

My Journey Out of Legalism

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I'm calling this message, "*My Journey Out of Legalism*." As I thought about that title, it occurred to me that this story is not just a journey OUT of something, but also a journey INTO something. I want to emphasize that as well. This message could be called: "*My Pilgrimage into the Brighter and Brighter Radiance, Glorious Freedom, and Deep Personal Security of the New Testament Gospel of Grace through the Finished and Perfect Work of Christ Jesus at Calvary's Cross*." But I think that it would fit better on the cassette tape label if we just leave the title as "*My Journey Out of Legalism*."

Now, by calling my story a journey out of "legalism," I don't mean to imply that everyone who is a part of the religious tradition I grew up in is a legalist. I also want to remind you that there are many, many forms of legalism. *Non-Christian* religions are mostly human-focused and works-oriented, and unfortunately, many *Christian* groups are infected by legalism of one strain or another.

Whenever a group teaches a Christ-plus-something gospel it results in *legalism* – that is, people thinking that their salvation is dependent somehow on their own performance.

So, whether you share a similar background as me or not, you may relate to elements of my testimony if you have been touched by legalism – whether in Catholicism or Protestantism; whether in liberal or fundamentalist churches; whether in Pentecostal or evangelical circles; whether in respected churches or cultic fringe groups.

I was raised in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

I am no longer a Seventh-day Adventist and I'm going to briefly tell you why today.

Let me make it clear that there are many good Christian people in the Adventist church. At the top of my list are my parents, whom I admire and respect. The Adventist church has been responsible for doing many good things around the world – especially through their humanitarian programs in developing countries.

But there are some significant theological problems, which it took me years to fully comprehend.

When I was born in Denver Colorado, my parents decided they needed to get involved in a church. My father had been baptized as a young person into the Adventist church, so he returned there with my mother who was from an unchurched background.

They became active in the Aurora SDA Church, where they quickly absorbed the Adventist culture. No more coffee or cokes or meat. My mother took off her wedding ring and gave her jewelry to support the church building program. They began to read the writings of Ellen White, the Adventist prophetess, and adapt their lives accordingly.

Soon, my father felt a call to pastoral ministry, so he quit his job at the Telephone Company and moved the family to Lincoln, NE to obtain a ministerial degree. The rest of

my growing up years was spent moving about every two years, as the denomination was in the habit of calling their pastors from church to church.

I attended Adventist schools from kindergarten all the way through post-graduate studies. Adventists encourage and often coerce their adherents to send their children to their own schools. People who send their kids to public schools usually feel that they are subtly treated as second class citizens.

While Adventist schools usually do a fine job educating students academically, they also serve two important needs: *protection* and *indoctrination*.

The **protection** supplied by Adventist schools goes beyond just shielding students from evolution or secular humanism, but also such evils as school dances, unclean foods (such as pork) in cafeteria lunches, competitive sports, and most importantly – Friday night and Saturday school activities which constitute Sabbath-breaking. (In recent years some Adventist schools have lifted the ban on competitive sports if the game schedules do not conflict with the Sabbath. By doing so they are in conflict with the teachings of their prophetess, though.)

The second important function of Adventist schools is **indoctrination**. The school system is an important tool for instilling the unique and demanding doctrinal and cultural package of Adventism.

From an early age children are taught the denominational stories, such as the incredible feat of Ellen White writing so many books after being hit in the face with a rock while in third grade and never furthering her education. Or the questionable story (more likely a myth) that she held a heavy family Bible at arm's length for a half-hour while in vision.

Children are taught that they must maintain a distinct lifestyle in dress, eating and recreation that will set them apart from the world. It is true, by the way, that Christians will be different from non-Christians. But nowhere does the Bible suggest that we should be *odd*.

Children are taught that the Adventists are God's special people, the true church, the fulfillment of prophecy. They are also taught that the day is coming soon when everyone who doesn't worship on the Sabbath will receive the Mark of Beast – which is Sunday worship. And the Sunday worshippers (led by the pope and joined by all the Protestant churches) will persecute the Sabbath-keepers. There will be a terrible time of trouble for the remnant people, during which they must demonstrate perfection of character without a mediator in the heavenly sanctuary. Finally, Jesus will come and deliver the faithful Sabbath keepers who have demonstrated that his law can be kept perfectly.

