of His grace to His people. Then let the fire fall. Let the cleansing, energizing power of the Holy Spirit take possession of us. Let Jesus Christ and His will become the passion of our lives. Let self-glory vanish and the blessing will come, and the fires of true revival will be kindled in every land" (Minchin, 1959, pp. 11-12).

He goes on to tell of a truly Pentecostal revival meeting held in Orlando, Florida where 1,500 people packed the church each night. Hearts were convicted of sin, marvelous victories were won with the youth, and even strong men wept as they saw and felt the power of God working. When cautioned about emotionalism my grandfather replied, "That is true, but there is a vast difference between emotionalism and godly emotion. We cannot have too little of the former and too much of the latter. A godly sorrow for sin touches the emotions. Our Savior wept for sinners and His heart bled and was broken for a lost world. Brethren, our hearts also must bleed if we would be ministers of the saving power of Christ's blood. Tearless hearts can never be heralds of the passion of Him who "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears" (Heb. 5:7). (Minchin, 1959, p. 15).

When spiritual leaders are really spiritual rather than virtually spiritual, it will be a powerful witness to young people caught in the struggle of what true spirituality is. We have an objective Word of God to reveal reality for followers of God. With ready access, none need to miss this revelation.

Young people often live on the cutting edge of whatever is new. And yet, new doesn't guarantee an improvement. The package might be appealing and have a certain freshness about it, but what's at the core? Solomon didn't seem too impressed with newness when he wrote, "There is no new thing under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9b KJV). In Jeremiah's time, what was "new" actually served as the problem rather than a solution. That's why he wrote, "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16 KJV). When it comes to reaching 2nd and 3rd generation Adventist youth, if the new fails to include repentance, a transformed life, and power from

sin, it certainly isn't an improvement! If such is the case, look back to the old gospel doctrines that include these.

Repentance usually isn't a popular message. It demands change and it exposes personal weakness and inadequacy. Yet repentance served as the introductory message for John the Baptist and for Christ the Messiah as well. According to Matthew 3:1-2 (NKJV), "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" One chapter later, Matthew recorded, "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 4:17 NKJV). If that seems out of date and no longer popular, then perhaps we need to heed this message from more than a century ago, "The Lord would have His servants preach today the old Gospel doctrine, sorrow for sin, repentance, and confession. We want old-fashioned sermons, old-fashioned customs, old-fashioned fathers and mothers in Israel, who have the tenderness of Christ" (White, 1899, par. 4).

I Have a Dream

I have a dream. I see hundreds, and even thousands of young people who have found God to be real and personal in their lives. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in their lives. They humbly confess their sins, receive forgiveness, and then live as forgiven people. They forgive others and invite others to experience the divine gift of forgiveness as well. With the assurance of being accepted by God, they stand boldly for what God has revealed. The mark of Christ matters more to them than the mark of success.

Let there be a work of reformation and repentance. Let all seek for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As with the disciples after the ascension of Christ, it may require several days of earnestly seeking God and putting away of sin (White, 1952, p. 58).

As Adventists, we understand that our calling is to prepare the way for Christ's Second Coming. As John the Baptist did prior to Christ's First Advent, the theme of repentance—sorrow for sin and turning from it—would be as consistent and pertinent today as it was 2,000 years ago. This message seems absent in many of our gatherings. Obviously, to prepare naturally sinful people for the return of Christ, repentance is essential.

In a time of virtual realities, true reality can be found in the Word of God. We can find the center of this through the Word of God known as the Bible, through the record of the Word that became flesh in the form of Jesus Christ, and in the results of God's spoken Word that created this world—through nature. Reality is not always limited to the things we can physically see or feel. True reality goes so much farther. "But in Him, it has always been 'Yes!' For no matter how many promises God has made, they are all 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1: 19-20).

Katie Davis included in her blog the battle for her adopted child's emotional healing. She wrote, "I want to live as a prisoner to the 'Yes.' Remembering all we have seen, we set our hope fully on what we have not yet seen. We place all of our hope and all of our trust and all of our focus on the grace given us through Christ, and we beg to live captured by His promises."

These are the promises that give us bedrock realities. Here is a sure anchor. Jesus put it in these terms, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3 KJV). To really know God through His Word - this is reality!

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