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Responding to: What Do Seventh-day Adventists Believe? Sharing Jesus

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RESPONDING TO:

WHAT DO SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS BELIEVE?

SHARING JESUS

I have often been asked what it is that Seventh-day Adventists believe. Experience has taught me that the shorter my response the better. Here is an explanation of Adventism deriving from the Gospel of Mark that I have found to be particularly effective when responding to enquiries about our faith. It is memorable, teachable, and easy to share. This is Adventism explained in under two minutes.

First, I share that Seventh-day Adventists are followers of Jesus Christ who seek to make known His full identity to the world. This identity includes five key claims Jesus made about Himself in the “Son of Man” sayings in the Gospel of Mark. These may be summarized as follows:

1. Jesus forgives sins (Mark 2:10).
2. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28).
3. Jesus died and rose again (Mark 8:31).¹
4. Jesus will return in glory (Mark 8:38).²
5. Jesus came to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45).

I affirm that we share with all other Christians the claims that Jesus forgives sins (first saying), that He died and rose again (third saying), and that He came to serve (fifth saying). After the horrors of two world wars and decades of global turbulence, more and more Christians

have come to the conclusion that it is beyond the capacity of the Christian church to establish heaven on earth. It will take the return of Jesus to fundamentally change the world (fourth saying).

This leaves the second saying concerning the Son of Man as Lord of the Sabbath. Unfortunately, I say, this key claim of Jesus is still neglected by many Christians today. Our goal as Adventists is to encourage the acceptance of all of Jesus' claims about Himself.

A few points deserve making on how practically to share this explanation. I am lucky enough to have a complete set of digits on my right hand. As such, I use my thumb and four fingers to count off the five sayings. This serves both as an aide memoir and signals to the person with whom I am speaking that my explanation will not drag on forever.

REMEMBERING THE BIBLICAL REFERENCES

I focus on five key texts in Mark. Other Markan "Son of Man" sayings repeat or expand these texts. The key texts are in Mark 2, 8, and 10 (2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 10:45). These chapters may be remembered easily through the simple sum of $2 + 8 = 10$.

INTRODUCE NARRATIVE DETAIL WHEN NECESSARY

I sometimes expand my explanation to include the narrative contexts of the sayings. I might, for example, refer to the story of the paralytic lowered through the roof by his four helpers as the context for the saying on forgiveness (Mark 2:1–12), or the controversy between the Pharisees and Jesus over the plucking of grain by the disciples on the Sabbath as the setting for the Sabbath saying (2:23–28). Sharing narrative details can help enliven the appeal.

LIFE-CHANGING APPLICATIONS

I might, depending upon the particular context, emphasize a specific application associated with each of the sayings. For example, the saying on forgiveness offers the opportunity to stress divine release from

guilt. The Sabbath saying opens the door to talking about God as Creator and Re-Creator and the need for spiritual and physical rest. The saying on the death and resurrection of Jesus provides hope for those facing death, loss, or persecution. The return of the Son of Man offers hope that better times are ahead and that justice will be established. The service saying permits the contrasting of the emptiness of self-centered materialism and consumerism with the joys and trials of service.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of applications. Many more may be found. The result of sharing such applications is that my initial two-minute explanation often evolves into an extended conversation.

A GOOD EXPLANATION OF ADVENTISM?

There are a number of disadvantages to this way of sharing Adventism. It ignores the historical context of Seventh-day Adventist origins. It also takes the five sayings out of their narrative contexts. A further disadvantage is that much of Mark's nuanced characterization of Jesus is ignored. It says nothing about Jesus' identity as Messiah, Shepherd, Son of God, or Suffering Servant. Exegetical difficulties associated with the Son of Man title likewise remain unacknowledged.