I realize that not all Adventists believe these things, but these are the official teachings of the founder. If you don't believe me just read the last 10 chapters of the book by Ellen White called *The Great Controversy*.

Many young people are filled with fear when they think about the end. My wife, Selene, tells how, when she was attending an Adventist academy, she used to lay awake at night in fear and depression. She was sure she would never be able to be good enough to make it through the time of trouble. The insecurity continued with her into college.

Finally, she made an appointment with a well-known Adventist pastor, Morris Venden, and shared how she struggled to get the victory over snacking between meals (since Ellen White had instructed that "not one morsel of food should pass between the lips between meals"). He told her not to worry about it. That confused her.

The indoctrination process is so effective, that even though many Adventist young people become discouraged with Adventism and slip away, most of them still believe it is true. They stay loyal to the idea, long after they give up trying.

I don't want to make it sound like Jesus was not a part of the religion I grew up with. Jesus was definitely a part of things. My parents were loving Christian parents who taught my sister and me to pray, read our Bible and love Jesus as our Savior and friend. Religion for me as a young person was Christ -- plus rules.

Rules, of course, are a part of life. But for many Adventist kids they become quite oppressive. No TV, no movies, no meat, no adornment, no secular music (I used to hide a small radio under my pillow to listen to Glen Campbell singing about a "Rhinestone Cowboy"). And on Sabbath, starting a half-hour before sundown on Friday night, there was to be no secular activity or conversation. I couldn't wear jeans for a Sabbath-afternoon hike because those were "every-day" clothes.

My parents loosened up on a lot of that stuff later in life and maybe wished they had done things a bit differently. But to be fair to them, they were just sincerely trying to do their best to follow what they had been taught. They were trying to please Jesus, whom they truly loved.

As a teenager, I went through a severe time of rebellion. When I went away to an Adventist boarding academy, even though it was run like a military school, I found ways to get around the rules. I smoked marijuana almost daily and abused alcohol every chance I got. I got suspended a couple times and finally quit halfway through my junior year. (I say I "quit" – actually I declared that I quit when they called me in to kick me out, so that it would go on my record as withdrawing rather than being expelled).

I obtained my G.E.D. and worked construction for awhile, living an irresponsible, wild and carnal life. In my mind there were only two options: Adventism or hell. I decided to choose the latter for a stretch, but in the back of my mind I always believed that Adventism was the truth and the only way, and I figured I'd come back to it someday – if I lived long enough.

I almost didn't. I had some close calls with drugs, the occult, automobile accidents and the police. Fortunately, God got my attention through some of those events and the quiet, yet persistent voice of the Holy Spirit convicted me to flee from that lifestyle.

I didn't know where to go, except back from where I'd come. So I moved far away from the bad influences in my life to an Adventist college to start my life over. I committed my life to Jesus. It was a very real Christian experience for me. I became a zealot! I was like the apostle Paul before he discovered the gospel. He says, *"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers"* (Gal. 1:14).

Later, as a Christian Paul would say about his former associates in legalism: "...I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Rom. 10:2). That's how I was – zealous for God, but my zeal was not based on knowledge of the full truth of the gospel.

I tried very hard to be a good Christian by observing all the Adventist extras. In addition to the Bible, I faithfully read Ellen White's books every day. While all Adventist must accept Ellen White as a prophet who has doctrinal authority in order to be in agreement with the 27 Fundamentals of Adventism, many of them do not read her writings. They just pick and choose which counsel of her's they want to obey or ignore.

I tried hard to learn it all and obey it all. I didn't eat meat because I read that all of those who are translated when Jesus returns will be vegetarians. In fact, I read labels to make sure no lard was in my food – since that was forbidden as unclean food. I poured V8 juice on my salad instead of using dressing because I read that I shouldn't eat vinegar. I tried (unsuccessfully) to give up dairy products. I quit playing my guitar because I was too tempted to play secular songs. I didn't go to theaters because I was convinced that my guardian angel wouldn't go in there with me. And the list goes on...

