

October 8, 2011 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
2 Peter 1:1-9 Genuinely Spectacular or Deceptively Average by Andy McDonald

We all aspire. In fact we don't just aspire—we doubt ourselves and we question the value of those who seem to lack big aspirations. No one wants to be average or maybe better said no one wants to admit they wish to be average.

I grew up in a wonderful home where being average wasn't celebrated—average intelligence, average grades, average quality in work. There was always the idea, the constant push to do better, be more, know more, rise above the previous generations.

A report card with B's was a matter of discussion and C's simply weren't acceptable anywhere on our report cards! Now the truth is a C wasn't and isn't a bad grade, it's just average.

In our home the stories of the immigrant who came to this country with nothing, worked hard and became a glorious economic success, were the stories worth reading. The story of a young couple with little to get by on and who risked it all in the land rush to homestead and they became wildly successful ranchers, farmers, land barons.

It is interesting that the aspirations of the great American dream have spilled over into matters of faith.

I think it has for many of us. We expect the rag's to riches stories to be repeated in times of testimony.

We hold up the conversion stories with the biggest, most obvious contrast as of greatest value. It isn't the story of the kid who does okay in school, is helpful at home, who doesn't have some big rebellious streak, who is just there as part of the youth group, and one day says to the pastor, "I've accepted Jesus and I want to be baptized. I've

recognized that without Jesus I will be held captive in sin and I want Jesus in charge of my life.”

Those aren't the stories we highlight in spiritual testimonies, or feature in religious magazines.

No the stories that are headlined are the ones where the kid was into drugs and gangs. I remember it was David Wilkerson's story “The Cross and the Switchblade.” The lifestyle and choices line up with all the standard signs of sin and being far from God and then through some set of circumstances, some point of desperation, a late night conversation to talk a person off the proverbial ledge—and the person surrender to Jesus and goes on to school to be trained for ministry!

The stories we like are the ones where something happens beyond just the average life.

We historically like to feature return missionaries. I remember growing up in the church and how cool it was when a return missionary would visit our church and tell “Indiana Jones” kind of thrilling stories of the jungles and exotic place far away. It was so incredible how God's love was being lived and shared in this harsh place with glaring contrast to our average suburban lives in North America.

I don't remember ever hearing a story featured about one of the average members of the church, going to their average job, coming home to their average neighborhood, and in their average way loving their average neighbor and that average neighbor becoming an average friend who eventually came to our average church.

It is almost like there has been an unspoken but very real assumption that it is a sin to be an average Christian. There has subtly come into our thinking, probably influenced by the cultural American dream, the idea that if we are going have a God-pleasing spirituality that it will mean we must plan on becoming some super saint!

This misguided thinking has been reinforced in the Seventh-day Adventist Church through a subtle heresy that infiltrated our denomination in its early days.

The very nature of the most effective heresies, are that they must be very close to truth. If the distance between truth and a new or variant teaching is too great no one will buy in. If a new teaching came in that said to “hate one another” it would have a hard time gaining traction because of the long history and clarity of Jesus unequivocal teaching that his followers are to “love one another.”

So to create heresy that would move toward hating one another you sneak it in. You introduce a thought that you love everyone but you love those who are like you in theology, or skin color, or socioeconomic levels, or education, or language, etc. you love your kind just a little bit more. You still love everyone but you reserve your best love for people like yourself. To create that heresy that false teaching you bolster it with good reasons, stories, you even use scripture about caring first for those who are of the household of faith to subtly move from the responsibility of taking care of those in the church first into a false teaching of loving them more!

In the early days of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, just having come to birth from the tragic and horrific disappointment that Jesus had not returned as hoped in 1844, we sort of came into our own as a church organization still very much concerned about being prepared for Jesus second coming.

In fact in the very development of our name we put it out there for the whole world to see that we were serious about keeping the commandments including the fourth one about the Sabbath and that we were Adventists anxious to become a people prepared to welcome Jesus at his second Advent.

Our early church work wasn't much among those who weren't friends of Jesus, not so much among the heathen, as it was about inviting

Christians to join with us in restoring respect for God's law and preparing to meet Jesus.

