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A Biblical Framework for Discipling Believers Who Fear Death and Hell

Introduction

What happens to a person when he/she dies is a question humans have always wrestled with. Many people, including some Christians, believe that hell and life after death literally exist; and as such, they live in constant fear of death and hell. According to the Pew Research Center's 2015 Religious Landscape Study conducted among U.S. adults, 70% of Christians, 76% of Muslims, 32% of Buddhists, and 28% of Hindus believe in hell (Murphy 2015). According to the December 16, 2013 Harris Poll, 64% of American adults believe in the survival of the soul after death. The same poll indicates that 58% of American adults believe in hell. Hell is viewed as a place of eternal punishment for people who have not lived right in this life. The afterlife fate of the departed has a strong resonance in many parts of the world. Because of the belief that the dead who are in hell can still receive salvation through post-mortem means, many death-related rituals are practiced by believers of various religions around the world as a way of helping a person's loved ones avoid or escape the eternal punishment of hell (Shannon-Missal 2013).

Death, Hell, and Funeral Rites: A Brief Overview

Death is a disrupter of harmony. Many traditional mythologies and religious beliefs assert that death was not part of the original human condition. Because of this, many "societies are laden with rituals, beliefs, and practices that acknowledge, affirm, grieve, and [try to] heal the inevitable effects of death" (Martin 2009:195).

In many traditional contexts such as in Africa, the concepts of life and death are not mutually exclusive concepts. It is believed that “death does not annihilate life and that the departed continue to exist in the hereafter” (Mbiti 1970:264). This belief asserts that at death the body decays but the soul escapes to continue its existence, wandering as a ghost until it is released by means of rituals to go and join the ancestors (Goody 1962:364, 371).

In traditional thinking, “dead people are not dead at all. Death is only a transitional state to a spiritual life free from material hindrances” (Amanze 2003:44). Death is spoken of as a departure, a setting out on a journey, a transition to ancestorhood. Nevertheless, whenever it occurs, “the soul of the deceased must undergo a series of spiritual adjustment if he or she is to find a secure place in the afterlife and continue to remain in contact with the family left behind” (Ray 1976:140). Funeral rites are performed to reduce the effect of the loss as well as to facilitate the process by which the deceased joins the community of the ancestors. A traditional funeral is believed not only to help the deceased reach their “fathers” (i.e., enter the ancestral world) but also “have a tomorrow” (i.e., a continuation of life in the lineage) (Abasi 1995:448, 450, 452). This is the community’s expressed desire for kinship continuity and solidarity even in death. The community’s survival is crucial and rests on the strict observance of proper burial and funeral rites to help the deceased make a good and successful journey to the ancestral world to join those who ensure life and wellbeing, and who become intermediaries to the living.

Because of the general belief among many traditional religionists that there is life after death, funeral rites are elaborate ceremonial occasions as they are considered to be the indispensable means by which human beings avoid hell by passing from the land of the living to that of the ancestors (Sidonia 2002:9). In the event of death, the bereaved family seeks the help of a diviner to find the cause of their loved one’s death. Every human death is assumed to also have other unnatural/supernatural causes (Mbiti 1990:151). Every death is thus thought as having a hidden cause that must be known before the deceased is buried (Labouret 1931:319-320). For example, when someone dies of a snake bite, the snake is perceived not as the cause of the death but rather as an intermediary agent (Goody 1962:208). While mourning goes on, many attempts are made to determine with some degree of certainty the cause of death in order to counteract its effect on the deceased reaching ancestorhood.

The discussion above reveals that in some traditional religious contexts, a person experiences hell at their death if they fall short of becoming an ancestor. It is believed that when a person dies their body decays but their soul escapes to continue its existence wandering as a ghost until it is released by properly conducted funeral rites to go and join the ancestors

(Goody 1962:364, 371). A person's soul therefore remains a wandering spirit without a resting place if the family fails to go through all the prescribed rites of passage during their life on earth, or if the person died of a "bad" death (Sanou 2015:87),¹ had improper burial and funeral rites, or are denied ancestorhood by the clan's ancestors because of an offence done to them by the deceased (43-48, 87).

Similarly, some Christian denominations (including the Roman Catholic Church) and other traditions point to life after death and hell as part of what happens to humanity after a person dies. In this view, not only is there life after death for those who will go to heaven, but there is also a subsequent hell as part of the afterlife. Furthermore, for those who have not lived properly in this life, and have to still atone for certain sins, there is the need that they must pass through "purgatory" (a transitional state between death and heaven) in order to "undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (Purgatory 2019).