I developed a burden for my "non-Adventist" relatives and sent them letters and tapes trying to convince them to join the true church before the Sabbath-test came upon the earth. I felt that by so doing I was preaching "the gospel," because for most Adventists the gospel means Jesus -- plus the Adventist package.

Did you notice I used the term "*non-Adventist*?" That is common language in Adventist circles. I never hear that outside Adventism. Do you ever hear Lutherans talking about reaching "non-Lutherans" or Presbyterians talking about "non-Presbyterian" relatives? I don't.

Adventists use that language because they look at everyone else as outsiders, people who will eventually join them or be lost. They have a hard time viewing other Christians as their brothers and sisters when their prophetess clearly stated that all other denominations are Babylon and people need to be called out of them. People can still be saved from those churches without becoming Adventists, but only if they never heard the "truth" and die before the final events -- when everyone will know about the Sabbath and be forced to choose for or against it.

Some Adventists have been presumptuous enough to apply the words of Jesus to their denomination when Jesus said, "*Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd*" (John 10:16, KJV). Some quote that text as evidence that there are Christians in other denominations but, if they are true Christians and time lasts, they will come out and join the Adventist church.

When I graduated from Union College in 1985 after a mission stint in Indonesia, I was called to a small two-church district in Missouri. I still feel sorry for those dear people when I think back on it. Oh, I preached some decent sermons, but many of them were exhortations to work harder because sinlessness is not only possible, it is *necessary* for the final generation.

I even prepared a 40-page paper, compiling Ellen White quotes to prove that Jesus had a fallen, sinful nature like ours. My reason for establishing that was to insist, just like Ellen White, that if Jesus could be sinless with a fallen nature, then we can be also.

Adventists have argued for years over the nature of Christ, and many have rejected the heresy that declares that Jesus was just like us with a sinful nature. But students of Ellen White know that she taught it.

While I was working hard to be perfect (and failing miserably all along), I was also working hard to convert other Christians to Adventism, to let people know the "Three Angel's Messages." The "Three Angel's Message" is Adventist lingo, based on Revelation 14, for the unique Adventists doctrines that the world needs to hear before the end of time.

I did quite a number of Evangelistic Crusades and Revelation Seminars over the years. Sometimes unchurched people came to my crusades, but it was mostly Christians who were interested in prophecy. So my task was to convince people who were already Christians to leave their churches and join Adventism.

The reason people came who were interested in prophecy was because of the way we advertised the meetings. I still have numerous old brochures in my files. They are covered with ugly, scary beasts from Daniel and Revelation. Adventists are convinced that they have figured out all the prophecies and that the prophecies point to them as the true church.

One time a police detective called me and said he was concerned by the pictures on my brochures and the frequent use of the number 666. He was worried that perhaps a dangerous cult was sponsoring the advertisements.

I was taught to hide our denominational affiliation if possible in the early nights of the meeting. Sometimes we would start in a public hall and then move to the church later.

The early presentations would be about the Second Coming of Jesus. Then I would give them a full dose of Adventist doctrine, featuring especially the Sabbath, of course.

I used the slides called *20th Century Bible Truths*. There were 30 topics. Nowhere was the gospel clearly presented. One night was devoted to proving Jesus was God. One night presented the plan of salvation, but the outline did not establish that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ's finished work alone, plus nothing.

In fact, the question was raised on one slide: *"What is man's part in being saved from the penalty and power of sin?"* Rather than answering on the next slide, in harmony with the New Testament, "only believe," instead the following list was given as man's part in being saved: *"Forsake sin, pray for a clean heart, let the Spirit lead, be willing to keep God's law, be instant in prayer, witness for God, assemble when possible, feed on the Word, and keep your eyes on Christ."*

Friends, regardless of how good and helpful any of those things are, they are NOT man's part in being saved. Our obedience is a response to God's saving initiative, not a part of what saves us!

After that one confusing gospel presentation the remainder of the 30 sessions were dedicated to Adventist doctrine. 10 of the 30 sessions were used to prove that the Ten Commandment Law and the Seventh-day Sabbath were binding on Christians. I would watch the crowds gradually thin out, especially toward the end when I would tell them to stop eating pork and take off their jewelry.

But when I made the final appeal to join the only, true remnant church of Bible prophecy, there were always some that responded. I found over time that it was very hard to keep those new converts coming, though. More often than not, they would slip back sheepishly to their former churches.

