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PUBLISHERS



THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION publishes articles concerned with a variety of topics pertinent to Adventist education. Opinions expressed by our writers do not necessarily represent the views of the staff or the official position of the Department of Education of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION (ISSN 0021-8480) is published bimonthly, October through May, plus a single summer issue for June, July, August, and September by the Department of Education, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6000. TELEPHONE (301) 696-5078; FAX (301) 622-9627; E-mail: 74617.1231@compuserve.com. Subscription price, U.S. \$17.25. Add \$1.00 for postage outside the U.S. Single copy, U.S. \$3.75. Periodical postage paid at Silver Spring, Maryland, and additional mailing office. Please send all changes of address to P.O. Box 5, Keene, TX 76059, including both old and new address. Address all editorial and advertising correspondence to the Editor. Copyright 2001 General Conference of SDA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION, P.O. Box 5, Keene, TX 76059.

Editorial

Picture
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BY JOHN M. FOWLER

September 11, 2001: Three Affirmations

“My God, why?”

The words were uttered across the globe in a hundred different languages, by millions of on-lookers in street corners, shopping centers, living rooms, and office cubicles. Stunned at the graphic image of two jets plowing through two towering pillars of human strength and creativity and sending thousands of innocent people into oblivion, the world shivered in silence, suffered in numbness, and shouted in anger or whispered in its inability to understand, “My God, why?”

September 11, 2001, changed forever human life, understanding, and perception. The question—a believer’s anxiety or just an agnostic’s exclamation—has no ready answer. Mindless evil, and its aftermath of terror in the form of anthrax, did produce one sure global result: fear. Fear of the future, fear to return to normal life, fear to open mail, fear to travel, fear at what life is all about.

Such fear seems to take hold of all of us in times when evil seems to triumph, when terror seems to strike at the innocent, and when the enemy seems a mystery wrapped in total darkness and shadow. As teachers, what do we say to each other? What do we say to our students? What do we say at all that can make some sense out of a senseless situation, that can create hope when everything around seems hopeless, that can make life worth living?

From the Christian vantage point, we can make three biblical affirmations.

First, God is not responsible for evil. Within hours after the New York tragedy, a few preachers went on to define the terror as God’s punishment on a city and a society gone evil. Similarly, some three years ago, when the largest earthquake in recent memory shattered an entire city in Western India, a few Christian preachers proclaimed the catastrophe as God’s punishment for that region’s persecution of Christians and burning of churches. Perish the thought! Such preachers hardly know their God or their Bible. God does not move around the universe with His fingers on a trigger, with His hand on a knife, with His body wrapped in a bomb, or with His breath pouring out a seismological or biological terror. The biblical portrayal of God is one of eternal love, enduring mercy, and everlasting compassion. Even His eschatological judgment is an act of grace that purifies all creation from the presence of sin.

Second, Satan is responsible for the evil in this world. Jesus pointed that out when He declared, “An enemy has done this” (Matthew 13:28, RSV). The enemy who is engaged in a mortal combat with all that is good and righteous, the enemy that hijacked this earth in the Garden of Eden, the enemy that is still at work, casting doubt on the goodness and love of God, sowing seeds of rebellion against truth and righteousness. Every time we see evil in the world, it presents us an opportunity to present its diabolical nature, course, and destiny within the context of the great controversy between Christ and Satan.

Third, we as Christians have a duty to perform in the presence of evil. Look at the cross. From there arose the cry that tore apart the heart of God. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, RSV). God did not provide a philosophic answer to the problem of suffering, but rather, He paved the way for life to arise from the ashes of death. The women heard the words of agony, “My God, why?” and went home to light their Sabbath candles. After the Cross, there was the Sabbath. After the suffering of death, there was the rest of a redemptive experience. After the skies turned dark, the hearts and the homes of the disciples were lit. In the abyss of hopelessness, there was the leap of faith.

Such a leap of faith does not go unfulfilled. Victory came on the Resurrection day. Come wind, come weather; come terror, come evil; come suffering, come death: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” (Psalm 46:1-2, RSV). Through acts of selfless love and witness, we can share this hope with those around us who are in the grip of despair and fear.

There lies our hope—to share, to teach, to live, and to help.