This whole concept keeping the Sabbath and of being ready for Jesus' to return brought, in its wake, a growing behaviorism—an emphasis on making sure we were obeying all the rules, so as to be ready. Sabbath was taught as a matter of obedience rather than the joy of God's gracious gift of a whole day to spend with him in celebration of resting from our “works”, resting in the full salvation that Jesus gives.

The first 20+ years from our founding in the 1860's until the late 1880's we formed our fledgling denomination along lines that many would identify as legalism. The preaching was predominantly, law, Law, and more LAW! The teaching wasn't so much untrue as imbalanced.

It was in the late 1880's that two young men Jones and Waggoner presented sermons teaching that a sinners best obedience, stringent law keeping was not guarantee of anything, and certainly in no way meritorious toward salvation, that what we needed as sinners was revival, understanding of Jesus Christ as our righteousness. Not our works but Christ's work is where our hope lies. It was a day of great revival.

But unfortunately E.R. Jones went beyond righteousness by faith into what came to be known as the “Holy Flesh” movement. It arose because of a misuse of a great text of scripture
2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Jones taught that “To be made the righteousness of God in Him is to be made right as Christ is right, and in him is no sin and so we must have no sin in us either—we must be sinless, just like Jesus. His teaching was that we must become righteous in ourselves as Jesus was in himself. We must develop a righteousness that measures up to the

perfect righteousness of Christ in all respects so that we can stand faultless before God on the great day of judgment.”

From this heretical and unscriptural teaching that infiltrated our church, came a further heresy. It was taught that if you were alive at the very end of time when Jesus comes back that you would need to have developed in yourself a righteousness as meritorious as that of Christ. To stand as faithful at the end of the world requires the believer to achieve complete spiritual wholeness and to have learned to live in absolute obedience to God’s total will for man.

In essence a perfect level of holiness that negates the need for Jesus.

Fortunately our denomination recognized this heresy for what it was. Ellen White wrote and preached against it. But unfortunately remnants of it still hang on.

And it is this heritage of heresy that makes it too easy for us to buy into the idea that it is somehow a sin to be average spiritually! That there are the average Christians and then for those who are “really serious” about spirituality they move on up to “super saint Christians.”

We so easily stratify. Certainly those who are willing to abandon family and friends and move to some remote and needy place as missionaries are more spiritual than the rest of us.

Just down the ranking from foreign missionary might be the denominational leader who sacrificially travels the world to care for the church, visiting and backing up the missionaries.

Then a little down the ranking would be the itinerant evangelist who sacrifices the home life to one on the road for the sake of the kingdom.

Then pastors,
Then church leaders
And finally the faithful member who attends church.

We find ourselves going back to the middle ages concept of spirituality that it is more for some than others!

We relate the concept of “average” Christian to what we know about Bell Curves and average groups.

Draw Bell Curve barely Christian on one end and super Christians on the other with all the other Christians in the big bell average.

But “average” Christian is really quite different from what we may think of when we use the word average.

Being Christian doesn't have gradients. Christian faith is written in Binary Code. We are digital Christians. Just like the 1 and 0 in Binary Code representing off or on that's the way it is for us.

So instead of a curve maybe we should think of Christianity as a box. And that everyone who is Christian is in the Christian box and everyone not Christian is not in that box.

Remember how a person becomes a Christian. They respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, recognize their sin and that it separates them from God, they give their lives over to the lordship of Jesus, and he gives them his righteousness, his right standing with God, and now in him they are righteous and are part of his family we call Christians.

That's his body. We call it the universal Church, the body of Christ. You don't get in at all on your merit. Now within the body there are various gifts and we'll talk about that in an upcoming message. In the body there are varying levels of maturity and understanding, and a zillion other variables BUT NONE OF THEM MAKES ONE “MORE” CHRISTIAN.

Some of you are wired to lead. And sometimes leaders think everyone should be passionate and join up with whatever it is that they are

leading. There are high energy Christians and low energy Christians. There are morning people Christians and night owl Christians.

