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REFLECTIONS



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Artificial Intelligence: is it a blessing or a curse?

William E. Timm - Novo Tempo Communication Network

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the ability to complete complex tasks in a matter of seconds and makes available democratized and easily accessible knowledge for many people. It also is an excellent tool for overcoming any creative block. On the other hand, it can complete complex tasks without generating any real learning. There are also complex issues of copyright infringement that need to carefully be taken into consideration, and there is the real possibility that content created with the help of AI may be incorrect. These are just a few of the benefits and drawbacks commonly raised about new generative AI tools in conversations or analyses on the internet. These innovations are even pointed out by many experts as the beginning of a new cycle in the behavioral and technological development of the world.¹

Every year, the largest technology companies strive to dominate the global market by releasing new devices and tools. None of these releases are everlasting; they will all be replaced by newer versions. However, some of them have the potential of significantly impacting or altering human behaviors or even influencing human brain development.² These inventions assist human needs, but also awaken previously nonexistent desires within us. They are tools that were previously inaccessible to the majority of the population. This was the case with the launching of laptops, smartphones, and social networks. We cannot imagine our world today without them.

The fact is that AI is revolutionizing everything in the technological world. From a refrigerator with a display to a microphone, which until recently was considered “naive,” AI is collecting data and using it to map our behavior and enhance their services.

The broad impact of this revolution raises the question of how AI can be used for theology and what its implications are for Christian ethics.

New and Old Together

AI, as a whole, is not a recent invention or tool. Its origins can be traced back to the 1940s with Alan Turing’s work, which helped break the German Enigma encrypting machine’s code during World War II. The foundational concepts of AI were further explored with the publication of Turing’s article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” in 1950. This is considered by many as the beginning of AI. However, Turing never used the term “artificial intelligence” himself. The term would be

used for the first time in 1956 at a conference called “The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence” in New Hampshire.³ Since then, this field has experienced many changes.

The great hope was that AI would revolutionize various segments of technology in a short period of time. This perspective led to significant investments from companies that saw AI as a hopeful solution to problems and a means to create advantages against their competitors. Herbert Simon, a political scientist who impacted such areas as economics and psychology, exemplified the hype around AI in the 1960s when he said in 1965, “Machines will be capable, within 20 years, of doing any work a man can do.”⁴ This statement still does not fully apply today, but we are moving in this direction.

Despite some advances in the early 1980s, AI suffered something known as the “AI winter” from the 1970s to the 1990s. Major companies did not see the expected return from their significant investments in the field. In the 1990s, hope arose when IBM’s machine called Deep Blue defeated Garry Kasparov, then world chess champion, in a chess match in 1997. The machine had already lost a match the previous year, but this evolution of capacity in the space of just one year rekindled the mood for a more optimistic future for AI.

Since then, this area has grown significantly and has become present in our lives in a way that we often do not realize. Our cell phone has hundreds of AI applications working in various activities. As of a few years ago, every social network, spell checker, GPS app, streaming platform, and even search engines used AI. For example, when you type a word in Google and search suggestions appear to complete your sentence, nothing is by chance. These suggestions are provided by an AI that analyzes your age, search history, trending topics, and possible preferences. After mapping them, Google delivers possibilities that we are most likely looking for. This AI is called Google Suggest.

But if AI has existed for over seventy years, and if we have been in contact with it for decades, why is this theme on the rise again? Why has it become a global concern? The most plausible explanation is that we are entering now into a new phase in which AIs are not only used by large companies to map our behaviors, collect our personal data, or improve our app experiences, but can now also be used by users themselves in creating content for themselves.⁵ This is known as generative AI.

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Today we can open incredible technological tools and create images, texts, books, presentations, and many other things instantly. People without coding experience or technical knowledge can create a mobile app quickly, simply by writing what they want and following the instructions.⁶ In a few seconds and without any artistic knowledge, we can create images that previously could only be made by someone with a special talent and willingness to devote a significant amount of time to the project. We can create extensive texts on certain topics without even mastering the topic and without spending hardly any time. Unlike before, we would not just be copying ready-made content from the internet but generating something entirely new. This raises some important ethical questions that are connected with generative AI.

Morality in AI

With such convenient power at our fingertips and the advancement of conversational AIs such as ChatGPT, Google's Bard, and Microsoft's Bing, ethical questions become unavoidable. Who is the "owner" of the generated content? If someone creates a complete article using an AI, for example, could that person be considered the author of the article, even if it was written by AI? What Christian principles should we uphold when using these tools? As Christians, should we have a favorable or unfavorable stance towards these new technologies? What are the main risks of using AI? And finally, is it possible to use AI in preaching and sharing the gospel? These are just some of the questions frequently found on the internet. Many of them still lack a consensus answer.

There are many other technical or ethical questions that we will not address in this article, such as the issues related to unemployment and its global economic impact. Many of these questions, in fact, still lack satisfactory answers.

The moral and ethical discussion in the field of AI is not a recent phenomenon. This concern has permeated the entire history of technology development. One of the key points of discussion is the moment when machines become as capable in all areas of knowledge and human skills as humans themselves, which is known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). In this phase, the machine would not just learn specific aspects as it does today, but would be capable of developing in any area. This concept is not new either; it was developed by Alan Turing himself in the aforementioned 1950 article and became known as the Turing Test.⁷

But it does not stop there. AI could supposedly reach singularity in the next phase, surpassing humans in all aspects. This is known as Artificial Superintelligence (ASI).⁸ In this phase, humans would no longer have control over the machine, and the machine would

have complete autonomy to make decisions and perform tasks.⁹ In both phases, the machine would not only execute functions as it does today, but would also have an understanding of why it performs them—something that does not yet exist. For many, humans would no longer be the most intelligent and capable beings on the planet. Scientists have not reached a consensus on when this phase would begin, with predictions ranging from five to thirty years, and some even believe that this moment will never arrive.

If AI were to someday reach that level of development, several other delicate aspects would come into play. Some of these were addressed in an open letter published on March 22, 2023, by the Future of Life Institute (FOLI) and signed by many thousands of CEOs, researchers, and individuals connected to the technology sector. The letter, which made history in the development of AI, suggested a six-month pause in its advancement to discuss the consequences of its use. While the request from the letter obviously was not heeded by the scientific community, the discussion about its impact has received greater attention. "AI systems with human-competitive intelligence can pose profound risks to society and humanity,"¹⁰ the letter begins. What are some of these risks? Unemployment, rapid extinction of professions, more catastrophic conflicts, and other consequences that are still unknown.

However, we should not think that concerns are only tied to ASIs. The generative tools we use today also have their own concerns. These tools are trained on a learning model known as Deep Learning, which requires massive amounts of content for effective results, as the model learns primarily through examples. As a result, these tools create responses by cross-referencing data and information. Generative tools have implications in many areas of human knowledge, and as a result, discussions about their good and bad usage have extended beyond the technological realm and become concerns across nearly all fields.

Among the main concerns are privacy, both of the content used to train these tools and of the users themselves. Another concern is the issue of deepfakes, because these tools have the capacity to generate hyperrealistic texts, photos, and videos about nonexistent events in a matter of seconds. There are copyright issues and the manipulation of public opinion on sensitive topics. Lastly, we have to consider the implications of these tools on new human and societal behaviors.

