

Chapter 1

Big Picture/ Little Picture

The man in a dark gray pin-stripe suit paced excitedly on the platform of the Centerville Church. A great discovery welled up inside him and made his voice as bright as the colors in the stained glass window above the baptistery. Pastor Johnson told the dear people of Centerville that his eyes had recently been opened to the wonder of the Great Controversy, the Eden-to-Eden perspective that Adventists have been blessed with. He gestured enthusiastically as he explained why this big picture illuminates the whole of the Bible and sheds such a glorious light on the depths of God's character.

"It's a spectacle spread out before our eyes," Pastor Johnson exclaimed. "It's the drama of the ages, the great battle between good and evil. The plot is more compelling than that of any screenplay, the climax more electrifying than that of any blockbuster on the wide screen."

Hearing this, Jack Piercey shook himself more awake in his pew and rubbed his heavy eyebrows. Something wasn't quite right here. Where was this message going? Could this visiting preacher (from California no less!) have a hidden agenda?

As Johnson continued to wax eloquent on the climax of history that would someday project across the sky from horizon to horizon like a giant cinema, Jack's suspicions were confirmed. This man was trying to get Adventists used to the idea of going to the movies. Oh, it was very subtle. But his intentions were clear. He was on the side of that new youth leader.

Just last week the kids from youth Sabbath School had gotten together Thursday night and gone to some silly movie about a pig (an unclean animal no less!) and the youth leader had accompanied them. It wasn't exactly an official church function. But he was there, lending his stamp of approval. What was the church coming to?

Jack decided to take notes the rest of the sermon. He listened carefully and began jotting down every reference Johnson made to something cinematic. After all, he wasn't a man to make wild accusations. He wanted to be able to present facts, hard numbers.

Up on the platform the guest speaker began talking about how all the conflicts in the world would be resolved in a great, final battle

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

between Christ and Satan. “On the one hand,” he preached, “are arrayed the forces of coercion and manipulation, the power of the sword lifted up in the name of religion. On the other hand stands just one thing: love - the wooing, winsome, persistent love of God. The allied armies of Satan, which appear to be an irresistible force, are going to collide dramatically against the immovable object of divine love and grace.”

Trisha Dearwood found herself fidgeting in the pew. She was trying to listen to the sermon, but she couldn't get the church school principal's puffy red face out of her mind. She could still see him lecturing her about Jimmy's “dangerous pattern of inappropriate behavior.” Her boy had placed a frog in his teacher's top desk drawer. The teacher wasn't at all amused when she reached in for a ruler and grabbed this slimy amphibian instead, even less amused when it leapt onto her and almost squirmed down the front of her dress.

Trisha and Jimmy had been brought before the school board - not just because of the frog incident, they were told, but because of the “dangerous pattern.” The previous month he'd shouted out a curse word when fouled during a soccer game. And furthermore, he'd worn a cap to school on six separate occasions - all of which were no-cap days. They had the dates written down.

Trisha knew that Jimmy, like most kids, could be a cut-up. She would have gladly agreed to some form of discipline. But this solemn row of school officials laid out Jimmy's missteps as if they were war crimes. They seemed like prosecutors intent on getting a conviction. And something broke inside Trisha. It was just too much. Why were they always picking at the kids? Why this obsession with “dangerous patterns”? They treated every little problem as if it were some cosmic battle against evil.

Sitting there in church, Trisha had to dab at the corner of her eye. She wished it were because she'd been moved by the sermon. But it was just this frustration, this anger. Why did people have to make Christianity so, so petty? Would her son be able to fit into it when he got older? Would he even want to?

Pastor Johnson was now doing his best to describe the wonder of Christ's Second Coming. “Imagine a sound,” he said, “a sound that shakes the whole earth. It's the voice of God announcing a new era. That voice is described in many ways in Scripture. It's the sound of many waters; it's the sound of thunder rumbling across the sky, it's the sound of a multitude. And at this moment it's most like a trumpet blast

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

that pierces every heart. It pierces some hearts with awe; it pierces some with terror.”

Mrs. Gilder looked over at her husband and frowned. She wasn’t sure she liked this take on the Second Coming at all. Why all the noise? Church seemed to be getting noisier all the time. The nice, mellow organ had been replaced by an electronic keyboard. Drums and electric guitars made an occasional appearance. It sounded to her like a nightclub. This wasn’t how you were supposed to worship. Everything was just too loud. Whatever happened to that “still, small voice”?