When I went to the Adventist seminary in Berrien Springs, MI to obtain a Master of Divinity degree, I developed some cognitive-dissonance. I was exposed to a variety of thought. Some of the teachers had received their Ph.D.'s at respectable Christian universities. Some of them were determined to stir up thought and move students toward Christian orthodoxy, while others were concerned only with defending Adventism.

I gave up my heretical view on the nature of Christ. I also began to have some questions about Ellen White. In a class designed to help us defend her writings, I discovered all kinds of problem statements that she had made – statements which contradicted the Bible, herself, science and history.

At that point, I was able to buy the rationales and defenses that were made concerning Ellen White. Today I no longer can, because over the years I have seen so much more evidence that discredits her. She made prophecies that didn't come true, tried to cover up mistakes she made and placed burdens on people that even she could not live under. She made multiple statements that contradict the New Testament gospel. It has been proven that Ellen White borrowed most of her writings from other writers. After Walter Rea shook up the denomination in the early 1980s with his research concerning Ellen White's plagiarism in the book, *The White Lie*, the denomination sponsored their own study. Dr. Fred Veltman and a research team spent eight years investigating Ellen White's book, *The Desire of Ages*. Dr. Veltman concluded that the book was "for the most part derived rather than original" and that one is not able to recognize "any general category of content or catalog of ideas that is unique to her." He admitted that the evidence "strikes at the heart of her honesty, her integrity, and therefore her trustworthiness." (See *Ministry* magazine, November, 1990).

I could say a lot more about that. You can study it for yourself now that we live in the information age. Facts are no longer hidden that once were. Go online to www.truthorfables.com or www.SDAOutreach.org or www.ratzlaf.com, for example. If you want some really interesting food for thought read about "The Trial of Israel Dammon" at www.EllenWhite.org, or read the testimonies at the new site www.FormerAdventist.com put together by the former editors of *Adventist Today*, or at *SDAanonymous* -- www.sabbath.com/sdanon.

I've read a number of books that reveal information about Ellen White of which most Adventists are unaware. One of the easiest to read and most revealing is, *White Washed*, by Sydney Cleveland a former SDA pastor. (Sydney Cleveland, 172 Suncrest Drive, Greenwood, IN 46143, (317) 885-8122, E-mail: Scleveland@TCON.NET).

When I was at Andrews University, the most notable and defining class I took was an elective on the New Testament book of Romans. The teacher was a scholarly, evangelical gentleman. We spent the entire quarter covering the first eight chapters of Romans – focusing especially on the first five. I had never spent so much concentrated effort thinking about what Paul said about the gospel.

My heart warmed as I read words like Romans 3:21-24 --

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

For the first time I was forced to grapple with what those words said and meant. It sounded wonderful, but was a bit confusing when put up alongside of the rest of my belief system. I had been taught that the law was essential for righteousness. But the text clearly said that a righteousness *apart from law* had been made known through Christ and that we could be *justified freely by his grace*.

Looking back now, I believe that God used that class to put the first crack in my legalistic armor.

Another crack in my armor started around the same time. I discovered some books on science of church growth and became fascinated. It became a hobby of mine to read and learn about various principles for growth that were being advocated by church growth experts. It was at that time that a dream began to grow in my heart to someday plant a church from scratch and stay with it for the long haul.

The church growth researchers learned by studying churches that were growing and then comparing similarities. So I began to do the same thing. Shortly after seminary I visited Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. Since then I've been back many times. God is doing an awesome work there. I was impressed by the sincerity of the leaders and members. The message was clearly focused on Christ and the cross. Thousands of formerly unchurched people were coming to faith and becoming fully devoted followers of Christ. They were involved in ministry, outreach and stewardship.

In all my years of attending many Adventist churches, I had never seen such an example of New Testament Christianity in action. And yet my theology whispered in the back of my mind that these people were suppose to be the bad guys. These were supposed to be ones who didn't have the truth, or weren't living up to it if they did. I wondered how that could be "Babylon" and how I could call people *out* of that into what Adventism had to offer. This created more cognitive dissonance for me.