AI also significantly impacts the education process. Teachers find themselves facing the challenge of redefining homework, a crucial part of the learning process. A study conducted by the website study.com with one thousand students found that as of January 2023, 89 percent of students reported using ChatGPT to complete homework assignments and over half of the respondents

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admitted to using it for creating school texts.¹¹ Since ChatGPT allows students to add specific requirements such as an exact word count, the number of pages, or even the literary style, many students have not even read the provided text and simply submitted what AI generated to meet the requirement. The problem is intensified by the inability of many educators to determine whether assignments were entirely done using AI. Surprisingly, the study also showed that almost three-quarters of the interviewed students favored banning ChatGPT from the educational process, indicating that they are also concerned about the consequences.

Johann Neem, a history professor at Western Washington University, pointed out to *The Wall Street Journal* the issue of using tools like ChatGPT in education: “Just because there is a machine that will help me lift up a dumbbell doesn’t mean my muscles will develop. In the same way, just because there is a machine that can write an essay doesn’t mean my mind will develop.”¹²

Although some teachers and universities are in favor of integrating these tools into the educational process, many universities around the world have restricted the use of conversational AIs like ChatGPT and Bard on their campuses.¹³ Other educators have tried to mitigate the consequences of using these tools through alternative methods, such as handwritten assignments, small reading quizzes, or oral assessments. Some are even moving towards requiring tasks that involve personal critical analyses of lesser-known works, with questions that make it inevitable that the student must read the content and form a specific opinion, such as identifying the drawbacks of the work or drawing connections between the content and what was covered in class. Finally, some teachers have been adding a small declaration at the end of assignments where the students must affirm that they did not use any AI or similar means to complete the proposed activity.

While it may still be early to determine which methods will be the most effective, these new challenges in the field of education underscore the importance that teachers, parents, and all those involved in education must place on motivating students and conveying the true significance of the learning process (including extracurricular activities). It is not wise to rely solely on the personal motivation and maturity of students to prevent them from misusing such tools. More than ever, instructors must focus on shaping the character and integrity of students. They should educate students to have a full awareness that generative tools do not replace the benefits of the learning process and the relevance of knowledge. Just because I am driving a car faster than riding a bicycle does not mean I am getting more exercise from the car. Learning involves more than mere

memorization; it encompasses intellectual and character development and critical thinking.

In the academic sphere, master’s and doctoral students have also been using ChatGPT in their thesis work. However, the tool poses a problem for unrestrained usage. As seen earlier, generative AI creates responses using a lot of content available on the internet. However, often the user cannot verify the source of the material used in the research.¹⁴ They cannot even mention or add it to their bibliography because due to the generative nature of the intelligence, the provided response will be different every time it is asked, even if it is the same question.

And So What

Given that AI systems are but tools, one should not assume that they are inherently negative or positive. Just as with social networks, communication tools, and applications, it is the manner of use that dictates whether they shall be deemed beneficial or harmful.

As enthusiastic or concerned as many may be about these new tools, it is the duty of every pastor and religious leader to be aware of the potential as well as the risks of such technology. They need to raise an awareness among their members of the risks and problems that the misuse of these tools can bring, while also highlighting the benefits of using them correctly. Churches can address this topic in a creative manner, discussing it with young people in small groups or informal settings. Schools and colleges can utilize chapels or guest lectures to engage students with this topic. We should encourage our youth to become role models in the use and development of these technologies, especially for noble purposes. Many universities have already taken steps to teach students how to use these tools, but it is also important to prioritize ethical and moral discussions about their use.

Exercising common sense during the development process of new tools is essential, especially in the context of recent initiatives emerging in the evangelistic field of the Seventh-day Adventist Church linked to AI. In this regard, Christian ethics play a crucial role, demanding that professionals involved in the design and creation of tools consider moral and spiritual principles in their approaches. We can strive to humanize the experience and interaction of users with AI systems while ensuring a clear distinction between the identities of the communicating entities—whether they are machines or human beings. It is crucial to acknowledge that AI tools are subject to errors, as they operate based on probabilities. Consequently, content should never be automatically shared as an official church position without making sure that the response is correct and in harmony with what the Seventh-day Adventist Church officially affirms.

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The way AIs, such as ChatGPT and Bard, train their models using content available on the internet underscores the importance for the church to consistently produce high-quality articles and content, making it available on our websites. This is significant because various themes of biblical interpretation and subjects that are unique to Adventist theology are not readily available from an Adventist perspective on the internet. Sometimes, it is easier to find critical analyses produced by theologians from other denominations regarding Adventist interpretations than it is to find Adventist interpretations themselves. Regular postings of high quality articles on our websites will also aid in ranking higher those sites on Google. This content will increasingly be found not only by visitors to these sites, but also through other means. This is why the church and their members need to be active in digital ministry and need to produce and post quality theological articles on their websites (especially on websites that do not carry the church's name in the domain).

AI can also support the church in the communication of information and in reaching larger numbers of people. We should not avoid or ignore AI simply because there are numerous examples of misuse. Instead, it is important to understand that the responsibility for an ethical and proper use of these technologies falls on us, as creators and users. We must comprehend that new technologies lead to new behaviors, and new behaviors provide new opportunities to spread the gospel to others. Here is an illustration of how AI was used in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South America.

Through an AI called “Esperança” (“hope,” in English), Novo Tempo (the Hope Channel in the South American Division territory) has engaged with nearly three hundred thousand people in studying the Bible over the past four years. It was the first Adventist project using AI for evangelistic purposes.¹⁵ People from over a hundred different countries have gained a better understanding of biblical truths through a robot that responds to common questions and interacts on social media with individuals in Portuguese, Spanish, and English. Since May 2019, over fourteen thousand people have decided to commit their lives to Christ after studying in this unique way. Individuals from countries and regions that otherwise would be extremely difficult and dangerous for missionaries to reach have been reached because they only require the basic prerequisite for studying: a social network and interest.

Last year (2022), Esperança began answering biblical questions using AI. It utilizes biblical texts and audiovisual material produced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and uses more than six thousand articles and excerpts from the works of Ellen G. White to formulate its responses and provide additional content to encourage

users to continue studying. This is a small example of how AI can and has been used in sharing the gospel.

One might question whether we are “robotizing” the human mission, which should be the role of church members. However, it is important to consider that such tools are not meant to replace the personal mission assigned to each Christian (Matthew 28:18–20), but rather to amplify it. We should also not forget that behind these tools are people with their gifts and talents working to foster and advance the mission of the church. The AI tool is merely the means that is used in this endeavor. During the process of studying with interested individuals, the participation of church members is crucial in welcoming and providing spiritual support for these potential new converts. Just as the church has utilized various other technological means to reach people, these tools cannot replace the personal interaction and contact but serve as catalysts to reach even more individuals for the kingdom of Christ.

Every pastor, researcher, or educator should have at least a basic understanding of AI tools like ChatGPT. If you're not familiar with the tool, consider the possibility of taking a basic course. You can use it effectively only if you submit the right questions to AI. The more specific your search questions are the more effective AI will be in assisting in research, suggesting sermon themes, and even aiding in the development of Bible studies. AI can correct written texts, improve the language, or translate text or spoken messages with high accuracy. While the answers may not always be 100 percent precise (especially when texts from Ellen White are translated), these tools generally have a high level of accuracy, and if used appropriately, they can save a lot of effort and energy.