Mr. Gilder didn’t notice his wife’s look. He was lost in calculations. He was thinking about the visions in Revelation of the seven seals and seven trumpets and seven vials. He’d been arguing with the Bible instructor for months about the details of how they fit together. And now he had a clincher. The seven vials were not contained in the seventh trumpet or in the seventh seal. He could prove it. He was going to blow that so-called Bible instructor away with a few choice texts.

Pastor Johnson had now managed to get believers up in the air at the Second Coming. They were rising to meet the glorious Christ. He began talking about the wonderful immortal bodies each of us would have. “These are heavenly bodies,” he said. “So much more glorious than our present ones. It’s like comparing dirt clods to shining stars.”

Gladys Pinnight nodded her head gravely at this announcement. Yes, indeed, she was going to have a glorious, perfectly pure body—she was making herself ready for that event day by day. But then her brow wrinkled. She remembered going to Lucky’s the day before and picking up a few items before sundown. She’d grabbed a box of Wheat Bits; they seemed perfectly healthy. But now she recalled someone telling her they made those things with lard. And her family had consumed several after supper! Gladys felt defiled. And this made her think of last weekend. At a potluck she just couldn’t resist spreading mayonnaise and catsup generously on her veggie hot dog. And this guilty pleasure brought to mind an incident the week before that when she’d indulged in a bowl of ice cream late at night.

Gladys slumped in her pew. Pastor Johnson was describing the wonder of our face-to-face reunion with Christ and an eternity of limitless possibilities in a perfect universe. But Gladys couldn’t enjoy the prospects. Her body was just never going to be ready for the Second Coming. She tried and tried, but still couldn’t keep herself pure; she couldn’t keep all the bad stuff out.

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

Pastor Johnson was reaching the conclusion to his sermon. With eyes brimming with tears, he spread his arms out and proclaimed, “The watching universe will celebrate with us as the Great Controversy is resolved forever, as every question is answered, as every tear is wiped away, and as everything in the cosmos declares with one harmonious voice that God is love.”

As he sat down, Pastor Johnson hoped that he’d been able to take this congregation on the ultimate journey to heaven with him. He prayed that their hearts and minds had been lifted toward that glorious destiny.

Unfortunately, many in Centerville just couldn’t make the trip. They’d been left behind in their own small worlds.

Jack was adding up the cinematic references Johnson had made - quite a figure. Trisha managed to murmur “Amen,” but the principal’s puffy red face still loomed larger in her mind than the face of Christ. Mrs. Gilder cringed as the keyboard fired up for the closing song. Mr. Gilder quickly thumbed through Revelation for one final proof text with which to finish off the Bible instructor. And Gladys grimly resolved to try harder this coming week.

How We Get Small

Some years ago a British pastor, J.B. Phillips, wrote a book called *Your God is Too Small*. It became a bestseller. He pointed out that Christians often unconsciously reduce God to a manageable size. They shrink the Sovereign Lord into someone they can be comfortable with, someone they can manipulate.

I believe that Adventists are facing a slightly different problem. We have a big picture of God. We’ve been blessed with a wonderful drama-of-the-ages perspective. But our religion, too often, becomes quite small. The practice of our religion is what shrinks. What we do week in and week out doesn’t often live up to the big picture.

The scene I’ve recreated of Pastor Johnson in Centerville reflects something important that’s been happening in the Adventist Church. There’s a striking contrast between the big picture up there in theory, and the little picture here in our lives.

For example, we have a big picture of the Sabbath and how it reflects great truths about God, about his work as Creator and Redeemer, about his care for our physical and spiritual well-being. We’ve also come to see it as a wonderful symbol of our rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

But in everyday practice, too often the Sabbath becomes rather small. We're fighting with our kids about whether rollerblading is appropriate or not. We get caught up in debates with fellow church members about how far we can go into the water before it becomes actual swimming. Can we dip our feet in? Can we wade?

We have a wonderful, glorious hope of Christ's second coming and of the dead rising to meet the Lord in the air. This is good news indeed to share with those who are grieving over the loss of loved ones. But sometimes that good news gets bogged down in the details. We end up arguing with someone over the timing. No, their dear spouse's soul has not gone to heaven; he or she is fast asleep in the grave. We tell people that their views on the state of the dead are, in fact, the essence of spiritualism. And that's one of Satan's greatest deceptions.