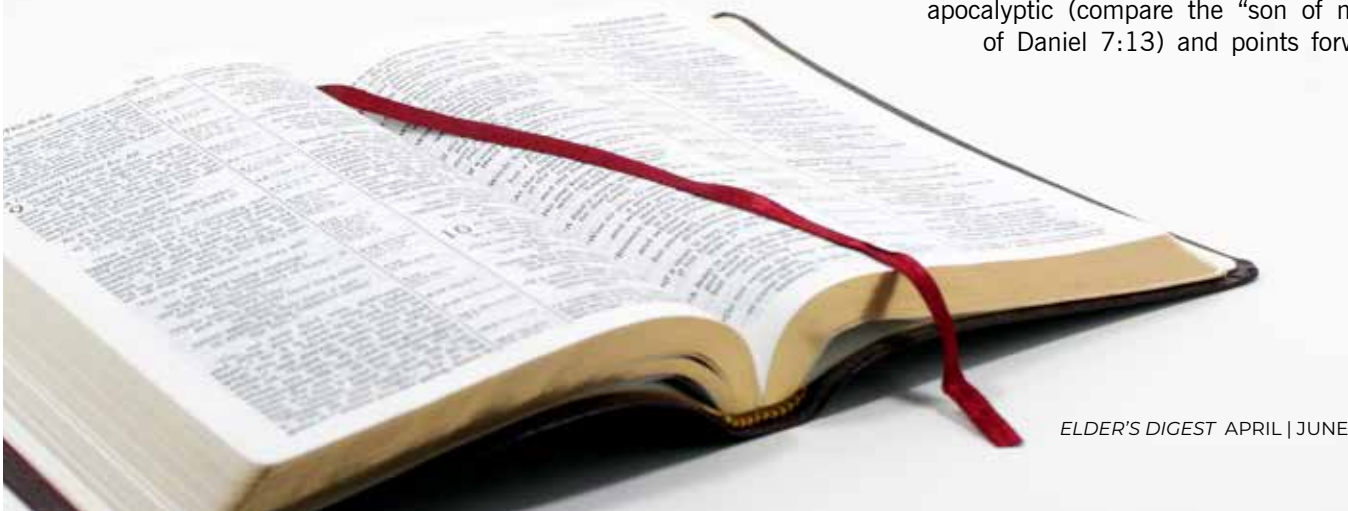
Despite these disadvantages, a number of advantages suggest themselves to sharing Adventism in this way.

THE ADVANTAGES OF THIS METHOD

1. A Jesus-Focused Definition of Adventism

First and foremost, this explanation frames Seventh-day Adventism in relation to Jesus Christ. Many Christians find the apocalyptic portions of the Bible very difficult to understand and so view with suspicion those who emphasize beasts and timelines rather than the words and deeds of Jesus. An explanation based on Jesus' own claims from one of the Gospels offsets this suspicion.

Using the Markan "Son of Man" sayings does not result in the loss of our distinctive apocalyptic identity. Jesus' identity as Son of Man is deeply apocalyptic (compare the "son of man" of Daniel 7:13) and points forward



to the future restoration of divine sovereignty over the whole world. Focusing on Jesus as Son of Man affirms rather than denies our apocalyptic identity.

2. A Call to Accept Jesus in All His Fullness

A second advantage is that this explanation confirms those beliefs that we hold in common with other Christian believers while at the same time urging them to accept the full identity of Jesus, including both His lordship of the Sabbath and, where still unaccepted, His return in the clouds of glory (Mark 8:38).

This explanation does not rely on proof-texting. Instead, it derives from a systematic and sensitive reading of Mark's characterization of Jesus.³ Similar readings could be made of the other Gospels.⁴ These sayings were clearly central to how the first Christians remembered Jesus and provide a model for how He should be remembered by later generations of believers. In sharing these five claims we affirm our mission to restore early Christian teachings that have been neglected.

3. Sidestep the Law Versus Grace Debate

Lastly, sharing Adventism in this manner counteracts the accusation sometimes made that Adventists overemphasize law and neglect grace. The affirmation that the Son of Man forgives sins neutralizes this critique (Mark 2:10). My sins are forgiven *and* I keep the Sabbath—no contradiction!

4. The Start of Something Deeper

In providing any summary of Adventism we face a tension between providing too much or too little detail: Include too much and the explanation becomes overly technical and difficult to remember. Too little and the definition fails to say anything of any great import.

Rarely is someone persuaded by such a short explanation. That is not its purpose. Nevertheless, it provides a focused and Jesus-centered explanation of Adventism that often leads to deeper and more searching con-

versations. Why not preach a sermon (or even five sermons!) on these great claims Jesus made about Himself and train your fellow members to share them with others? ED

¹ See also Mark 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33; 14:21, 41.

² cf. Mark 13:26; 14:62.

³ See, for example, M.D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark: A Study of the Background of the Term "Son of Man" and its use in St Mark's Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1967).

⁴ For accessible overviews of the Son of Man in the Gospels, see I.H. Marshall, 'Son of Man' in J.B. Green and S. McKnight (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 775-781 and G.W.E. Nickelsburg, 'Son of Man' in J.J. Collins and D.C. Harlow (eds), *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1249-1251.

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