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2020

## **Discovering Adventist Identity in Times of Crisis**

Petr Činčala

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# DISCOVERING ADVENTIST IDENTITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

*By Petr Činčala*

A couple of years ago, my young adult married son became part of an interdenominational outreach initiative. Previously, my family spent over a decade in a secular mission field, working outside the church; as such, I did not have any reason not to support him, knowing he had been trained at home to work with “others.” About a year and half ago, he returned from that two-month mission trip to colleges across the USA—transformed, inspired and shocked, in a way, because he had met with other Christians (fellow missionaries) who actually *lived* what Adventists believe. Showing God’s love was their lifestyle.

My son told me, “It was just crazy to see how much they (members of the mission team) were able to love on people—in a practical sense, on a practical level. It was crazy how they loved the students selflessly. They went out of comfort zones to be with people. They prayed for them, they talked to them and spent so much time with them, showing how much they cared for the students. This was how the people we were reaching out to could see God’s love... It felt way more like the stuff we read about in the Bible (New Testament).”

When I was in the seminary as a student nearly 30 years ago, Professor Duda started his Practical Theology class by stating that knowing God is very

important; this relationship literally leads to eternal life (John 17:3). He taught us that the purpose of studying theology is to know and present God for who He truly is, not a distorted picture of Him. The purpose of Scripture is to reveal God, and thus knowing God according to the original text of the Bible implies both understanding of God, as well as an intimate relationship with Him.

Recently, I had a conversation with this same son about a particular Bible text that had struck him: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). He said, “Dad, I have read the 1 John letter many times and am quite familiar with it, but this is the first time that I realized what the text is saying: if you do not love, you do not know God!” Yes, the Bible presents story after story exemplifying God’s love; God did not just talk about love, He “showed His love for us by sending His only Son into the world” (1 John 4:9).

When the apostle John reached his retirement age, he decided to write a letter to the believers and followers of Jesus, summarizing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, it was also John who liked to identify himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7–20). Did Jesus not love all disciples? Of course He did. The same author writes

this about Jesus: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). And yet, for some reason, John wanted to let everybody know, “I am the loved one.” From his writings and the historical background, we also know that John was a very loving person, too.

A brief statistical summary of 1 John reveals that the three most frequently used words are: “is” (103 times), “God” (64 times), and “love” (46 times). The idea that GOD IS LOVE permeates the whole epistle. Perhaps, in your Bible translation, the frequencies are different but, even if you used the Greek original text of the Bible and searched for the Greek term for love, you would discover even more surprising numbers.

In the 51 chapters of the five New Testament books written by John, he uses the word “love” in different forms 123 times (54 times in the Gospel of John, 51 times in 1 John, 4 times in 2 John, 6 times in 3 John, and 8 times in the book of Revelation). Perhaps this is because he—“the disciple whom Jesus loved”—was still overwhelmed by what had he experienced while with Jesus, specifically how Jesus said at the Last Supper, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The Bible makes it clear that, as followers of Jesus, we should stand out because of our love. That should be our identifier. Is this how we are known as Seventh-day Adventists? How do we want to be perceived in a time of crisis? Or better yet, how are we actually perceived? How do people identify us? How should they, if we are living in accordance with the commands of Jesus?

On one hand, Adventists have considerably comprehensive theology explaining God’s love, not only on an academic level (as John C. Peckham demonstrated in his books *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* or *Theodicy of Love*, solicited by various Christian theologians), but also on a practical pastoral level. When we examine the three angels’ message carefully, we see that it is Good News—a call to embrace a loving God and abide in His love. Judgment viewed in the light of Jesus’s ministry in the sanctuary is more Good News for those who accept His ultimate sacrifice.

Reminding us of the importance and validity of the ten commandments is basically reminding us of the importance of LOVE, as we remember how Jesus summarized the ten commandments (Mark 12:28–31). Sabbath, one of the two gifts from the garden of Eden, showed God’s longing for an intimate and loving relationship with humans from the very beginning when Adam and Eve were brought into existence. Understanding the state of the dead is yet another declassification of God’s love, as many Christians suffer anxiety and depression from their fear of burning forever in hell. And we could continue on and on. Every Adventist belief deepens an understanding of God’s love!

On the other hand, many Adventists have yet to discover how to show love. The evidence is not just anecdotal nor coming from randomly-shared experiences of young people being pushed out of churches,

not accepted, not loved, rejected. Natural Church Development (NCD) data comparing the average health results scores of 1,000 Seventh-day Adventist churches in North America (data collected between the years 2008 and 2018) shows that the lowest scores of eight church qualities are holistic small groups followed by loving relationships, both below the national average score based on thousands of Christian congregations.

Overall, the statements that received the lowest average score are:

- I can rely upon my friends at church.
- In our church it is possible to talk with other people about personal problems.
- In my small group, we trust each other.

Holistic small groups and loving relationships are the two vehicles most closely linked to being disciples of Jesus and to demonstrating that we actually know God (not just know *about* God). I dream that, particularly in times of crisis and all kinds of suffering, we’d be known not only as people who study the Bible and have a deep understanding of the truth, but also as people who are disciples of Jesus and “know God!” Wouldn’t such an identity add weight and power to all that we actually believe?

As the director of the Institute of Church Ministry, I have been involved for several decades in researching young people—specifically studying factors that cause them to leave or stay in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It has been repeatedly confirmed that teenagers who live with both parents, attend Adventist schools, whose parents attend church regularly, who participate in family worship, etc., are more likely to stay in the church.

This research has also—perhaps unintentionally—revealed and confirmed the fact that our typical churches do a good job accepting well-behaved teenagers who come from well-established, solid Adventist families. However, those who have grown up in troubled families, who really need a loving and caring environment to be spiritually healed, may need to look for a church outside our denomination.

How, again, do we present an undistorted picture of God? How can we prove we know God well? How do people recognize that we are disciples of Jesus? How does our identity as Adventists determine how we want to be known in times of trouble and great need?



**PETR Činčala**, PhD, is director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University, director of the Doctor of Missiology Program, and the managing editor of the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.