



## **PRAISE FOR *THE GREEN CORD DREAM***

Alex Bryan captures the essence of Adventism in broad strokes that draw us all to Jesus. He raises the questions that people ask only in the privacy of their homes, and he seeks the answers in our Lord. Join Alex on his journey as he finds hope for the present and life for the future of our movement.

**Japhet De Oliveira**  
Director, Center for Youth Evangelism  
Andrews University

Alex embraces his church with a vibrant and affectionate passion. He clearly sees Jesus as the soul and lifeblood of Adventism, and his desire for this denomination to find a path to a vital, relevant, and thriving future is clear. This book is as refreshing as it is inspirational.

**Tami Cinquemani**  
Worship Director  
Florida Hospital Church

Pastor Bryan brings a fresh view of the centrality of Jesus in Adventist roots that challenges twenty-first-century readers to see whether Jesus is truly ALL in their lives. His personal stories are engaging, and his dialogue relevant. A refreshing read, this book directs our focus back on the One of our church.

**Brandy Kirstein**  
Collegedale, Tennessee

Alex Bryan gets it. This Jesus-drenched piece is a breath of fresh air. Alex has distilled what it means to be a historic, primal, and elemental Adventist. He has taken the chaff off the wheat and has given us the life-giving Bread: Jesus. All. Alex has mined history, culture, and the themes of Adventism, and he rightly finds Jesus in the midst of all of these. Read this book to reorient, reapply, and restructure your relationship with Jesus as seen through the Adventist experience.

**Timothy Gillespie**  
**Young Adult Pastor**  
**Loma Linda University Church**

THE GREEN CORD  
DREAM





# THE GREEN CORD DREAM

Pursuing Ellen White's Vision of Jesus and His Church

ALEX BRYAN



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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to my wife, Nicole,  
who models the compassionate love of Jesus  
in our home, our church, and our community.



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## CHAPTER 1

# THE GREEN CORD DREAM

**T**HE STREAM OF ADVENTISM is fed by the teardrops of the Great Disappointment.

We can't understand the currents of this faith movement, the flow of its theology, the rapids of its hopes and hang-ups, what floats it and at times drowns it, its eschatological energy, the life of its lifestyle, nor the refreshing river of its anthropological vision without an empathetic grasp of the October 22, 1844, punch in the gut.

It didn't happen on that day. He didn't appear. The clock struck midnight, and the Adventists were wrong. Tragically wrong. A whopper of a theological mistake. We argued from the Bible that the second coming of Jesus would happen on *this* date. We quit our jobs, left our homes, walked out of our churches. We sold our stuff. We looked to the sky. But there was no trumpet. There were no angels. There was no cloud.

The Advent movement was born in failure rather than

success, error rather than truth, darkness rather than light, and sorrow rather than joy.

Jesus didn't return.

*The Great Disappointment.*

Here is a truth: disappointments clarify, purging the streams of our lives of substances that might have clouded them. The disappointments of our lives bring sharper vision. They enable us to see who we are and what we are about. They make the hearts of men and women transparent.

In the fall of 1996, the Atlanta Braves, whom I adore, led the New York Yankees, whom I abhor, two games to one in the baseball World Series. At one point in game four, they held a six-run lead, and in the eighth inning they were still three runs ahead when Mark Wohlers, one of the Braves' better pitchers, threw a hanging slider—a very bad pitch. Jim Leyritz, the Yankee catcher, connected with that pitch, hitting a game-tying three-run homer over the left field wall. The Yankees won that game in extra innings, and they went on to win the World Series.

I'll bet you couldn't care less about the Braves' loss. It was fifteen years ago, and you might not even have lost two seconds of sleep that very night. Well, *I* did. I was so disappointed that I tossed, turned, and fidgeted, replaying that home run over and over again in my mind. And for days afterward, I talked with friends about the game: "Did you see what happened? Can you believe it?"

And now, a decade and a half later, I'm writing about it. In detail!