Give It a Try

As previously discussed, there is a strong debate regarding the potential of AI to replace jobs and professions in the future. However, it is a consensus that those who fail to adapt and capitalize on the benefits of these technologies will see their productivity decline compared to those who have adapted. To illustrate it, consider the difference in productivity between a professional food delivery with a horse-drawn cart and another using a car. Though they might perform similar tasks, the time to achieve similar results will be drastically different.

Every pastor, researcher, or educator ought to possess at least a foundational understanding of AI tools like ChatGPT. If unfamiliar with this tool, one might contemplate enrolling in an introductory course. It is hard to get good answers without knowing how to ask the right questions to these tools (an example will be provided later). Such technologies can significantly facilitate research, propose sermon themes, and even assist

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in creating Bible studies. They can correct both structure and spelling of texts, modify language to be more accessible or more academic, or translate with good accuracy. Educators can employ this tool to easily correct academic papers, for instance, by requesting the tool to critically evaluate each assignment based on the Adventist perspective on the subject or by feeding it with the content covered in class.

Another outstanding capability of generative AI is to condense texts into their key points or to underscore the most salient aspects. Consider summarizing several pages of text into just one or two paragraphs. AI can also offer creative ideas for thematic divisions when crafting new materials. For example, if you are planning to write a fifteen-chapter book on soteriology, ChatGPT can give you ideas for what to cover in each chapter, keeping your target audience in mind.

For educators, AIs can help share knowledge by offering ways to support students with special needs or to teach a certain subject. They can make pictures, give teaching examples, or even come up with deep thoughts for big discussions. A teacher could use the tool to make a test, just putting the content in and getting the questions out. With its easy-to-use setup, lots of customization, and a ton of data, AI can help anyone doing research on any topic from start to finish. While answers might not always hit the mark (especially concerning Ellen White), these tools are usually remarkably accurate and, when used wisely, can save a lot of time and energy.

AIs can also help find solutions to problems in specific areas, evaluate the effectiveness of existing plans, or even refine ideas that are not fully matured.¹⁶ It is essential to use these new technologies wisely in our personal research. The results provided should only be an initial step in the research process, and not treated as the final word. We should not ignore the fact that, being a generative tool, in many cases the responses provided by ChatGPT or any other generative platform may not be 100 percent accurate. The availability of content on the requested topic on the internet will likely affect the precision.

Therefore, the work of researching external sources and confirming results through other means becomes crucial. Furthermore, a correct answer from a non-denominational tool such as this may not necessarily reflect our specific understanding of the topic. In the research field, Google's Bard, which is still in its testing phase, and Microsoft's Bing have an advantage over ChatGPT (at least up to version 4) because they provide some of the references used in creating the response. Therefore, these tools are not only interesting for accessing a possibly different argumentation and approach, but also for obtaining some references and bibliographic information.¹⁷ Bard also has another advantage of being

connected to the internet, which can assist in researching recent topics. However, it is always interesting to use more than one generative tool, as the answers and approaches can vary.

On the other hand, ChatGPT (particularly its version 4) has been achieving notably superior results compared to Bard and Bing currently. However, to get the most out of this tool, it is important to know how to ask the right prompts (commands). A simple tip is not merely to ask a direct question, but also to provide a background, context, or specific nuances you seek in the answer. Such details will enhance the AI's precision. If the response does not meet your expectations, changing even a single word in the question might produce a quite different and possibly more fitting result. Yet, this is not always necessary; expressing your dissatisfaction or further detailing your request can deliver a more precise answer. Concerning context and details, imagine you wish to draft a brief Bible study on the gift of tongues for classroom use. If you simply request verses addressing the gift of tongues, you'll obtain a basic list. If you quickly ask for an analysis of these verses, the response might contradict the traditional Adventist perspective. But for your study's objective, when posing your question, it is essential to be more specific. For instance, you might input the following prompt into ChatGPT: "Imagine you are an Adventist theology college instructor. Your assignment is to craft a Bible study with an introduction, five verses from the Pauline epistles about the gift of tongues with individual analyses of each, followed by five true-or-false questions of a moderate-to-high level of difficulty. Conclude the study with a Christocentric and missiological reflection, linking it to the thirteenth Adventist belief: The Remnant and Its Mission." In this case, you could be more specific with your request, like asking to include Greek words, turning the study into a poem, or even adding fun riddles in the questions. The possibilities are endless.

Many other AI tools are specifically designed for research and can be very useful in academia or education in general. For example, Consensus is a great tool for finding relevant articles in a particular area of interest. When conducting research, the tool provides a summary, making it easier to assess relevance, provides some basic information, and offers a link to the complete article. Research Rabbit aids in the process of creating bibliographies, tracking citations, and generating summaries of papers. Time-consuming processes in the production of scientific articles can be streamlined through intelligent tools.¹⁸ To develop slide presentations, some tools are available such as Gamma, beautiful.ai, tome.app, and even PowerPoint's own Copilot 365. Most of these tools are paid and require a bit of practice to achieve meaningful results.¹⁹ However, if you are not technologically

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proficient, just being familiar with ChatGPT or Google Bard will significantly improve your research process.

What can AIs not do? They will never replace the need for human interaction, the importance of collective Scripture study, biblical authority and centrality, and the necessity to open the Bible and seek the true meaning and significance of each passage, without external interpretations. In spiritual terms, AI tools should not overshadow our intrinsic need to meditate and reflect on biblical topics or texts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit when preparing some material. Although these tools can craft entire sermons and articles, their primary role should be supportive in their preparation, ensuring that the connection and communion with God remain as central elements of the whole process. Even if AI can provide insightful answers based on extensive databases, it lacks the ability to discern the individual challenges and needs of your congregation or classroom. It would not know the peculiarities of each individual and, as a result, what would be the most effective approach. At best, it can only offer suggestions.

It is important to emphasize that we are still in the early stages of the AI revolution, and new tools will be launched in the future. It is crucial to have an evangelistic-missionary perspective when considering the new possibilities that will arise with these new AI tools. How can we use this tool to better prepare ourselves for preaching the gospel? Is there a way this tool can be

useful in our institutional work? Will this tool make preaching or carrying out the mission easier for you? How can you integrate this tool into a missionary initiative? These are some of the questions that need to be asked.

If God has used radio (AWR), television (Hope Channel), social media, and so many other technological means to reach people, why should we not be able to also use AI? I am convinced He will use them as well.

As you explore the potential of AI tools in your ministry and mission, consider how they can enhance your abilities, expand your reach, and extend the message of the gospel to new audiences. Just as technology has been a powerful tool for spreading the Word of God, AI can be harnessed to further advance the mission of the church and impact lives. Keep in mind the ethical and moral considerations, while also being open to innovative ways of sharing the message of hope and salvation.



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Endnotes

¹ Bill Gates, "The Age of AI Has Begun," *GatesNotes*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.gatesnotes.com/The-Age-of-AI-Has-Begun> (accessed August 11, 2023).

