

January 28, 2012 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church  
Hebrews 12:1 Experience—the fifth gospel: The True Iconoclasts  
By Andy McDonald

When we open our Bibles to the story of Jesus we find it most clearly in the first four books of the what we call the New Testament. It's amazing that we still call it the "New" Testament after nearly 2000 years but it is the newer portion of our ancient document we call the Bible.

The book we call the Bible is really a composite of 66 smaller books. These smaller books dealing with God's leading of people prior to the coming of Jesus consist of 39 books from Genesis about the origins of all things to Malachi, and we call that first section the "Old Testament" The New Testament begins with the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The word "Gospel" simply means good news. So these are four books of stories about the "good news" that Jesus, the Messiah, God Incarnate, One with the Father, has come to reveal righteousness, and justice, and to clear up the picture, to give us a first hand look at who God really is and what he is really like.

Part of God's problem is that ever since the snake in the tree, possessed and used by Satan, lied about who God is and what he is like, and what he wants for his creation, it seems that no matter how much God does, how many press conferences he holds, or good stuff that he accomplishes, he still is misrepresented and blamed for everything.

I hate whining! I mean when a person yells at you or accosts you in some way directly it may be painful but whining is like trying to sleep on a bed of nails. It just wears on you, breaks you down, the constant irritant like a mosquito in your tent. It drives you to not just wish for the end of the whining but to wish to die to end it all!

And I feel a deep sympathy for God. He doesn't just have to put up with a little whining but all the whining of the world and all the

accusations that have no basis in any true understanding of who he really is.

And it is only because he is pure unadulterated love that he takes this abuse, and is patient and kind and gracious to a fault and this was revealed with exceptional clarity in the life and ministry of Jesus. He came to show us the father, whom to know is life eternal.

And guess what we get to continue the story. We get to write the fifth gospel. Telling, living the story of the good news is our commission. Jesus said to his disciples as he was leaving, you will be my witnesses—first in Jerusalem. Living good news stories, being witnesses remember, always starts at home and then it moves out like ripples on a pond in larger and more extensive concentric circles of life. From Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and to the utter most part of the earth.

Living lives of good news, being good news to the people in our spheres of influence. We are commissioned to go and love people into a lifelong friendship with God and that begins with our being good news. Our lives become a testimony, a witness, the gospel story in 3D to the people our lives bump into.

We are called to love, but somewhere along the line too many of us have gotten off track. I don't think it is sinister. I don't think the early church leaders in New Testament times or the founders of our denomination or our parents were trying to do a bad thing—I mean how can it be bad to add? I can understand if people were taking something away from the story, diminishing it, making it smaller or less significant that would be bad. But adding just makes it better and bigger and bold.

Oh how nice that would be. But as many wise systematic theologians, church fathers, leaders have said, whenever we try and add to the gospel we only diminish it.

Paul's counsel in Romans 12:1 is so vivid in The Message Paraphrase.  
 "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him."

That's it! To live our lives embracing what God does for us!  
 To live a life of freedom in knowing that God is my savior.  
 To take my everyday life, all the ordinary stuff and live it in the Wow-ness of knowing that I am a child of God. That's what John wrote in 1 John 3:1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!!"

We are beloved sons and beloved daughters of God.  
 Wipe that frown off your face, you've been adopted by the king.  
 Let the reality sink in. EVERYTHING that is the Fathers is yours!!

And so God invites us to live, to let the experience of our lives be the good news embodiment—the fifth gospel.

It is God's intention and plan that our lives be full.  
 This means the Body of Christ we call the church is meant to be a place  
 A place of FREEDOM not restriction  
 A place of EQUALITY not of pecking orders  
 A place REALITY not of pretense  
 A place of ACCEPTANCE not exclusion  
 A place of EVENHANDEDNESS not injustice  
 A place of RIGHTEOUSNESS not sinfulness  
 A place of ENERGY, VIBRANCE, LIFE not tiredness or dingy  
 A place of LOVE and not apathy

But the sad reality is that when people think of CHURCH when people, neighbors, the news media, Hollywood, think of church and Christianity

The words that come to mind aren't  
Freedom, Equality, Reality, Acceptance, Evenhandedness,  
Righteousness, Energy, or Love.

And why not? Maybe, just maybe it is because with good motivations,  
and good intentions the church has added to the gospel making it  
something less.

Here in America we've often created unhealthy religious smoothies by  
adding to the gospel of grace a couple of tablespoons of the American  
dream and while there may be some synergy in the parts about freedom  
and freedom of religious belief, it's the idea of having more and  
holding more and mixing that with believing that temporal prosperity is  
the Christian's right that creates this unhealthy religious smoothy.