Details about last day events have significance. They are relevant. But those details sometimes cloud the big picture. We can't rejoice with another believer in the basic hope of heaven. We fasten on the fact that they haven't got the timing right. We can't affirm their ultimate hope in Jesus Christ. We have to analyze just what the breath of life means and argue the fine points of innate immortality. That makes us seem rather petty.

It's not that we're wrong. It's just that our religion seems very small.

We have been blessed with a wonderful health message and been given great insights into how to care for ourselves as whole human beings. But that big picture of health gets lost in the details. People tend to push specifics to extremes. They get lost in the minutia-tracking down traces of fat in oatmeal ingredients, analyzing what ice water might do to digestion, worrying about how many times to chew a forkful of food, fretting over when salt might be permitted on the table, etc., etc., *etc.* Small, small, small.

Too often our religion seems to shrink us. The big picture from the Bible remains an abstraction in the distance; it doesn't enlarge our lives. And sometimes the little picture isn't just something we get trapped in individually, sitting in the pew. Sometimes the little picture is preached from the pulpit. Pastors and church officials are human too; sometimes they allow personal quirks to narrow their picture of truth. Sometimes their emotional limitations distort their message. That tends to throw a pall over the whole congregation.

Human beings long for something big to belong to, something great that captures them, something they can devote their lives to. And

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

when their religion becomes too small, they look elsewhere to satisfy that basic need.

The Dedalus Complaint

Irish author James Joyce once wrote an autobiographical novel called *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.¹ The main character, Stephen Dedalus, experienced an intense Christian conversion. One day in church, he was so moved that he just poured his heart out to God. Walking home, he saw the whole world differently: the muddy streets seemed cheery; an invisible grace made his limbs feel light. The boy knew for the first time how beautiful and peaceful life can be with a soul pardoned and made holy by God.

Stephen's sense of grace persisted and led him to consider entering the ministry. But then something stopped him cold. It wasn't some doctrine he couldn't quite swallow. It wasn't some point of Scripture that he couldn't quite believe. It was the face of the clergyman giving him instruction. Suddenly it appeared as "a mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day." Stephen tried to shake off this impression, but he couldn't. He started to wonder - what would a future confined to the holy life really be like? It began to seem "grave and ordered and passionless."

At length Stephen realized that the call to the holy life simply "did not touch him to the quick." And he was amazed "at the frail hold which so many years of order and obedience had of him." The prospect of pursuing such an artificial perfection in "the pale service of the altar" seemed unbearable: "Not to fall was too hard, too hard."

So the young man left parochial school and headed for the university. There he found a calling that did touch him to the quick: the spirit expressing itself "in unfettered freedom" through art. He would become a writer and pursue beauty passionately. He vowed to become "a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of ever living life."

Who's Got the Good Life

What James Joyce describes in this book is a young man's moment of truth; the religion he wanted to devote his life to was exposed as just too small. He needed to aim his life at something bigger, something grander.

It wasn't just his carnal nature getting cold feet. He didn't just shrink from the moral demands of a Christian calling. Stephen was

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

caught up in an intense experience of grace at the time. He felt close to God. But he couldn't get beyond the dull faces of the pious, the sterile ritual of his religion.

Stephen was compelled by the truths of the church, by the great themes of Christianity. But he just couldn't reconcile being a complete human being with the type of holiness he saw in front of him. The goodness he saw didn't compel. That was the bottom line. It wasn't something worth dedicating your life to.

Many people in our world today share Stephen's aversion to religious goodness. His experience is typical of the path countless people have taken away from religion, a path that has become a congested freeway today. And many people in our church, many people who have gone through Busy Bee and Pathfinders and academy are on that road.

When we think of confronting the challenges of our secular age, we usually focus first on the challenge of helping people believe. Our contemporaries seem to have a hard time grasping stories of Christ's miraculous birth, of His ministry in a heavenly sanctuary, of His coming to earth in clouds of glory. We struggle to make these truths real in a world that does not regularly bump into them.

We conduct Bible studies. We do evangelism. We write books. We try to build an intellectually credible defense of the faith. We try to relate spiritual truths to down-to-earth human beings. This kind of apologetic is valuable. It is certainly true that the more secular we become the less responsive we are toward that great Truth in the sky.