² Martin Korte, "The Impact of the Digital Revolution on Human Brain and Behavior: Where Do We Stand?" *Dialogues Clin Neurosci* 22, no. 2 (June 2020): 101–111, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7366944/> (accessed August 11, 2023).

³ "Artificial Intelligence Coined in Dartmouth," Dartmouth, <https://home.dartmouth.edu/about/artificial-intelligence-ai-coined-dartmouth> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁴ Cem Dilmegani, "When Will Singularity Happen? 1700 Expert Opinions of AGI," *AI Multiple*, April 28, 2023, <https://research.aimultiple.com/artificial-general-intelligence-singularity-timing/> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁵ Cassie Kozyrkov, "What's Different About Today's AI?," April 20, 2023, <https://kozyrkov.medium.com/whats-different-about-today-s-ai-380569e3b0cd> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁶ Thomas H. Davenport, "We're All Programmers Now," *Harvard Business Review*, September–October 2023, 100.

⁷ A. M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 59, no. 236 (October 1950): 433, <https://academic.oup.com/mind/article/LIX/236/433/986238> (accessed August 11, 2023).

⁸ It is important to consider that both AGI and ASI definitions can differ. The academic and scientific community does not have a consensus on the definitions of what intelligence and even consciousness would be, which results in different definitions for both terms.

⁹ Roman V. Yampolskiy, *Artificial Superintelligence: A Futuristic Approach* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2016), xiv.

¹⁰ "Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter," Future of Life Institute, March 22, 2023, <https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/> (accessed August 11, 2023).

¹¹ Study.com, "Productive Teaching Tool or Innovative Cheating?," <https://study.com/resources/perceptions-of-chatgpt-in-schools> (accessed August 11, 2023).

¹² Douglas Belkin, "Professors Turn to ChatGPT to Teach Students a Lesson," *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2023, <https://wsj.com/articles/professors-turn-to-chatgpt-to-teach-students-a-lesson-11674657460> (accessed August 11, 2023).

¹³ Joshua Herman, "Top UK Universities Ban Chat-GPT," *Redbrick*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.redbrick.me/top-uk-universities-ban-chat-gpt/> (accessed August 11, 2023).

¹⁴ In Bard and Bing, as well as in other tools, it is possible to access some of the websites used in generating the response.

¹⁵ See William E. Timm, "Using Social Network to Bring People to Christ," *Dialogue* 32, no. 3 (2020): 34–35.

¹⁶ Tojin T. Eapen et al., "How Generative AI Can Augment Human Creativity," *Harvard Business Review* 101, no. 4 (July–August 2023): 62.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the tool may reference unofficial websites or blogs that might not be the best bibliographic references.

¹⁸ To explore other tools, see, e.g., Somasundaram R., "Top 7 Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools in Scientific Research," *iLovePhD*, June 4, 2023, <https://www.ilovephd.com/top-7-artificial-intelligence-ai-tools-in-scientific-research/> (accessed September 15, 2023).

¹⁹ In a short testing period, I personally found Gamma to be the easiest tool to use with interesting results.

Lessons from Matthew 24

Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 24 and 25 are part of Jesus' final discourse that began in Matthew 23.¹ As He leaves the temple precincts for the Mount of Olives, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. So several of the disciples (Peter, James, John, and Andrew, according to Mark 13:3) ask about the timing of this event and of His second coming. The twofold structure of Jesus' answer reflects the twofold nature of the question.² This can be seen "from the repetition of events at two different junctures of His discourse, including the appearance of false Christs (Matt 24:5, 23–24) and false prophets (vv. 11, 24), tribulation (vv. 9, 21), and various upheavals of nature (vv. 7, 29)."³ The nearer events in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple are signaled by references to "these things" (vv. 2–3, 8, 33–34) and "this generation" (v. 34).⁴ The more distant events of the second advent and the end of the world are indicated by reference to "the end of the age" (v. 3) and "those days" (vv. 22, 29).⁵ Matthew 24 can be outlined as follows, describing recurring events that culminate with the second advent,⁶ followed by exhortations to be ready in the form of three parables that bracket a warning about the days of Noah:

A Events preceding Jerusalem's destruction (Matt 24:4–8)

B Tribulation/deception: false christs/prophets (Matt 24:9–14),

C Abomination of Desolation (Matt 24:15–20; cf. Dan 9:26–27; Luke 21:21–24)

B' Tribulation/deception: false christs/prophets (Matt 24:21–28)

A' Events preceding the coming of the Son of Man (Matt 24:29–31; cf. Dan. 7:14, 27)

1. Parable of the Fig Tree (Matt 24:32–35): two-fold application; end of Jerusalem/world
Like the Days of Noah (Matt 24:36–41): coming of the Son of Man
2. Parable of the Thief's Coming (Matt 24:42–44): coming of the Son of Man
3. Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants (Matt 24:45–51): exhortation to faithfulness

Interpretation of Matthew 24

1. Verses 1-8

- The disciples were so enamored with the magnificence of the temple buildings that they failed to

appreciate the truth of what Jesus had said about the "house" or temple being left "desolate" (Matt 23:38), so He had to reiterate the point in even stronger language: "not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Matt 24:2). These words were heard by many and would later be misconstrued against Him (Matt 26:61; cf. John 2:19).

- Many will come in Christ's name, with presumed messianic authority and false ideas (cf. 2 Cor 11:4). In fact, in first-century Israel such pretenders proliferated (Judas of Galilee, Theudas, James and Simon, Eleazar son of Dineus, and others).⁷ These continued even after Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70, including Simon Bar Kokhba who led the second Jewish revolt (AD 132–135).
- Wars are often preceded by increased instability in society and in the world and such is what happened leading up to the first Jewish revolt in AD 66. Within Israel there were rivalries with different factions vying for power and, on a larger scale, AD 68–69 was the "Year of the Four Emperors" (Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian, who had led Roman forces against the Jews).
- Jesus urged His followers not to be alarmed as if the end had arrived, because more would need to take place first, including "famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places" (Matt 24:7). "All these are the beginning of sorrows [Gk. *ōdinōn*]," He said (v. 8). The Greek word *ōdinōn* means "birth pains." In other words, just as labor pains come in waves, not all at once, so these types of events will recur repeatedly.
- In fact, an even closer parallel may be suggested: just as labor contractions increase in frequency and severity, natural disasters, wars, and pestilences can be expected to become more intense and widespread, some even having a global impact.

2. Verses 9-14

- Jesus' prediction of persecution soon met fulfillment with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:59), the execution of James (Acts 12:2), and the widespread Jewish opposition to the gospel. Nevertheless, despite being "hated by all nations" for their Christian witness (Matt 24:9) and even betrayed (v. 10) and "despised" (1 Cor 1:28), the disciples of Jesus would be successful in their mission to reach the world with the gospel (Matt 24:14).