Biblical View of Life and Death

Addressing the fear of death and hell among converts from traditional religious or animistic contexts (for further reading see Sanou 2015:58-63) calls for a clear biblical understanding of the state of human beings in death and a concise and systematic presentation of the plan of salvation demonstrated in the life, death, resurrection, and continued ministry of Christ.

The creation story gives an account of the origin of life on earth. Two key texts are considered: Gen 1:26, 27 and Gen 2:7. At creation, humanity was given the special status of being created in God's image: "Let us make mankind in *our image*, in *our likeness*, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. God created mankind in *his own image*, in *the image of God* he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26, 27, emphasis added).

The same concept is reiterated in Gen 5:1 and Gen 9:6. Genesis 5:1 simply states that "when God created mankind, he made them *in the likeness of God*" (emphasis added). Genesis 9:6 gives the very first clear implication for humanity being created in God's image. It states that it is because humanity is created in the image of God that human beings should not shed the blood of one another: "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for *in the image of God* has God made mankind" (emphasis added).

The image and likeness of God in humans has had many interpretations among scholars. Is image and likeness the same or are they referring to two different things? Is it physical, mental, or spiritual? Although this

is not the focus of this study, I concur with the view that “bearing God’s image does not imply so much resembling God [physically] as representing Him. Man is God’s collaborator (Gen 2:4-6, 15) and lieutenant (Ps 8:3-8; 115:6)” (Cairus 2000:208). The likeness of God in humans refers to “the representational functions of humans,” which includes “everything that enables humankind to rule over their sphere as God rules in His” (208). The creation in the image and likeness of God sets humanity apart from other creatures, because only humanity (man and woman) has been granted this special status. Although no clear clues are given as to the features of the likeness of God, God’s image in human beings and the dominion that was given them over other creatures (Gen 1:26) probably has to do with humanity’s relationship both to other creatures and to God the Creator. In other words, people were created as relational beings (Reiss 2011:184). Also, because the Bible further says that God is spirit (John 4:24), it seems safer to see the image of God in humans in terms of their spiritual nature (Nichol 1976-1980:1:216; “In Our Image” [Gen 1:26]).² For Reiss, the image and likeness of God in humans are located in “some spiritual quality or faculty of the human person” (2011:185). In a nutshell, the creation of humans in the image of God, the highest conceivable status, affirms their dignity and worth (181). Our true identity is first and foremost found in the fact that humans are created in God’s image.

Genesis 2:7 gives the two basic components of every human being, namely, a physical body and the breath of life, which is immaterial: “The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Scholars have also debated whether at death the body and spirit have an independent existence. Two main groups have emerged out of these debates.

Scholars such as H. David Lewis, Wayne Grudem, Gary R. Habermas, and James P. Moreland believe in the immortality of the soul on the basis of texts such as: “The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Eccl 12:7), “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28), and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). For them, between death and the resurrection, believers are in some kind of conscious state of intermediary existence. Lewis states, “Throughout the centuries Christians have believed that each human person consists in a soul and body; that the soul survived the death of the body; and that its future life will be immortal” (1984:125). Wayne Grudem unpacks the nature of the immortal soul by defining death as “the temporary cessation of bodily life and a separation of the soul from the body. Once a believer has died, though his or her physical body remains on the earth and is buried, at the moment of death

the soul (or spirit) of that believer goes immediately into the presence of God with rejoicing" (emphasis added) (1994:816). Gary R. Habermas and James P. Moreland push this concept a step further by stating that in the intermediary state "the person enjoys *conscious fellowship with God* while waiting for a reunion with a new, resurrected body" (emphasis added 1998:222).

For other scholars such as Edward Fudge and Joel Green, the body and the spirit cease to exist until the resurrection of the dead. Green (2008:179) states that

Death must be understood not only in biological terms, as merely the cessation of one's body, but as the conclusion of embodied life, the severance of all relationships, and the fading of personal narrative. It means that, at death, the person *really dies*; from the perspective of our humanity and sans [without] divine intervention, there is no part of us, no aspect of our personhood, that survives death.