But there's another problem, one that involves perhaps deeper instincts: the problem of who's got the good life. For most people, goodness is what first attracts the attention; experience speaks louder than doctrine. Most individuals are moved to believe because they are drawn into a way of life that includes certain beliefs. Very few turning points are based on abstractions. Not many of us (unfortunately) go around seeking truth. But all of us are after the good life, and our perception of what the good life is generally determines what beliefs we cling to.

Stephen Dedalus, and I assume James Joyce as well, had his doubts, but he wanted to believe. The mysteries of the faith attracted him precisely because they were glorious mysteries. But something else tripped him up: that pale service of the altar, the failure of religious goodness to compel.

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

And that is the challenge that the Adventist Church faces today. I believe this is its greatest challenge: a religion which has become too small for our contemporaries. They just can't fit into it. Our religious goodness calls rather feebly in our world. It awkwardly interrupts pleasures; it mumbles excuses at parties; it shuffles along out-of-step and slightly behind the times. Somehow we've acquired the idea that we must become a "peculiar people" set at odd angles to the world rather than an attractive light illuminating it.

It may come as a shock, but many of our acquaintances regard the Adventist lifestyle as a narrow - even trivial - pursuit. Compared to, say, efforts to achieve world peace and end world hunger, preoccupations with jewelry, foul language and whether women should preach in church or not don't seem very earthshaking.

There are some things about Stephen Dedalus's coming-of-age that I deeply identify with. I spent four high school years in Adventist academies, surrounded by order and duty, ambivalent about the pull of religion. The great moral issues of my world were boys' hair sneaking below the collar, girls' skirts edging above the knees, and anybody listening to Top-40 radio stations.

Still, even within those boundaries, I had no aversion to believing; God and his Word and his acts beckoned nobly to me. I did struggle with doubts, but it was a struggle I wanted to win.

Religious goodness was the tricky thing. It did not confront me as a challenge to take on, but as a fear in the back of my mind. I was afraid of what kind of person I might turn into if I became completely religious. The few who'd fallen altogether into that state projected a forbidding image: virtue wrapped around them tightly like packing wire, faces pinched into benevolence, bodies aligned on the straight and narrow like boxcars burdened with holy freight.

It wasn't just fanaticism that threatened us. It was simply a religious goodness that seemed drained of life, colorless. I'm sure our sinful natures were a big factor in all this aversion. But there was something more. We saw no signs of the good life, or the great life; nothing compelled us. Indifference and boredom were just too easy, they were too much of a fitting response to our religious environment.

Conventional religious goodness, like almost everything else in the world, is able to project only one basic image. It is positioned in people's minds with one label. As I tried to show in my previous book, "Burned Out on Being Good," conventional Adventist virtue is seen primarily as something which avoids evil. It is avoidance, the absence

YOUR RELIGION IS TOO SMALL

of. We seem to confront a world full of threats - anarchic rock lyrics blaring out everywhere, suggestive TV shows on every station, riotous parties in every neighborhood, decadent materialism all over the mall - and we have to turn away, again and again. The world is portrayed as morally toxic - tobacco smoke blown in your face. The easiest sermon to preach is one on why our society is going to hell. The quickest religious bestseller is one which red-letters a new hidden danger out there threatening the faith.

When avoidance is at the center of morality, when virtue is a matter of continually whittling life down to proper size, then it's all going to appear quite pale and stifling. It will always fail to inspire. If a people's primary focus is on remaining unspotted by the world, they will invariably narrow their way down to pettiness, preserving their peculiar slice of religious turf undefiled.

Most religious fanatics simply carry avoidance to its logical end. Evil seems all-encompassing. Their turning away from sin turns into a frantic flight. They have to build ever higher, ever stricter barriers against the encroachment of the world. Morally safe activities steadily decrease; the "true way" of holiness steadily narrows.

And so the watching world sees the pursuit of holiness derailed into pettiness - over and over. They wonder why it falls into awkward extremes so often? To many secular people, sanctity seems a bit dangerous. You just can't pursue it too zealously. They conclude that a little goodness goes a long way.

I believe there is something better, something far better we can show the world. And I believe our big picture of God gives us a wonderful starting point. But we need a bigger religion. We need to express our big picture of God in a bigger, more winsome way. We don't want our religious lives to simply shrink, to keep losing energy. Our calling is to fashion a kind of Adventism that will appeal to the best in people, a kind of lived-out faith that will touch the deepest part of their souls.

In the next chapter we'll begin to explore how we can fulfill that calling.