Lessons from Matthew 24

- False prophets were a persistent problem in biblical history (e.g., Deut 13:1–3; Jer 14:14; 2 Cor 11:13), and perhaps it should be no surprise that false teachings generally appear whenever the truth becomes especially prominent (cf. 1 John 4:1–3). The “many” probably refer to deceivers both inside and outside the church as prophet-claimants generally attract widespread attention wherever they are.
- Lawlessness refers to either an attitude of indifference to or flagrant disregard of God’s law (cf. Matt 7:21, 23). It is the outward manifestation of an inner rebellion against the moral restraint the Decalogue provides.
- Since God’s law is based on love, rejection of that law leads to love growing cold and the death of a true heart-based spirituality. The positive counterpart to this is described as enduring “to the end” (Gk. *telos*), which may refer to the end of one’s life or to the predicted destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. A very similar thought is expressed in the Discourse on Discipleship (Matt 10:22).
- Although verse 14 is frequently applied to the completion of the gospel commission before the end of the world and is certainly applicable to our time, this verse probably also applies to the rapid spread of the gospel throughout the Roman world (Gk. *oikoumenē*) by the apostolic church (cf. Col 1:23).
- Jesus’ pronouncement of woes and His parting words as He departed from the temple seem to mark the time when the divine glory was again abandoning it to destruction (Matt 23:38; John 1:14; cf. Ezek 10:18; 11:23; Hag 2:9).
- The reference to “the abomination of desolation” mentioned by Daniel as a sign likely refers to the encroachment of Roman troops on “the holy city” (Matt 4:5; 27:53) in AD 66 by Cestius Gallus and their sudden, unexpected withdrawal (cf. Dan 9:26),¹⁰ as well as to the longer 1,260-year period of persecution (alluded to in Matt 24:20, 29; cf. Dan 12:7–11) that would precede the second advent (cf. 2 Thess 2:3–4).¹¹
- The hasty retreat of Cestius and the pursuit after them by Jewish troops provided the golden opportunity promised by Jesus for Christians to flee the city. Josephus describes it this way: “Many of the most eminent Jews swam away from the city, as from a ship when it was going to sink.”¹² According to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.3), Christians fled to Pella in Perea.
- The admonition to pray that one’s flight not be in winter or on the Sabbath refers to circumstances that would make escape from Jerusalem difficult, especially since this would largely be on foot with heavy rains making some routes impassable. Additionally, had it been necessary for Christians to flee on the Sabbath, its observance, finding shelter, etc. might have been difficult or impossible and would have drawn attention to them at a time when they could least afford it.

3. Verses 15-20

- Jesus now answers the disciples’ question regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, using the language of Daniel 9:26–27, which, quite astonishingly, predicts a future destruction of “the city and the sanctuary” following its restoration under Persian rule.⁸
- Although Daniel’s little horn prophecy (Dan 7:8, 11, 20–21; 8:9, 12) is often applied to Antiochus IV Epiphanes (cf. 1 Maccabees 1:54; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12:320–322), Jesus indicates its fulfillment is still future in His day.
- There is no reason to doubt Jesus’ application of “the abomination of desolation” to Jerusalem’s destruction following a Roman siege (Luke 21:20; cf. Dan 9:26). But this prophecy in Daniel has a broader significance (Dan 8:13; 9:27; 12:11), which Jesus also hints at (see below and comments on vv. 21–28).
- The Hebrew terms referred to in this prophecy, as well as their use in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel regarding Jerusalem’s desolation by Babylon (e.g., Jer 7:10, 31; Ezek 5:11; 7:20; 8:6, 14; Dan 9:11–17), suggest that both that destruction and the one by Rome were a direct result of Israel’s persistent rebelliousness and committing of abominations prohibited by God. A similar situation led to the temple’s demise at Shiloh.⁹

- Jesus consistently upheld obedience to the law, including the Decalogue (Matt 5:17; 19:18–19) and, as Luke 4:16 indicates, habitually worshipped in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Christians after Christ’s death and resurrection continued to observe it (Luke 23:56; Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). In fact, nowhere does the New Testament suggest a change in how first-century Christians related to the seventh-day Sabbath.

4. Verses 21-28

- Reference to “great tribulation” (v. 21) in “those days” (v. 29) distinguishes this period of suffering from the tribulation the disciples will face (v. 9; cf. Matt 13:21) and assigns it to a later, more distant time. The unusual string of negative particles (“no, nor ever shall be,” Gk. *oud’ ou mē genetai*) suggests an especially horrific period of persecution such that God promises it will never be repeated.¹³
- In view of Jesus’ previous reference to Daniel’s prophecies and the importance of understanding them (v. 15), there is a likely allusion here to the long

period of persecution by the little horn that would last 1,260 prophetic “days” or literal years (Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 12:6, 14), from AD 538 to 1798.¹⁴

- The parallel in Luke 21:23–24 confirms that reference is to a later period of persecution, following “great distress in the land and wrath upon this people,” the slaughter of Jews “by the edge of the sword,” and their dispersion “into all nations.” Only then is reference made to “Jerusalem” in a figurative sense. That is, God’s people “will be trampled” or persecuted by Gentiles (unbelievers) “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” This language matches the prophetic “trampling” of God’s people referred to elsewhere (Dan 8:10; Rev 11:2, referring to “forty-two months” of prophetic time).
- Deceptions will multiply in order “to deceive, if possible, even the elect,” including claims that Christ has appeared in some specific place, when, in fact, it is to be as visible as “the lightning which flashes across the whole sky from the east to the west” (Matt 24:27, GNT). The only explicit “sign” of Christ’s coming is given in verse 30: “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Such a sign cannot be counterfeited because it includes the righteous dead being raised and transformed with the righteous living to immortality and caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Cor 15:52–53; 1 Thess 4:16–17; cf. 2 Pet 3:10). By contrast, the wicked will be destroyed by fire with the brightness and glory of His coming (2 Thess 1:8–10; 2:8).
- Prophecy, one of the more important gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:10, 28), is a special sign of God’s remnant church (Rev 12:17; 19:10) given to counteract the demonic deceptions designed to deceive and decimate God’s end-time people (2 Thess 2:9–11; Rev 16:13–14). The “elect” (those who remain faithful) will not be deceived because they understand, believe, and obey the teachings of Jesus (Rev 14:12).
- Although these signs were centered primarily in North America,¹⁶ it was precisely this sparsely populated location prepared by God indicated in prophecy for the remnant’s appearance (Rev 12:15–17). Also not to be underestimated is the encouragement these signs gave to the study of Daniel and Revelation, leading to the rise of the Adventist movement with its focus on the fulfillment of the final and longest time prophecy in Scripture, the 2,300 day-years of Daniel 8:14, and to their conviction that the second advent of Christ was near.
- Daniel describes, as the result of the heavenly judgment (Dan 7:9–10), “One like the Son of Man” receiving “dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him” (Dan 7:13–14). So Jesus, having received the kingdom because those who will compose it have been identified through the judgment process, comes “with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30) “to give to every one according to his work” (Rev 22:12). The mourning depicted in verse 30 (cf. Rev 1:7) indicates regret by those who realize their eternal loss.
- The angels’ gathering of the elect (cf. Matt 13:41–43) is described as being “from the four winds” (cf. Rev 7:1)—that is, from the four directions of the compass and from across the globe.
- The first of three parables constitutes a kind of summary by Jesus of what He has explained in answer to the disciples’ twofold question. The sign given by the fig tree in putting forth leaves, showing that summer is near, illustrates how the signs Jesus has just mentioned will signal the nearness of the two great events—the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the second advent.
- By “this generation” Jesus refers to those in Israel who heard the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles and rejected it. In Matthew “this generation” is always a negative reference to faithless Israel (Matt 11:16; 12:39, 41–42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36) and recalls the wilderness generation that perished after forty years (Num 32:13; Ps 95:10). In a similar way, the judgment on Jerusalem would occur forty years after Jesus’ prediction, and is directly attributable to their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Hope remains for individual Jews who believe (Rom 11:23–24; Gal 3:27–29), but God’s purpose for raising up Israel as a nation could be clearly seen by this event as having come to an end.
- A secondary application may be seen in connection with the signs preceding the second advent. Just as the destruction of the temple was preceded by the sign of the abomination of desolation, so the second advent is preceded by the sun-moon-stars signs. In both cases, the signs were witnessed by a single