For a number of years I went through a gradual *Grace Awakening*. Charles Swindoll wrote an excellent book by that name. It's a must-read for any current or former legalists. I love the title because it describes my journey – *a grace awakening*.

As a pastor in Davenport IA, while I was still doing Prophecy Crusades, I began to try and weave the gospel of grace in more and more. Another crack in my legalistic armor happened when I decided to preach verse by verse through Ephesians. I gathered some good commentaries and spent a couple months studying Ephesians.

Once again, I was forced to grapple with Paul's clear gospel statements. Before Paul says anything about Christian living, he spends half the epistle talking about what is ours in Christ by grace through faith. Most my sermons were exhortations about living right and trying harder. But now I had to deal with words such as –

Eph 1:5-7

He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

Eph 1:13-14

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.

Eph 2:6-9

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.

I was still tempted to add a "but" after these wonderful statements of God's grace. My armor was cracking, though.

As I began to visit other churches and attend Christian concerts I was blessed tremendously by contemporary music and praise and worship music. I tried to bring worship renewal into the church I pastored by changing the music. Since we had no musicians in our congregation who were willing to help, I played the guitar and my wife Selene played the piano as we attempted to liven up worship with Maranatha praise songs. The church had such a poor sound system that I had to purchase my own to supplement it.

A few people enjoyed the changes that we were trying to make. But most just sat back and criticized. I still had not realized that their theology left them incapable of celebrating. Celebration can only happen when a person is secure in Christ's finished work. Anyone who thinks that his salvation is even partially dependent on himself has nothing to celebrate. That person will prefer a somber service which portrays his mood – doom and gloom.

A church in Richmond, VA heard what we were doing and asked me to come be their pastor. They claimed they were trying to move toward a more contemporary model and were looking for a pastor who would lead change. It sounded like the perfect fit for us.

Shortly after I moved to Richmond another crack developed in my legalistic armor. I met Dr. Richard Fredericks who would become a dear friend and mentor. From our first meeting when we had lunch together, we formed a special affinity and respect for each other.

He challenged me to try and let the gospel reshape my theology. I'll never forget the time he said, "Clay, how can you teach the Adventist doctrine of 1844 and the Investigative Judgment when it can't be supported in Scripture and undermines the believers security in Christ?" I was tongue-tied. I couldn't use on him all the arguments I had learned at Andrews University because he knew them and knew their weaknesses. He recommended that I read the gospel masterpiece by New Testament scholar John Stott entitled, *The Cross of Christ*. More than any book I have read, that book made clear for me the centrality of the gospel.

When I walked into my church assignment at Richmond, I walked unknowingly into World War III. They asked for change, so I thought they wanted it. When we arrived there was a robed choir and lots of organ music, within three months we set up a band where the choir used to be, the organ was unplugged and we auditioned choir members for a new praise team. Some of the congregation loved it, others hated it. War broke out.

It finally climaxed in a four-hour business meeting which ended in a vote that divided the church. Two-thirds in favor, one third opposed. I'll never go through that again!

We tried to please everyone by doing a 9 a.m. Traditional Service and an 11 a.m. Contemporary Service. At first everyone was happy, but over the next couple years as the traditional service steadily declined and the contemporary service continued to grow, attitudes changed.

It became obvious that the issue involved more than just music styles. I had long since loosened up my rigid and oppressive enforcement of Adventist taboos and decided to just preach about Jesus and accept people the way they came. The traditionalists became bitter and judgmental toward the new people who were coming to the contemporary service. They were convinced that I was lowering the standards and not preaching the full message.

The traditionalists began to ask for equal representation in leadership and even tried to figure out whether more offerings were generated from the first or second service.

I became discouraged fighting legalism and began to lose my joy for ministry. I began to think of other things I could do. I wrote to Denver Seminary and obtained their Doctor of Ministry information. I picked Denver just because I had always dreamed of coming back to Colorado some day. I obtained maps of the Front Range and wondered about the possibility of starting a new church – a different kind of church, fresh and relevant.

I didn't know that God would fulfill that dream, but first he had another step of preparation in store for me.

My friend Richard Fredericks had left his college teaching position to pastor a church in Damascus MD, just outside of Washington DC. The church was exploding with growth and he asked me to come serve as an associate pastor with him. I was so relieved to be delivered from what had become a miserable experience in Richmond.