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* provides additional insight. In commenting about the body and spirit it says,

Although Eccl 12:7 says that at death the spirit (*ruach*) returns to God, in not one of the 379 instances of its use throughout the OT does *ruach* denote an intelligent entity capable of existence apart from a physical body, so far as man is concerned, and it must therefore be clear that such a concept is without basis as the teachings of the Scriptures themselves are concerned (see Gen. 2:7; 35:18; Num. 5:14; Eccl. 3:19-21; cf. on Num. 5:2; 9:6). That which here returns to God is simply the life principle imparted by God to both man and beast (see on Eccl. 3:19-21, where *ruach* is translated "breath"). (Nichol 1976-1980:3:1104)

For Edward Fudge, a human being is an indivisible whole. The soul and the spirit are not parts into which a human may be divided. The soul refers to the living human individual; in other words, human beings do not have souls, they are souls. The spirit is a constant reminder that humans have their source in God (2011:27). He further asserts that the consistent witness of the Old Testament is that when a person dies, it is the entirety of their soul that dies (Ezek 18:20) (27). Scholars who say that no part of humans survives death argue that it was only when God breathed the breath of life into the inanimate body of Adam that he became a living being/soul (Gen 2:7; Nichol 1976-1980:1:223). There is a difference between "breath of life," *ruach*, and "soul," *nephesh*, in Gen 2:7. The soul "denotes man as a living being after the breath of life entered into a physical body formed from the elements of the earth" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1998:82). This is supported by the fact that the account

of Gen 2:7 says that “man *became* a living soul. Nothing in the Creation account indicates that man *received* a soul—some kind of separate entity that, at Creation was united with the human body” (81, 82; emphasis in the original).

Also, humans were only given conditional immortality at creation, as attested to by Gen 2:15-17: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly *die*’” (emphasis added). Adam and Eve’s conditional immortality was changed to mortality when they disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit (Gen 3). Death is simply the reversal of the process of creation. At death, the breath of life is withdrawn from the living being/soul (Nichol 1976-1980:1:223), and “when that happens, the person dies. He or she ceases to exist. The ‘soul’ is no more because the living person is no more” (Ball 2011:15). Other Bible passages also highlight the fact that the dead are in an unconscious, nonexistent state (Eccl 9:5, 6), a state of unconscious sleep (John 11:11-13), and the next thing they will be conscious of will be when Christ returns and raises them either to eternal life (1 Thess 4:13-17) or to eternal damnation (Matt 25:46).

Christ the Victor Over Death and Hell

The question of mediation between God and humans is central to the doctrine of salvation. Among traditional religionists (and animists), it is humans who, at their own cost, reach out to God through the mediation of their ancestors, whereas in Christianity, mediation has been initiated and paid for by God by means of Christ’s victory over death (Wikipedia 2019). Christ’s victory over the grave won him the right to become the sole mediator between God and humans (1 Tim 2:5, 6). That is why in the name of Jesus, every believer can approach boldly the throne of God to receive mercy and the assurance of salvation (Heb 4:16) (Kuhn 2016).

The death of Christ on the cross and his subsequent resurrection is God’s statement that he is able to, effectively and conclusively, deal with sin and death, and the fear caused by both. Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead was to make the power of God real and available to all. That power is evident in the life of the early church and in the life and ministry of many who have faithfully and fearlessly followed Christ.

Understanding the biblical basis and the implications of the Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief #11 “Growing in Christ” is foundational for addressing the fear of death and hell among converts from non-Christian religions and even other Christian denominations. In addition,

this Fundamental Belief #11 is especially relevant when mission is carried out in traditional and animistic religious environments where many church members are constantly afraid of spirits and ancestors.

The biblical principles provided by Fundamental Belief #11 when communicated and taught properly should drive away the fear of evil power. It states,

By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience (Ps 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Col 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; Luke 10:17-20; Eph 5:19, 20; 6:12-18; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Phil 3:7-14; 1 Thess 5:16-18; Matt 20:25-28; John 20:21; Gal 5:22-25; Rom 8:38, 39; 1 John 4:4; Heb 10:25). (Ministerial Association 2005:149-150)

Fundamental Belief #11, "Growing in Christ," helps to understand that "salvation transforms how we see our world. We no longer fear our past or future, but embrace a present full of hope, love, passion and praise as the Spirit lives in us" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2019). People who fear death are looking for power to overcome this fear. Power comes from a personal communion and relationship with the victorious Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and an understanding and knowledge of Scripture. Christ is the only one who has overcome death and who is powerful to protect all those who put their faith in him. Once church members learn of and experience his power over all other spiritual forces, they will allow him to enter their lives, and the fear of death and evil spirits will no longer cripple their existence. Individual church members can now live with the assurance that just as Jesus overcame death they will also overcome.