5. Verses 29-35

- The signs mentioned of the dark day and the stars falling from heaven (Matt 24:29) occur near the end of this long period of persecution, which was shortened to some extent by the events of the Reformation (cf. Mark 13:24) and has been identified by Seventh-day Adventists as beginning in AD 538 and ending in 1798, based on several mentions of a 1,260 prophetic day-year period in Bible prophecy (Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 12:6, 14; 13:5). Importantly, “the *sequence* sun-moon-stars is the same everywhere these phenomena are mentioned” (see also Luke 21:25; Rev 6:12–13), suggesting that “a specific rather than a more general fulfillment is expected.”¹⁵

generation, warning them that the predicted event was near.¹⁷

6. Verses 36-41

- The shift from near demonstrative pronouns (“this generation,” “these things”) to the far demonstrative pronoun (“that day and hour”) signals that the more distant events connected with the second advent are primarily in view.
- Interestingly, despite Jesus’ clear statement that “no one knows” the time of His return, not even Jesus Himself (cf. Mark 13:32), date-setting has never gone away. Countless predictions of a given year (rather than the day or the hour) being *the* year of Christ’s return have come and gone. Speculation regarding the time of the second advent distracts and detracts from the work Jesus’ followers have been given of spreading the gospel. Since Jesus, at least while on earth, did not know the time of His return, He could only answer the disciples’ question in a general way. To their more specific question after His resurrection, Jesus had to remind them that only the Father could reveal that (Acts 1:7). God reveals to us what is best for us to know at any given time (Deut 29:29).
- Although the time of the second advent has not been disclosed, we can know that it is near. One of the indications that Matthew has mentioned is in connection with the long period of persecution and the sun-moon-stars sign that came near the end of that time period. Another indication given by Jesus is that the world will resemble “the days of Noah” when people were blissfully unaware that God’s judgment on the world was imminent (Matt 24:37).
- Although there is no explicit reference here to the evil that existed in the antediluvian world, the description in Genesis no doubt underlies Jesus’ statement. Wickedness was so pervasive that “every intent of the thoughts of his [man’s] heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). However, even worse, was the carrying on with everyday life (“eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”) as if all this wickedness was normal. Thus, normalizing evil within the context of this human activity becomes the ironic prelude to sudden global destruction.
- Just as the people of Israel were given forty years to repent prior to the destruction in AD 70 prophesied by Jesus, and the antediluvians were given 120 years to heed the preaching of Noah (Gen 6:3; cf. 2 Pet 2:5), after the signs signaling the nearness of the second advent an even lengthier time for response to the final gospel proclamation may be expected.
- Jesus affirms both the historicity of Noah and the historicity of Noah’s flood. He also compares this event to His second advent, suggesting that both are global cataclysmic events (Matt 24:27, 37, 39). This conception is seen in other New Testament passages also (2 Pet 3:3–7 makes a similar comparison of these two events).¹⁸
- People are pictured peacefully going about their work, men in the field and women grinding at the mill, with everyone completely oblivious to their impending judgment. Those who are taken (being gathered by the angels, v. 31) are saved, while those who are left (as food for the eagles/vultures, v. 28) are lost and punished (Matt 24:40–41, as the antediluvians were who were left outside the ark in v. 39). The parallel in Luke 17:34–37 is preceded by the story of Lot: those who perish are left behind in Sodom, while angels take Lot and his family by the hand and lead them safely away (Luke 17:28–30; cf. Gen 19:16).
- Although some commentators applied the image of being “taken” to argue for a “secret rapture,” there is nothing secret about the second advent (vv. 27, 30–31); the point is that people will be taken by surprise and so we should always be ready.

7. Verses 42-51

- The two parables that conclude the chapter emphasize the importance of watching for the Lord’s return and working faithfully until then. We are commanded to watch (v. 42) because we cannot know the exact time. That is why His coming is likened to a thief—not because it is secret, but because it will be sudden and unexpected (vv. 43–44).
- The New Testament makes very clear that, when Jesus comes as a thief, everyone will know it. Destruction will come suddenly, like labor pains (1 Thess 5:2–3). Peter says, “The heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (2 Pet 3:10). And the book of Revelation connects it with the seven last plagues (Rev 16:15) and says that “every eye will see Him” (Rev 1:7).
- The final admonition to “be ready” refers to a constant and perpetual state of readiness that results from living, not for this world, but for the kingdom of God and placing it first (Matt 6:33).
- In the parable of the faithful and evil servants, both are trusted because both are left unsupervised. But only the faithful servant proves trustworthy—feeding the household at the appropriate time and not misusing the master’s goods. Yet, faithfulness earns no merit. In the end, all the faithful will confess, “We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10).

Lessons from Matthew 24

- The wicked servant's behavior shows that he/she experienced no real change of heart. Christian hypocrites are as bad, if not worse, than the hypocritical Pharisees because they claim to know Jesus and have received more light. Therefore, they will receive a similar punishment, summarized as “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 25:30; Luke 13:28) and suffering the destruction of “soul and body” (Matt 10:28) in “everlasting fire” (Matt 18:8; 25:41, 46)..

Application of the Chapter

Some important lessons we may glean from Matthew 24 include:

1. Sometimes it is better to humbly listen and learn, especially when God is speaking to us through His Word. Otherwise, we may miss the message He has for us.
2. Protection from deception, satanic influence, and false ideas requires wisdom from God, gained primarily through a Spirit-guided study of the Scriptures (Matt 22:29; John 16:13).
3. While some societies offer comparative freedom of religious expression and safety from reprisals, this is never guaranteed in the Bible. As biblical principles become increasingly unpopular, it is even more important to find ways to express these principles convincingly and to have the courage to voice one's convictions with love and wisdom rather than to compromise in order to fit in with the spirit of the times.
4. Jesus never suggests that the whole world will be converted, but that the gospel message will be given to all the world *as a witness*, just as the healed leper was a witness to the priests (Matt 8:4)—possibly part of the reason for “a great many” of them eventually becoming followers of Jesus (Acts 6:7). Similarly, what we say and, even more importantly, how we say it can make an important impact for the kingdom of heaven.
5. The prophecies regarding the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon and by Rome (recall the preceding comments on Matt 24:15) constitute a serious warning to God's people today to avoid every form of sin and abomination, especially in light of the fact that one of end-time Babylon's most prominent epithets is “THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Rev 17:5).
6. Miracles are not always a sure sign of God's working but must be tested by whether the message accompanying them is in accordance with the Bible or not (Deut 13:1–4).
7. With the words, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Matt 24:35), Jesus underscores the absolute and inviolable nature of the prophetic word. Prophecy is one of the surest indications of God's existence and the truthfulness of the Bible (Isa 46:9–10; 2 Pet 1:19–21). As Jesus also affirmed, “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Thus, we are warned against any suggestion that parts of God's word can be safely ignored.
8. Jesus says quite clearly, “The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” and therefore urges us to “be ready” (Matt 24:44). We should keep in mind that not only were the antediluvians surprised by the flood despite the preaching of Noah, Jesus' disciples were also surprised by His suffering and death even though He had clearly warned them three times what was about to happen. It behooves us, then, to learn the lesson from their experience and take Jesus' prediction here more seriously.
9. In the final parable of Matthew 24, Jesus makes clear that the way to be ready for His return is to be always faithful as His followers. The servant is wise because he is faithful to his master.