The move to Damascus represented a significant and formative step in my journey out of legalism for at least four reasons:

First, I stepped off of the denominational payrolls. The Damascus Road Community Church (DRCC) became my employer. Denominational leaders counseled me not to go to Damascus, for fear it would ruin my career with the denomination. They were right, it did.

Second, I had plenty of quality time to spend with Richard Fredericks, who is more passionately committed to the centrality of the gospel in his preaching and personal life, than anyone I know. We lived with his family for several months until we could find a house to purchase.

Third, I was able to experience a true gospel community from the inside. DRCC is a church that has been turned on fire by the good news of God's amazing grace. Selene and I were forever impacted by that church. And I could never have started Grace Place with the same flavor and focus without that experience.

Fourth, I had more time to study. Since I was no longer a senior pastor doing three different services – a traditional, a contemporary and a seeker-targeted Saturday night service, which almost burned me out in Richmond – I could give some time to processing how the gospel was redefining my theology and setting me free from the bondage of legalism.

Even though, we loved the people and church in Damascus, and planned to stay there, that nagging dream of starting a church in Colorado would never go away. In fact, I even wrote a secret "*What If?*" paper and saved it on my computer, outlining how I would go about starting a church in a bedroom community north of Denver CO. I did that to put it before the Lord in prayer and get it off my mind.

I'll never forget that day, about six months later when the phone rang in my office at DRCC. Kent Campbell was on the other end telling me about a small group of people in Northern Colorado who were thinking about starting a new church and looking for someone to give direction.

Many of you at Grace Place know the story from that point.

The Adventist conference learned that I was coming to start a new church. They came to the coordinating team and insisted on paying my salary, although the original agreement was for me to be paid by the new church. I believe, along with whatever noble motives they had, they did this in an attempt to try to control our endeavors.

Grace Place was never an official Adventist church. We were called an "experiment." We were an experimental outreach project to reach out to former and inactive Adventists – *the burned, the bored and the bypassed*.

We launched Grace Place in the fall of 1996 with a passionate commitment to *keep the main thing the main thing*. The "main thing," of course, being the gospel of grace in Christ Jesus.

We were amazed when 405 people showed up on opening day at the Berthoud High School. In that first year there were so many moving stories of conversion and life change as people who were starved and hungry for the good news of security in Christ began to find assurance that they had never known before.

Many of us had a new hope for Adventism. We believed that churches like DRCC and Grace Place and others might start a reformation – a grace awakening within Adventism. Some of us read the book, *Transformed by Truth*, which tells how the World Wide Church of God transitioned from being a dysfunctional group with heretical cultic doctrines, to standing for the gospel and renouncing their false doctrines and legalistic ways. We thought, "Wow, if it happened for that sabbatarian denomination, maybe it can happen in Adventism."

But we were in for a startling reality. Other SDA congregations became suspicious of Grace Place because we focused on grace. The elders of one church signed a petition calling for the denomination to terminate us. In fact, the conference president was threatened that he would not be re-elected if he let us go on.

When it became apparent that the supporters of Grace Place were giving more money to the local church, than to denominational headquarters, we became the target of intense scrutiny, pressure and criticism.

My theology was questioned. I was asked to prepare a number of written doctrinal statements. Finally, I wrote a paper, as a last attempt to stay in Adventism and still stand for the gospel. The paper was called, *"Please Tell Me that Evangelical Adventist Is Not an Oxymoron."*

I was flown to Andrews University to be interrogated by three professors. They criticized my paper and later sent a letter saying that I was not Adventist enough to receive their endorsement.

In the late fall of 1997 I was fired. Just two weeks after my friend, Richard Fredericks was also fired in Maryland. At least five or six other evangelical Adventist pastors were fired that year as a part of an apparent nation-wide attempt to preserve the purity of Adventism.

Grace Place picked up my salary and we became an interdenominational Christian church.

When I had been repeatedly interviewed and investigated by the Adventist denominational leaders, I promised that I would not preach on Adventist doctrines that I had problems with while I was their employee. I invited them to listen to my message tapes, assuring them that I would just stick with a positive presentation of the gospel. I did that.