What does this reveal about me? That I've got some serious sports addiction issues? Whether healthy or not, this disappointment is clarifying. It says Alex Bryan loves baseball and the Atlanta Braves baseball team. It reveals me.

When she breaks up with you and you cry and you listen to sad songs on the radio and you write sappy poetry and you mope and you can't seem to cope, your disappointment reveals that you care deeply for *her*.

When you break up with her and ten minutes later she is shopping and fielding calls from other guys, happy and free, her lack of disappointment reveals what—or who—she doesn't care about. (Hint: *you*.)

When a son looks for his father in the stands, a father who fails to show up for his son's basketball game, the look of disappointment speaks.

When a daughter looks for her mother in the audience, a mother who fails to show up for her daughter's violin concert, the look of disappointment speaks.

These looks say, "I care about my girlfriend's/boyfriend's/parents' approval, love, affection, participation, presence in my life. I'm disappointed when they're absent because *I care about them and what they think about me.*"

One day I'll find the emotional courage to tell the full story of Nicole's and my years-long struggle with infertility. We couldn't have children. We spent big money on cutting-edge medical experimentation, but our baby dreams rested on techniques that just wouldn't work. I'll never forget

hearing a good scientist with a horrible bedside manner tell my wife and me in a surgical recovery room, “I’m sorry. There’s nothing there, and there never will be. You won’t have children. You need to move on.” The look on my wife’s face: crushing disappointment. And I’m sure the look on my face revealed that my heart was shredded too.

We were humans who desperately wanted to become parents. It was our sorrow that pulled back the curtain that covered the deepest places of the soul. Pain made our desire clear.\*

## The Great Disappointment

When things don’t disappoint us, we know that we don’t care about them. When things disappoint us a little bit, we know that we care a little bit. But when we feel *great disappointment*, we know whatever caused it matters an awful lot.

Adventism was distilled by the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844. How Adventists reacted to what didn’t happen on that day clarifies the content of this Christian faith stream. Here’s what some Adventists who experienced October 22 said about what it meant to them.

*Henry Emmons:* “I waited all Tuesday and *dear Jesus* did not come. I waited all forenoon of Wednes-

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\* Miracle of miracles, and miracle of miracles again, we now have two children, born without the aid of modern fertility science.

day, and was well in body as I ever was, but after 12 o'clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me fast, and I lay prostrate for two days without any pain—sick with disappointment.”<sup>1</sup>

*Washington Morse:* “That day came and passed, and the darkness of another night closed in upon the world. But with that darkness came a pang of disappointment to the Advent believers that can find a parallel only in the sorrow of the disciples after the crucifixion of *their Lord*. The passing of time was a bitter disappointment. True believers had given up *all for Christ*, and had shared His presence as never before. *The love of Jesus filled every soul; and with inexpressible desire they prayed, ‘Come, Lord Jesus, and come quickly;’ but He did not come.*”<sup>2</sup>

*Hiram Edson:* “Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before. It seemed that *the loss of all earthly friends* could have been no comparison. We wept, and wept, till the day dawn.”<sup>3</sup>

*Seventeen-year-old Ellen White:* “Those who *sincerely love Jesus* can appreciate the feelings of those

who watched with the most *intense longing* for the coming of their Saviour.”<sup>4</sup>

All religious movements have a beginning. They have a foundational, formational, inaugural, initial reason for existence.

- Judaism was born as an organized religion when Moses heard God’s voice atop Mount Sinai.
- Islam sprang from the belief that Allah revealed insights to the Prophet Muhammad, who lived about fourteen hundred years ago. The Koran contains these revelations.
- Christianity was conceived in response to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. A group of men and women believed what He said about Himself and about them. They believed He rose from the dead, so they believed *Him*.

For two thousand years, all sorts of Christian sects, movements, denominations, organizations, and reorganizations have come to be.

- Because of theological and political differences, Christianity split into Eastern and Western churches in the A.D. 1054 Great Schism.
- The Church of England was founded in 1534, when,

due to a personal and political rift, King Henry VIII declared himself head of the church in place of the pope.