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Endnotes

¹ See Clinton Wahlen, “Lessons from Matthew 23,” *Reflections* 82 (2023): 11.

² The bulk of Matthew 24, sometimes called the “Synoptic Apocalypse” (Matt 24:1–44), is paralleled in Mark 13:1–37 and Luke 21:5–36. The question itself echoes the language of Daniel 12:6–7.

³ Clinton Wahlen, “Have the Signs in the Sun, Moon, and Stars Already Happened?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl, rev. ed., Biblical Research Institute Studies 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2017), 285.

⁴ All biblical quotations are from the New King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ See Richard M. Davidson, “‘This Generation Shall Not Pass’ (Matt 24:34): Failed or Fulfilled Prophecy?,” in *The Cosmic Battle for Planet Earth: Essays in Honor of Norman R. Gulley*, ed. Ron du Preez and Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs, MI: Old Testament Department of the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary at Andrews University, 2003), 312–313, 316, suggesting a difference in verse 19 (cf. Luke 21:23) based on the demonstrative adjective preceding the noun (*en ekeinaiis tais hēmeraiis*) rather than following it as it does in verses 22 and 29.

Lessons from Matthew 24

⁶ Francis D. Nichol, ed. *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 497: “It is worthy of note that DA 628–633 applies the signs enumerated in vs. 4–14 primarily to the fall of Jerusalem and some of them secondarily to our time, and those of vs. 21–30 quite exclusively to events leading up to the Saviour’s second coming.”

⁷ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.60–65, 118; and Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.97, 102, 161.

⁸ The Greek phrase for “the abomination of desolation” (*to bdelygma tēs erēmōseōs*, Matt 24:15) matches the Septuagint translation of Daniel 12:11, which seems to point to a broader and more developed manifestation implied already by “the consummation” referred to in Daniel 9:27.

⁹ Paul J. Ray, Jr., “The Abomination of Desolation in Daniel 9:27 and Related Texts: Theology of Retributive Judgment,” in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. David Merling (Berrien Springs, MI: Institute of Archeology/Siegfried H. Horn Archeological Museum, 1997), 208–209.

¹⁰ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.535–540; cf. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 25: “When the idolatrous standards of the Romans should be set up in the holy ground, which extended some furlongs outside the city walls, then the followers of Christ were to find safety in flight.”

¹¹ See Ray, 211. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Daniel,” *Andrews Bible Commentary* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 1059, applies Daniel 12:7 specifically to “the 1,260 years (three and a half times) of papal supremacy and persecution.”

¹² Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.556.

¹³ Despite frequent attempts to link this period to the “time of trouble” referred to in Daniel 12:1 (the LXX translation of which has different wording in Greek), the Hebrew expression (*‘et tsarah*) often refers to a period of distress caused by enemy forces from which God’s people will be delivered (e.g., Ps 37:39; Isa 33:2; Jer 14:8; 15:11; 30:7).

¹⁴ For historical justification for these dates, see Heinz Schaidinger, *Historical Confirmation of Prophetic Periods*, Biblical Research Institute Release 7 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 28–29, 33. Cf. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 631: “For more than a thousand years such persecution as the world had never before known was to come upon Christ’s followers. Millions upon millions of His faithful witnesses were to be slain. Had not God’s hand been stretched out to preserve His people, all would have perished. ‘But for the elect’s sake,’ He said, ‘those days shall be shortened’ [Matt 24:22]” (brackets supplied).

¹⁵ Wahlen, “Have the Signs in the Sun, Moon, and Stars Already Happened?” 287.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (referring to the “Dark Day” of May 19, 1780, and the great Leonid meteor shower of November 13, 1833).

¹⁷ See J. Robert Spangler, ed., “Questions and Answers on Doctrinal Issues,” *Ministry* (October 1980), 30.

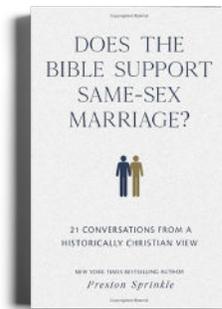
¹⁸ Further, see Clinton Wahlen, “Matthew and the Genesis Creation,” in *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the New Testament*, ed. Thomas R. Shepherd (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), 168.



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Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage? 21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View

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Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage? 21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View

Preston Sprinkle.
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There are available on the market a fair number of books that address the issue of homosexuality from a biblical-Christian perspective. The recent book by Preston Sprinkle, *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?*, stands out from the crowd for several important reasons. For one, Preston Sprinkle is a gifted writer and *New York Times* bestselling author who is not just knowledgeable about the subject on the theoretical and theological level, but also brings with him a wealth of practical engagement with people who identify themselves as gay. He has spent a good chunk of his life engaging the LGBTQ conversation and is the president of the *Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender* that seeks to provide theologically sound teaching and practical guidance on questions related to sexuality and gender. He has authored or edited a number of related books, like *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is not Just an Issue* (2015); *Living in a Gray World: A Christian Teen's Guide to Understanding Homosexuality* (2015); *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church (Counterpoints: Bible and the Church)* (2016); and more recently, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, The Church and What the Bible Has to Say* (2021).

But more than his reputable knowledge, Sprinkle in this book displays a rare virtue in his use of language and in the conciliatory spirit in which he engages the reader in the conversation. Throughout the entire book, one can tell that he tries hard to ensure that he represents opposing views with honesty, integrity, and charity (p. 13), and I think he succeeded admirably. What makes this book

so valuable is his ability to present sensitive subjects and controversial positions in an accessible and well-informed manner. The content is written in such a way that people who have not immersed themselves in the extensive research of the subject can nevertheless easily follow the discussion. He also presents current scholarship respectfully and engages recent proposals and positions in a thoughtful and fair manner.

To deal with such a theological and ethical hot potato that is one of the most divisive issues the Christian church faces today requires not only competence but humility and honesty. Sprinkle brings both to the discussion and he excels in dealing with the sensitive and controversial subject with keen acuity of its various perceptions and an awareness of the multifaceted dimensions that are part of this topic. His ability to present complex and often loaded subjects in a theologically responsible and yet highly readable manner is a rare quality that is often missing in the current debate. This is important because the manner in which we hold and present our biblical views is at least as important as what we believe.