But after I was no longer a denominational employee, I felt free to take some of those problem issues off the shelf in my mind where I had stuck them. One subject that I had longed to study more carefully for years was the covenants. What was the difference between the old and new covenants? How did the new covenant change things?

In February and March of 1998 I presented a series of messages called *New Covenant Christians*. The combination of that series and our separation from the denomination led to the departure of many from our midst who decided to go back to Adventism.

I realized that I could never go back, so I wrote the following letter to the president of the Rocky Mountain Conference of Seventh-day Adventists:

Dear Jim,

Since you made some recent inquiries about my membership, Selene and I have taken time for reflection and discussion. We have decided that we would both like to have our membership dropped from the Adventist membership rolls. I know that it is awkward for you and your committee to have our names there indefinitely while I pastor an interdenominational church.

I also feel strongly about membership being more than just a name on a book. That's why we established a "participating", "covenant" membership philosophy at Grace Place. People do not automatically hold their membership from year to year if they are not participating and re-signing the covenant. I believe that makes membership more meaningful and valuable. With this view of membership, I don't think it is responsible for us to keep our membership on the books of the RMC conference while we are not "participating" as members of the conference.

I hope that this will be a quiet transaction and not an opportunity for you or your committee to try and further discredit me. I believe that we can have supportive parallel ministries rather than a situation of competition. I was very disappointed to hear that a letter was sent to the area Adventist churches discouraging pastors from inviting our praise and worship team (even though we continue to get repeated invitations and warm receptions). We do not have an agenda to take Adventist members away from existing churches. So we do not constitute a threat. We do continue to have a passion for the burned, the bored and the by-passed -- especially of Adventist heritage. As you know, some from that background come to Grace Place who would not likely go anywhere else. So, let's see ourselves as partners in the Master's work!

While I value many aspects of my Adventist heritage, training and experience, I have serious questions about some of the Adventist doctrinal positions. At one time I thought that, since there were many streams of thought under the umbrella of Adventism, I could remain as an "evangelical" Adventist and redefine some of the doctrines in the light of a clearer and clearer understanding of the gospel of grace. But your public statements immediately after my employment termination... have made it

clear that my theology was a problem. The professors at Andrews who interviewed me (although they spent more time talking than asking me questions and had a hard time agreeing with each other on some key issues), decided that my theological approach was not "Adventist enough."

The issues have not changed. I have problems with the following SDA notions: 1) That SDAs are God's one, true "remnant" church; 2) that the Sabbath is the seal of God and the major deciding factor for who is "in" or "out" in the last days; 3) that 1844 has more significance than a historical date when another date-setting mistake was made; 4) that the atonement was not completed at the cross; and 5) that Ellen White has prophetic doctrinal authority.

While I choose to remain a friend of all that is good in Adventism and interface with evangelical Adventists, I believe that honesty and integrity lead me to a decision to have my name removed from the official rolls. I am confident that the Adventist rolls do not constitute the "Lamb's book of life" and believe that your name and mine are both written on that most important membership roll!

... Thank you for honoring our request.

Grace and peace to you.

In Christ Alone,

Clay Peck

I've taken the time to tell this lengthy story for two reasons:

First, to testify with joy to the liberating good news of the gospel. I am so glad to be free from the legalism of my past, to find my security in Christ alone, not in a denomination, or anything else. I'm also pleased to be able to raise my son without the oppressive cloud of legalism hanging over our home. I share my story to glorify God and thank him publicly for leading me into freedom in his Son!

Second, I shared this story to make it clear that the Grace Place congregation has completely moved on from its early SDA connections. The final step in our corporate processing toward a healthy evangelical congregation was the study we did together during the twenty-week message series on the New Testament book of Galatians, *Freedom in Christ*.

As an interdenominational, Bible-based congregation we are united by and committed to the simple seven-point statement of faith agreed on by the National Association of Evangelicals. This is it – no more, no less:

1. We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.

2. *We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
3. *We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in his virgin birth, in his sinless life, in his miracles, in his vicarious and atoning death through his shed blood, in his bodily resurrection, in his ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in his personal return in power and glory.*
4. *We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful man regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.*
5. *We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.*
6. *We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.*
7. *We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.*