- The desire to reform the Roman Catholic Church eventually gave birth to Lutheranism and other Protestant traditions.
- Methodism was launched because of the piety of Charles and John Wesley.
- Convictions about liturgy (Was baptism for children or adults? Was *this* music or *that* music acceptable? Should the worship experience favor emotionalism or an emotion-free experience?) were behind the founding of some movements.
- Some groups were born out of a disagreement over a social issue such as the role of women or homosexuals in the church.
- Some began in opposition to, or support of, some doctrinal issue.
- Some began opposing or supporting violence or war.
- Some began because of the teaching of some particular theologian.
- Some were born out of deep-seated conflict, while others seemed to rise merely from the desire to do religion differently.
- Many began because a man or woman claimed to have had special or secret encounters with an angel or with God Himself.

Adventism wasn't born as a reform movement, though it soon adopted various reforms. Adventism wasn't born as a temperance movement, though it found something to say about healthful living. Adventism wasn't born as a theological movement, as a correction of already existing denominations, nor in response to some liturgical or lifestyle concern. And despite its prophet, Adventism didn't come into being because of unique, private prophetic revelations. Adventism was born because of a *wrong* calculation about the Second Coming . . . fueled by an intense, emotional, highly personal, fervent, and *ultimately right* desire to be with Jesus.

Adventism—*primal Adventism*—was about men and women who longed to be with Jesus.

### **The Desire of the Ages**

The stream of Adventism is fed by the teardrops of the Great Disappointment. The cries of pain at its birth reveal intense affection and love for Jesus and an unsurpassed longing to be with Him. This is Adventism distilled. This is Adventism made most clear.

*What makes Adventists unique?* How would you answer this question?

I'd answer it by pointing to our unique beginning. Adventism isn't peculiar or special because of our Sabbath keeping, vegetarian cuisine, or remnant claims. Adventism's uniqueness is found at its historical root: Jesus.

Whatever else has been thrown into these Adventist wa-

ters over the past 170 years (much of it good, though perhaps some of it not so good), the river of this religion is all about loving Christ.

Adventism's nearly two-century-old hang-up is . . . Jesus.

I slid the back door open to let the dog out. Helium balloon in hand, Audrey, our four-year-old theologian, asked, "Daddy, if I let this go, would it go all the way up to Jesus?"

I paused to reflect on what answer I should give. (You have to be careful about these things.) "Yes," I said. "It would go all the way up to Jesus."

She pondered that lofty reality for a quiet moment or two. "Well, Daddy, when would He get it back to me?"

I had to think about that a little longer. "Soon," I said. "Soon."

Adventism *at its best* takes the balloons of life and somehow hears what they say about Jesus—the balloons of work and play, joy and sorrow, holiness, theology, doctrine, priorities, relationships, and even church. When we find Jesus in the middle of our lives, we are on the right track. When we worship and love Him, and when His love moves us to serve and love others, Adventism shines.

Jesus today. Jesus now.

Adventism *at its best* also looks up. It searches the skies with the very same hope that the Adventists of October 22, 1844, had. To be with Jesus. To enter His embrace and find a world without suffering and pain; sans tears and disappointment.

Adventism—again, *at its best*—has eyes that look up . . . not with fear-mongering predictions about the end of the world, not with wild speculations about when it will happen and how. Instead, with eyes that are filled with hope, humility, and love.

Jesus, later today—and if not today, then tomorrow.

## The One

Is Jesus worth the tears and the desire? This enduring and endearing passion?

John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (KJV).

“Only begotten”? The Word is actually *monogenēs*. *Mono*: unique, one, one of a kind. Monochrome: one color. Monotone: one pitch. Monopoly: one who has it all.

The One.

The look. The sound. The One who has it all.

*Genēs*: genetics, human genes, *Homo sapiens*, DNA.

A One-of-a-kind human being.

There have been, and there are, lots of human beings—billions and billions over many generations. But God did something special in this one case. God poured God—all of God—into a human zygote. A human egg from one of Mary’s ovaries, fertilized by the Spirit. And nine months later He was born: the Superhuman.