A Biblical Model of Discipleship

People will not give up on their old beliefs so long as those old beliefs remain the only working alternatives they have (Velsor and Drath 2004:390). The only solution is for the gospel to not only change former beliefs but also to transform the converts' worldviews in theory and practice. If this does not happen, the new beliefs will continue to be re-interpreted in terms of the old worldview (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno 1999/2000:177). A biblical model of discipleship is key to worldview transformation, and to conversion.

A good biblical model of discipleship is portrayed in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-13. This text presents discipleship as a process of spiritual parenting. In that passage, Paul uses the parent-child metaphor to describe principles of discipleship by referring to familiar things of life, which both the direct recipients and the wider readership of the epistle were conversant with. This parent-child metaphor is still a powerful means of impressing on people's minds important spiritual principles about Christian discipleship. Spiritual mentoring as discipleship can help achieve four things: (1) a long-term commitment to the spiritual welfare and growth of believers, (2) modeling a spiritual walk with God to mentees, (3) personal attention to believers' spiritual growth needs, and (4) the teaching of biblical truth. A brief analysis of this passage reveals the following four components of biblical discipleship.

Long-term Commitment to the Spiritual Welfare and Growth of Believers

"Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you" (1 Thess 2:7, 8; emphasis added). The process of discipleship requires the investment of quality time in those being discipled. Paul and his missionary team cared for the believers in the congregations they established as a mother cares for her children. This would have involved tenderly and patiently teaching the Thessalonians to walk with God. They demonstrated intentional commitment to the spiritual growth and welfare of believers. Their long-term commitment to the welfare of the believers at Thessalonica echoes Jesus' long-term concern for the growth of believers: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. . . . I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:1, 16-18). An important implication of these two examples

is that “disciples cannot be mass produced but are the product of [long-term] intimate and personal investment” (Ogden 2007:20).

Modeling a Spiritual Walk with God to Mentees

“Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of *how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed*” (1 Thess 2:9, 10, emphasis added). The missionary team strove to be role models to the new believers. If Hampton Keathley’s perspective on discipleship is correct, about 90 percent of what a disciple learns or applies is caught from the discipler’s life rather than from his/her teaching. As a result, he argues that “we should place our emphasis on being a friend and let people see how we deal with things, how we study, how we pray, how we love, etc. We don’t want to just give him all the facts. We need to allow him to see how we work through various issues and help him work through the issues himself” (Keathley 2004). Without any doubt, this was what happened in Jesus’ discipling ministry of the Twelve and his other early followers who so faithfully imitated him that when those who had observed them found no other way to call them but Christians (Acts 11:26).

Following Jesus’ example, mature Christians are called to be pacesetters, positively influencing new believers in their spiritual growth. Paul’s understanding of this principle of Christian growth led him to ask the Corinthian believers to imitate him just as he himself imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1). He later challenged Timothy to “be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). This is a challenge to all mature Christians and church leaders to keep on growing in their relationship with Christ so that they can manifest godly character worthy of being imitated.

Personal Attention to Believers’ Spiritual Growth Needs

“For you know that *we dealt with each of you* as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 2:11, 12, emphasis added). Paul and his team gave the believers individual attention and instruction as a father would do to his children with the intention to help each of them with their unique needs. They understood that each believer’s uniqueness meant individual attention. With what is known in the Bible about Paul’s ministry, it is very likely that the personal attention

given to the believers' spiritual needs also included power encounters to set people free from demonic harassment (Acts 16:16-18, 19:11-12, 20:7-12; Eph 6:10-18).

Hampton Keathley (2004) illustrates the need for personal attention to believers as follows:

When we bring a newborn home from the hospital, we don't just put down the infant and say, "Welcome to the family, Johnny. Make yourself at home. The towels are in the hall closet upstairs, the pantry is right here, the can opener is in this drawer. No crying after 10 p.m. If you have any questions, there are lots of people in the family who would love to help you so don't be afraid to ask." You laugh and say that is ridiculous, but that is what usually happens to new Christians. Someone gets saved and starts going to church but never gets much personal attention. We devote 18 years to raising our children, but don't even spend six months helping a new Christian get started in understanding the spiritual world. As a result, many people have been Christians for many years, but have not grown very much. Hebrews 5:12 refers to this phenomenon. So, new believers need someone to give them guidance and help them grow. Like a newborn, they need some personal attention.

