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The Lord Is Wonderful: Looking Around the Corner for Adventist Theology

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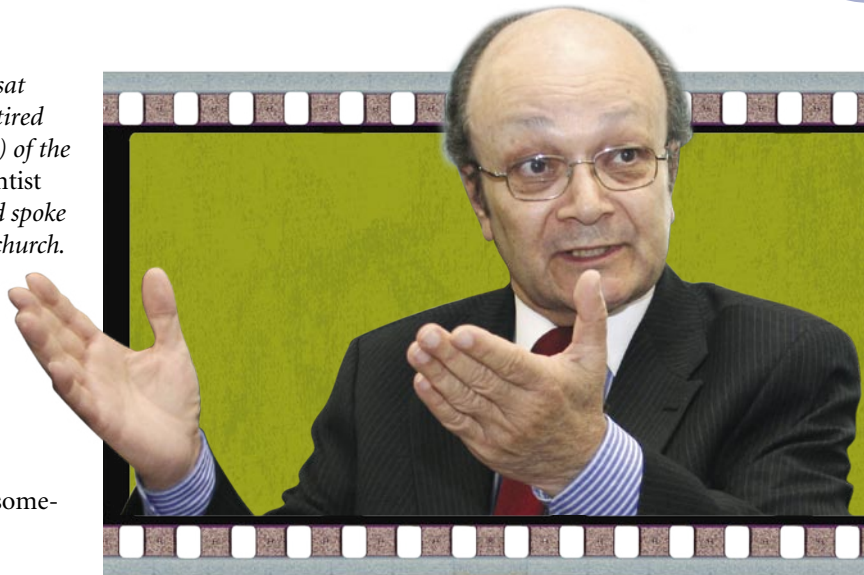
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Adventist World associate editor Gerald Klingbeil sat down with Angel Manuel Rodríguez, recently retired director of the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference and well known to readers of Adventist World as the author of the Bible Questions column, and spoke about Scripture and the role of theology in the life of the church.

Angel, after nearly 20 years of service at the BRI of the General Conference, 10 years as its director, you have recently retired. I know that you worked as a pastor, a university professor, and administrator. As you look back over your ministry, what comes to mind?

You know—the Lord is wonderful! He knows where He wants us, and He little by little shapes us. This is some-



SANDRA BLACKMER

The LORD Is Wonderful!

Looking around the corner for Adventist theology

thing that also impresses me with my colleagues [in BRI]. I look at them and I listen to their stories, their pilgrimage with the Lord. And I can see how the Lord was shaping them, preparing them, for what they are doing now. And I look back and I say to myself, really, the Lord was guiding me and preparing me for what He intended me to do.

During your nearly 20 years of service at the headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church you have seen many changes. Millions joined the church; the church has become more international. I think more members of our church are speaking Spanish or Portuguese nowadays than English or French or any other language. Does this mean anything for Adventist theology?

Of course it does. Adventist theology has become more international. Before this growth explosion, Adventist theology was influenced mainly by Western theologians from North America, Europe, and Australia. But then there was this explosion of membership around the world, and all of a sudden you had most Adventist theologians living out-

side of the Western world. This was a new development, and it brought with it wonderful blessings, but at the same time we faced tremendous challenges. One of the things that we decided to do was to take measures, steps, that would avoid fragmentation among this large number of new theologians around the world.

Mention some of those steps.

One of the first things that we thought of involved the Biblical Research Institute Committee (BRICOM). This committee meets twice a year. It plans projects dealing with theological and doctrinal issues that require further study and the production of material. BRICOM members were mainly from North America because that's where we had most of our theologians. With this incredible growth, one of the first things we had to do was to open up BRICOM to other non-Western theologians. The church is a world church, and we cannot do theology in isolation from the world church. Many of these new theologians are relatively young fellows. That's another great side benefit, because they will give

Built on Amazing Grace

Dixie Rodríguez, a columnist of the Adventist Review and daughter of Angel Rodríguez, shares a more personal facet of her father.

Our family tradition has never been lost: *my family sings.*

Childhood moments are vivid: daily worship and welcoming the Sabbath with song. It always started the same way. My father would say: *Let's sing a song.* He led the way.

In every melody my father would incorporate a Bible story. With every musical harmony he taught us Bible verses that spoke of hope, the power of prayer, and trust in divine guidance. God was never far or absent from our song. *We sang together.*

The best advice my father gave me was: *Put God first. Things may get difficult.*

Don't forget to sing. He was right. Things get difficult. Yet my father would always remind me: *He's watching you. Leave your worries to Him.* Then, as a final reminder of our journey together as a family, he would add: *Soon we will sing again.*

Every day my father reminds me how close our voices are to God's ears. For him, God has been not only a Savior but also a compassionate, powerful friend. Now I watch him teach his granddaughters to sing. Our inheritance will always be a home built on "Amazing Grace."

many more years of service to the church. As they see how we work together in trying to research biblical, theological, and doctrinal issues affecting the unity of the church around the world, they become extensions, so to speak, in their own areas in trying to nurture that theological unity.