The beginning of Adventist anthropology—the search for who we are as human beings, our meaning, our purpose,

our existence, our gene pool—is in the *monogenēs*, Jesus Christ. Not just any Jesus. Not just a word we use to fill in whatever secular scheme or religious regime we concoct. Jesus, the historical. Jesus, the real. The one-and-only Jesus. The Jesus of the Gospels. The One who holds certain values. Particular priorities. A very definite view of God, humanity, and the earth.

Jesus isn't a big deal. Jesus is *The Deal*.

First John 5:12 makes this bold claim: “He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life” (KJV). So we can say, The denomination that hath the Son hath life; and the denomination that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

Adventism was born nearly two centuries ago in “the global West.” But now in America, Europe, and Australia, Adventism finds itself (along with many other branches of Christianity) facing great challenges.

But the future of Adventism doesn't rest in master plans and master prayers. The future of Adventism doesn't find its hope in church structure, finances, new ways of articulating truth, creative approaches to theology, new or old worship, old-fashioned or new-fashioned ideas, or a longing for tomorrow or for yesterday. The future of Adventism is neither top down nor bottom up.

So what *is the future*? Here's my proposal: If Adventism is to have a bright, energetic, vibrant future . . . If Adventism is going to get a life and have a life . . . it must—we must—have the Son.

In 1842, during this era of Advent hope, fifteen-year-old Ellen White had a mystical experience. Her memoir points us to the heart of this movement. We end this chapter with Ellen White's *Green Cord Dream*.

Soon after this I had another dream. I seemed to be sitting in abject despair, with my face in my hands, reflecting like this: If Jesus were upon earth, I would go to Him, throw myself at His feet, and tell Him all my sufferings. He would not turn away from me; He would have mercy upon me, and I would love and serve Him always.

Just then the door opened, and a person of beautiful form and countenance entered. He looked upon me pitifully, and said: "Do you wish to see Jesus? He is here, and you can see Him if you desire it. Take everything you possess, and follow me."

I heard this with unspeakable joy, and gladly gathered up all my little possessions, every treasured trinket, and followed my guide. He led me to a steep and apparently frail stairway. As I began to ascend the steps, he cautioned me to keep my eyes fixed upward, lest I should grow dizzy and fall. Many others who were climbing the steep ascent fell before gaining the top.

Finally we reached the last step, and stood before a door. Here my guide directed me to leave all the things that I had brought with me. I cheerfully laid

them down. He then opened the door, and bade me enter. In a moment I stood before Jesus. There was no mistaking that beautiful countenance; that expression of benevolence and majesty could belong to no other. As His gaze rested upon me, I knew at once that He was acquainted with every circumstance of my life and all my inner thoughts and feelings.

I tried to shield myself from His gaze, feeling unable to endure His searching eyes; but He drew near with a smile, and laying His hand upon my head, said, "Fear not." The sound of His sweet voice thrilled my heart with a happiness it had never before experienced. I was too joyful to utter a word, but, overcome with emotion, sank prostrate at His feet. While I was lying helpless there, scenes of beauty and glory passed before me, and I seemed to have reached the safety and peace of heaven. At length my strength returned, and I arose. The loving eyes of Jesus were still upon me, and His smile filled my soul with gladness. His presence awoke in me a holy reverence and an inexpressible love.

My guide now opened the door, and we both passed out. He bade me take up again all the things I had left without. This done, he handed me a green cord coiled up closely. This he directed me to place next my heart, and when I wished to see Jesus, take it from my bosom, and stretch it to the utmost. He

cautioned me not to let it remain coiled for any length of time, lest it should become knotted and difficult to straighten. I placed the cord near my heart, and joyfully descended the narrow stairs, praising the Lord, and telling all whom I met where they could find Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

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1. George Knight, *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), 53; emphasis added.

2. George Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists*, 2nd ed. (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald®, 2004), 25; emphasis added.

3. Ibid.; emphasis added.

4. Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen White* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1915), 56; emphasis added.

5. Ibid., 34–36.