An important insight highlighted in Keathley's illustration is that discipling converts requires a significant investment of time. It is not an event limited to a two-to-three-week evangelistic series or something that is taken care of in a formal teaching setting (e.g., baptismal class). This makes mentorship inseparable from discipleship. Since the call to "make disciples" (*mathēteusate*) in Matthew 28:19 is essentially a call to duplicate one's self, mentorship is inseparable from discipleship.

A mentor is defined as someone who is committed to a healthy spiritual relationship with another person for the purpose of mutual accountability and growth in Jesus Christ. In addition to the formal teaching settings, spiritual mentors should be available to share their spiritual journey and experiences (both positive and negative) with new converts. I once invited a renowned Adventist preacher to share her spiritual journey with a group of students I mentor. She explained to us that throughout her life she always sought to be happy. Before she became an Adventist, she searched for happiness through wrong means to no avail. When she was converted and later became a pastor, she unsuccessfully sought happiness in the applause and approval of other people. One day, she finally found the answer to her quest in the following statement in *Steps to Christ* by Ellen White: "God made man perfectly holy and *happy*" (emphasis added) (1999:9). It was only then that she understood that true happiness is only found in surrendering one's life with its past mistakes to God. My

students really appreciated our guest being vulnerable in sharing her life experience with them. They understood that she did not get where she is currently in her spiritual journey at a click of a button. They also understood that they are not the only ones struggling in their spiritual journey. Because of this open conversation with our guest, we all resolved not to let our past mistakes determine who we become in life.

The Teaching of Biblical Truth

“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). Conforming themselves to the command of Matthew 28:19-20, Paul and his companions made the Word of God an essential element of the Thessalonians’ discipleship process. They taught biblical truth using illustrations and metaphors their hearers were familiar with (2 Tim 2:3-5). This not only helped their hearers relate to their teaching but also to easily remember them.

First Thessalonians 2:7-13 clearly shows that although the teaching of biblical truth was essential, it was not the sole component of Paul’s missionary team’s discipleship model. While the teaching of biblical truth is an essential component of discipleship because a convert cannot fully mature spiritually without understanding biblical principles, it must also be acknowledged that a convert may have considerable biblical knowledge and yet remain spiritually immature. For this reason, the teaching of biblical truth must always be balanced with other components of biblical discipleship such as an intentional commitment to the spiritual growth and welfare of new believers, a modeling of a spiritual walk with God, and personal attention to each believer’s spiritual welfare and growth needs. Congregational and small group teaching and personal attention of the believers are needed to encourage them along the road to their Christian maturity. Just as a baby needs an additional amount of attention, new converts also need someone to provide them with attention and guidance in the maturation process.

A Way Forward: Brief Considerations and Conclusion

It is expected that when new believers experience genuine conversion in Christ and embrace the Adventist movement wholeheartedly, they will leave the old religious practices and beliefs behind, and as new persons, become faithful disciples. Their allegiances and belief now and onwards

are to Jesus Christ and his remnant church who through his death on the cross has triumphed over the forces of evil and hell. In places where Satan pushes and coerces individuals to live in fear as his allies and prisoners, it is only through Jesus' victorious power that pastors and missionaries working for the Adventist Church can carry forward their mission, proclaiming the gospel and rescuing people from the devil's hand and the fear of hell and its grip.

Allegiance to the true God and his church happens only when believers know where they come from and who they are (history/identity), where they are right now (saved and in God's church), and where they are going (purpose/prophetic perspective). Accordingly, believers will have to depend on the Holy Spirit and on the members of Christ's body to learn the biblical truths cognitively, but they must also be disciplined through the principles and biblical framework of God's kingdom. This must be based on a clear understanding of the spiritual realities of life so that new believers will fully grow up in Christ and become mature and committed Adventist Christians.

Believers "struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm" (Eph 6:12). However, in all their struggles, believers are more than conquerors through Christ who loved them and sacrificed his life for them (Rom 8:37; Kuhn 2012:4, 5).

Endnotes

1 Among the Lobi of Burkina Faso, death by lightning, drowning, snake bite, or suicide are considered bad deaths for which no funeral rite is performed. As a result, such people cannot become ancestors.

2 It is also important to consider that in humanity, a spiritual nature is intertwined with a physical nature, as there cannot be one without the other. One could ask, "What is a spiritual nature without a physical nature?"

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