The second thing we decided to do was to empower them, to tell them, "We trust you. You can do theology for the church. We can work together with you and do great things for the church." So we encouraged the divisions to establish Biblical Research Committees (BRCs), not institutes but committees, in their own territories to work with theological issues relevant to those divisions. Many divisions have done that, and those committees are already working. There is constant communication between the BRI and those committees. Whenever any of these committees meet, one of us is there with them.

When we face theological tension in our local churches or unions, I hear people say, "Why do we need so much theology? Why do we have to invest so much in bringing all these theologians together? Shouldn't we just focus on mission and evangelism?" What would you say to them?

We need to focus on evangelism and the mission of the church. This is nonnegotiable; this is the gospel commission. The question is What is the role of theological reflection in that mission? And we have to make it clear that theological reflection is part of the mission of the church. It is not an addendum. It's not something that the church does if there is a problem and we have to react to it. No, doing biblical study, thinking theologically, is as important for the church as going out and doing evangelism.

Theology has the function of placing itself at the service of mission and evangelism, providing relevance and biblically grounded thinking that informs the evangelist. I have never separated theology from mission.

Most people reading this interview will not be theologians. How can we help our nontheologians think biblically

or theologically? Is that important, or is it just the task of the pastor or professor at the university or college?

Of course, the question is What do we mean by thinking theologically? It's very simple. It's being able to express your conviction biblically, in a rational way, in an appealing way, grounded in Scripture. That's what is needed. And of course we do it, depending on the training, at different levels. The function of the trained theologian is to provide materials that pastors, Bible teachers, and laypersons can also use to enrich their understanding of any particular doctrine.

Stepping back after 40 years of ministry provides a great vantage point. Where do you see the issues of Adventist theology currently? Which questions do we need to address as a church?

As I think about this it seems that the key theological topic is and will remain ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. It has always been an important topic in the church, but *primarily* because of the growth of the church, this topic has become extremely important. Like never before we have come into contact with world religions. It's important for us to interact with them, and it's important for them to know the Adventist Church, who are we, what are we doing here, what is our mission. The church has grown and is therefore no longer invisible. Other denominations cannot avoid seeing us, because we are everywhere. Our eschatology is becoming more relevant day after day. So because of that we need to have answers, biblical and theological answers, appealing answers. We need to reaffirm the commitment to our Savior, the commitment to the message and mission of the church among church members. They need this because most of our church members are new converts.

Are there theological issues arising out of the tremendous church growth we are seeing?

What I think is probably one of the most important issues has to do with new converts. You see, the growth is so rapid that it's very difficult even to keep up with it. Because of the



speed, we need to really think for a moment about the dangers. And the danger I'm going to mention is a real one. It's the danger of baptizing individuals coming from a different Christian tradition, or a non-Christian background, who are not well informed about the biblical message. They receive a brief introduction to the Adventist message and they're baptized. There is little follow-up. These people are Adventists—based on the little they've come to understand. They retain some of the ideas they brought in with them. There is almost an element of syncretism, because they've never understood Adventism well. Doctrinal and theological diversity is finding a place within the local congregation.

Not long ago we blamed the theologians. They were the ones creating theological and doctrinal polarization. There is truth in that, I cannot deny that. But this is a new phenomenon because often the new converts do not really understand what Adventism is about.

So, you are concerned about biblical discipleship?

That's correct. It's not simply "Oh, yes, I'm emotional; I want to be baptized." No, this is about that which is important, teaching the person to understand the message and to be able to go and share the message with others.

Angel, do you have a pearl of wisdom for our readers? Something that you've learned, something that has become important to you over the past decades of ministry?

Well, perhaps two things. I have learned what we all know, that our safety in our pilgrimage is in Scripture. The moment we drift away from it, there's danger. In my moments of difficulties, in my job, trying to find solutions, I do go to the Scriptures. And together with that I use Ellen White. I don't apologize for this wonderful gift that the Lord has given to us.

The second one is how you deal with others. We need to learn how to treat each other. Learn from the Master, our Lord, and His kindness and His love, even to His enemies. And learn to write and speak in a way that provides the opportunity for reconciliation, for common understanding. Now, I know, of course, that when it comes to theological disagreements and radical ideas within the church, we have to take a position. And we should take a position. I'm not afraid of that. But I have always tried to do it in a kind way. There's no need to get into personal debates and insult each other and be rude. It seems to me that the Spirit of Christ would move us to kindness. ■

Passionate for the WORD

Artur Stele, Ph.D., a general vice president of the General Conference and current director of the Biblical Research Institute, reminisces about Angel Manuel Rodríguez' ministry and passion.

I have known Angel since the nineties, when I was appointed a BRICOM member from the Euro-Asia Division. It was rewarding to hear Angel present a paper, hold a seminar, teach a class, or speak to pastors, teachers, and church administrators. He was always kind, balanced, and committed that the church remains a "people of the Book!" The world church was blessed by his ministry,

visits, and written work. The good news is that he is not leaving BRI completely. He will continue to be a vital and vibrant part of the institute! The BRI will continue its work based on the strong foundation that was left by Angel Rodríguez and his predecessors.

For a longer version of this interview, visit www.adventistworld.org.