The idea that we are "special" as children of God, can quickly and  
easily slip into we are "superior".

The understanding that God is a righteous God who wishes his children  
to be righteous can, in too many communities of faith, become some  
form of legislated, demanded, required adherence to the rules and if  
you don't then you are expelled from the group.

It is so easy for us to move something that was maybe good and even  
helpful to the place of being an idol.

Webster's second definition of an idol is, "any object of ardent or  
excessive devotion or admiration."

With that definition it is easy to see how something attached to the  
worship of God or belief in God, could gravitate to becoming an object  
of ardent or excessive devotion or admiration .

In Amos, that little book of only 9 chapters tucked among the Minor  
Prophets, called minor not because they were less important but simply  
because they wrote shorter letters than the Major prophets.

Amos this shepherd and care taker of sycamore-fig trees who is called to the work of a prophet shares a warning of coming judgment in chapter 5 of his book beginning in vs 18

How terrible it will be for you who say, If only the day of the Lord were here! For then the Lord would rescue us from all our enemies.”

Ever said that? Oh I wish Jesus would come back? If only the day of the Lord were here? Everything will be set right then.

Amos continues. “But you have no idea what your are wishing for. That day will not bring light and prosperity, but darkness and disaster. In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion—only to meet a bear After escaping the bear he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and is bitten by a snake. Yes, the day of the Lord will be a dark and hopeless day, without a ray of joy or hope.”

That will be the reality even for a bunch of very religious people. In vs. 21 we have God speaking, “I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won’t even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your hymns of praise! They are only noise to my ears. I will not listen to your music, no matter how lively it is. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, a river of righteous living that will never run dry.”

What had happened? They created a religious show—acting like they had hearts toward God but really wanting their own way while acting like they wanted God’s way.

They had great services hymns and praise songs and they brought big nice offerings to the service but in some way it was all self serving. If you read the whole book of Amos you discover that these same folks who came and had great worship services were living in the lap of luxury and bending all the rules their way. Gaining control of the courts.

Chapter 5:7 says, “You wicked people! You twist justice, making a bitter pill for the poor and oppressed. Righteousness and fair play are meaningless fictions to you...vs 10 How you hate honest judges! How you despise people who tell the truth! You trample the poor and steal what little they have through taxes and unfair rent.”

Listen, when we have ardent and excessive devotion, to anything other than God we have set up an idol and idols are the biggest insult to the God who is almighty and perfect and worthy above all creation.

When we add rules of restriction and value obedience to these restrictions and then have an ardent devotion to those rules even more than we value people they become our idol.

When loyalty to some even well meaning pecking order, gaining, having and holding control is the thing to which we are devoted being in control has become our idol.

When we are all concerned about looking good, regardless of reality, then our image how we are seen becomes our idol.

People from outside the body of Christ look at the abhorrent practices among professed followers of God of excluding people: based on gender, race, sexual orientation, political affiliation, nationality and perceived purity of the group has become an idol.

When injustice is practiced even as a means to some just end we have made an idol of our understanding, our wishes

When keeping things the same trumps energy and change we have made an idol of our tradition

And when our comfort is our highest goal that for which we have the highest devotion and admiration we can be sure that our comfort has become our idol.

Iconoclasm literally means “Image breaking” and it was during several periods of the middle ages that there was a rash of tearing down and destroying religious images. It was sparked by a fear that there was some violation of the commandment about images and their use in worship, and of these icons becoming idols, not just representations of the holy but holy in themselves. It is interesting that even the devotion to destroy these icons could become a kind of idol in itself if this work became an object of ardent or excessive devotion.

But today it is important that we become iconoclasts not of actual art, but of traditions or venerated institutions that block the our ability to experience the gospel first hand today.

Anything that blocks or takes the place of our looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

It is all about Jesus. And when the ability to see Jesus and experience his grace and to live the gospel life is blocked by some tradition or venerated institution we must tear it down.

Un-biblical restrictions

All pecking orders

Any pretense

Exclusion and exclusionary thinking

Injustice

Sin in all its forms

Dinginess

All kinds of apathy

And we must live lives marked by

FREEDOM EQUALITY REALITY ACCEPTANCE  
 EVANDEDNESS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENERGY VIBRANCE  
 LOVE

Listen if you are living in a Christianity that you have to pull along, one that seems a burden to live, one that wears you down and makes you tired.

I doubt whatever you have that you call Christianity is even remotely connected to the reality. Whatever it is is some form of an idol that has been pawned off as being of God.

Here is the life of the reality of experience that God calls us to live as the fifth gospel in our world. Listen to Jesus' words as paraphrased in the Message, Matthew 11:29-30

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. 'I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.'"

That is to experience life and that experience is the fifth gospel.