We have done the work of God a disservice when we act like or say that being a Christian means you must be a leader, a hill-charging spiritual warrior? What if you aren't Paul or Silas? That's okay not every convert to Christ in the NT early church era was a prophet, or leader, or out front spiritual leader.

Paul ends his letter to the church at Rome saying hi to some friends.

Phoebe, will be coming to see you soon. Help her in every way you can, for she has helped many in their needs.

Greet **Priscilla and Aquila**. They have been co-workers in my ministry

Greet my dear friend **Epenetus**. He was the **very first person to become a Christian** in the province of Asia.

Give my greetings to **Mary**.

Then there are **Andronicus and Junia**, my relatives, who were in prison with me.

Say hello to **Ampliatius**, whom I love as one of the Lord's own children, and

Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and beloved **Stachys**.

Give my greetings to **Apelles**, a good man whom Christ approves.

Give my best regards to the members of the household of **Aristobulus**.

Greet **Herodion**, my relative.

Greet the **Christians in the household of Narcissus**.

Say hello to **Tryphena and Tryphosa**, the Lord's workers, and to dear **Persis**,

Greet **Rufus**, whom the Lord picked out to be his very own; and also his dear mother, who has been a mother to me.

And please give greetings to **Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas**, and the others who are with them.

Give my greetings to **Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and to Olympas** and all the other believers who are with them.

These are just SOME AVERAGE CHRISTIANS PAUL GREETES IN HIS LETTER TO THE ROMANS.

Larry Osborne writes: "The vast majority of the people Paul led to Christ, and the vast majority of people in the churches he planted, never became leaders or joined Paul on one of his missionary journeys. They were farmers and merchants, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters who quietly lived out their faith and changed lives through Christ."

Osborne writes, “They include what I call the “cobbler in Corinth.” A shoemaker whose neighbor just loved him into a lifelong friendship with God. And this cobbler in Corinth stopped visiting the temple prostitutes, and with this friendship with God he became scrupulously honest in his business dealings, no more than soling a pair of sandals. At home he started treating his wife and children with a love and respect unknown in the pagan and Roman world.

He was no less a Christian than Paul facing martyrdom in Rome and Paul was no more of a Christian for being faithful in the role to which he was called.

And over time it was the cobblers in Corinth who stayed behind when the missionary left and lived out their faith. We need Christians with gifts of leadership and we need Christians with a huge variety of other gifts.

I think of Dick Starnes who died earlier this year. Dick was a gifted, intelligent, compassionate, participator, hard worker, but no matter what I said, or how I asked Dick would never stand in front of this congregation. He was clear that he was anxious to help but NEVER in the capacity that would require him to stand on this platform. Dick loved God, lived a life of obedience with grace and dignity. He modeled a quiet life without hypocrisy. Dick scheduled the volunteers to do eligibility screening at our Shepherd’s Hope Clinic. And when I failed to show up on a night I was scheduled Dick didn’t hesitate to call me to accountability.

Dick had learned something about spirituality we all need grasp. We must learn to listen to the still small voice of the Spirit as he calls and equips us to be a better us, rather than a poor imitation of someone else.

The only reason we would ever stratify Christians thinking one is “more” Christian than another is if we still hold on to the heretical idea that any tiny part of our being Christian is by our might or power.

Remember what Oswald Chambers put so well:

Sanctification is not drawing from Jesus the power to be holy—it is drawing from Jesus the very holiness that was exhibited in Him, and that He now exhibits in me.” Our hope of glory isn’t more of me in me.

It is Christ in you the hope of glory.

Christianity is a binary affair—digital if you will. It is either on or off, and that makes us all “average” Christians.

Maybe when the monster of needing to be some “super saint Christian” raises its ugly head Paul’s advice to the Christians in Thessalonica can ease our anxious hearts and put us on a more sane course.

This should be your ambition: to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we commanded you before. As a result, people who are not Christians will respect the way you live, and you will not need to depend on others to meet your financial needs. 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

And maybe we will feel so free we will have opportunity as just average Christians, to go love people into a lifelong friendship with God.