For this reason, Sprinkle has dedicated the first introductory chapter to the important question of how we can have fruitful conversations on contentious topics—not just on homosexuality (Foundation 1, pp. 17–33). He lays out some basic principles that will foster an effective conversation. In chapter 2 he presents a detailed and helpful description of the historical Christian view of marriage (Foundation 2, pp. 35–63). With this foundation he then engages in twenty-one conversations about different arguments against the traditional view of marriage (pp. 65–237). These twenty-one chapters are conversations, rather than dogmatic pronouncements or sly arguments. Every chapter follows the same pattern: a) it starts with a short but fair summary of the argument in favor of a same-sex relationship or an argument against traditional marriage; b) the next step is where Sprinkle mentions points of agreement. Here the author seeks to point out common ground and legitimate concerns in each presented position. And c) a thoughtful response is provided for each perspective that makes clear why the author

thinks that to affirm God's blessing on same-sex marriage is not the best interpretation of Scripture.

The prominent arguments proposed in support of same-sex marriage that Sprinkle addresses in these chapters are: "Sex Difference is *Described*, Not *Prescribed*, in Scripture" (Conversation 1); "One Flesh' Does Not Imply Sex Difference" (Conversation 2); "No One Actually Believes in 'Biblical Marriage'" (Conversation 3); "Paul Was Not Talking About Consensual Same-Sex Relationships" (Conversation 4); "Romans 1 Is Condemning Excessive Lust, not Same-Sex Love" (Conversation 5); "The Biblical Writers Didn't Know About Sexual Orientation" (Conversation 6); "Romans 1:26 Isn't Referring to Female Same-Sex Sexual Orientation" (Conversation 7); "The Word *Homosexual* Was Added to the Bible in 1946" (Conversation 8); "The Biblical Writers Were Products of Their Homophobic and Patriarchal Culture" (Conversation 9); "Jesus Never Mentioned Homosexuality" (Conversation 10); "Paul Said It's Better to Marry Than to Burn (1 Cor. 7)" (Conversation 11); "Jesus' Sabbath Hermeneutic Informs How We Should Interpret Same-Sex Prohibitions" (Conversation 12); "God's Acceptance of Gentiles Mirrors How We Should Accept LGB People" (Conversation 13); "The Trajectory of Women and Slavery Justifies Same-Sex Prohibitions" (Conversation 14); "The Traditional View of Marriage Is Harmful Toward Gay and Lesbian People" (Conversation 15); "Some People Are Born Gay, So It Must Be Okay" (Conversation 16); "Same-Sex Marriage Is on the Right Side of History" (Conversation 17); "Christians Are Hypocritical" (Conversation 18); "Love is Love" (Conversation 19); "It's an Agree-to-Disagree Issue" (Conversation 20); and "The Traditional Sexual Ethic Is Not Livable for LGB People" (Conversation 21). In addressing these challenging ideas, Sprinkle has not shied away from tackling some of the most difficult topics that have been promoted in support of same-sex marriages with understanding and grace without compromising the biblical and historical Christian view of marriage.

Sprinkle is an engaging author who at times uses humor to make a point, without thereby denigrating any opposing view. His honesty in grappling with difficult questions is admirable and it is encouraging to see where he is humble enough to admit that he changed his position in light of more thorough and convincing research. This lends credibility to his case. His profound sympathy for those who have suffered through loveless acts and insensitive communication or who have experienced degrading attitudes towards gay people fosters sensibility in our understanding of their views and helps to connect with greater sensitivity to those with whom we might differ. This becomes visible not only throughout the entire book but is highlighted in the final chapter that deals with the challenging view that the traditional Christian sexual

ethic is unlivable for LGB people. Rather than ending the chapter by presenting his perspective, the author deliberately gives room to reflect our view of things and invites the readers to craft their own responses to it.

The thoughtful and tactful responses to tough questions create an atmosphere where the reader can reflect on his/her own perspective and even prejudices and provides a much-needed example of how a conversation about same-sex marriages should be conducted. An important contribution Sprinkle makes in this book is his focus on the traditional-Christian meaning of marriage and how it impacts our understanding of the discussion. He repeatedly brings this biblical view of marriage into proper perspective and compares alternative models of living together with what the text of Scripture teaches about marriage and what is affirmed from a historically Christian view. For him the question about same-sex sexual relations is primarily a question about the nature of marriage (p. 146), which leads to the subsequent question: "What is the marital and sexual ethic that God calls all his covenant people to follow?" (p. 172). Sprinkle upholds what historical Christianity and Judaism have affirmed throughout the centuries—namely, that in order to form a "one-flesh" union according to the Creator's design, the two persons need to be human, and they need to be sexually different (p. 41). He also points out that marriage in the Christian tradition symbolizes the unity between God and His people, which is an important purpose that same-sex marriage cannot fulfill.

There is one area in which his reasoning is not as strong and convincing as in the rest of his otherwise excellent and very readable book, and that is when he briefly presents the Sabbath as not mandatory for Christians today. Here Sprinkle's reasoning could be even more stringent and biblically astute. To depict the Sabbath and the keeping of the Sabbath (cf. pp. 157–165, 215, 223), as something that isn't mandatory for Christians (p. 223) or as something where Jesus and the biblical writers applied humanitarian exceptions to the rule (p. 158, 162) does not do justice to a careful biblical study of the Sabbath in Scripture. The insights from careful recent biblical scholarship on this question could broaden Sprinkle's horizon on the enduring validity and significance of the Sabbath, which was instituted by God together with marriage in Eden.¹ But even with this caveat, he is certainly right in pointing out in his chapter on the Sabbath hermeneutics that any view that assumes that marriage is primarily for companionship and to solve the problem of human loneliness reflects a reduced and secular view of marriage rather than a biblical one. He writes, "Companionship is *part* of how the Bible describes marriage, but there are other, more fundamental purposes of marriage. God didn't design marriage to be *the* solution to loneliness. Humans can live without sex. But we can't live without

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love and intimacy. And until the church understands the difference, we will continue to fail our gay and same-sex attracted (and all our single) brothers and sisters” (pp. 165–166). That marriage and sex are not essential to human flourishing, as he capably outlines already on pages 50–52, is a thought that is worth pondering more deeply for our understanding of marriage and human relations.

The usefulness of the book would have been enhanced with an author and Scripture index at the end of the book. Some of these details aside, the book is a gem and should be on the desk of every pastor or anyone who is following this thoughtful debate. It is highly recommended.

Endnotes

¹ See the discussion in Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), and more recently the two excellent volumes by Daniel Bediako and Ekkehardt Mueller, eds., *The Sabbath in the Old Testament and the Intertestamental Period: Implications for Christians in the Twenty-First Century* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021); and Ekkehardt Mueller and Eike Mueller, eds., *The Sabbath in the New Testament and in Theology: Implications for Christians in the Twentieth Century* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2023).

Frank M. Hasel

Associate Director of the
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“The records of sacred history are written, not merely that we may read and wonder, but that the same faith which wrought in God’s servants of old may work in us. In no less marked manner will the Lord work now, wherever there are hearts of faith to be channels of His power.”

Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, 175.

Biblical Theological Retreat - Jerusalem 2023

From July 3 – 10, 2023 the Biblical Research Institute met with the theology teachers and representatives of the publishing houses from the South American Division (SAD) for a Biblical-Theological Retreat in Israel. Interacting with the theology teachers from all the schools of SAD provided good opportunities to get to know each other better and to discuss important issues pertaining to their work in the classroom, research, and teaching.



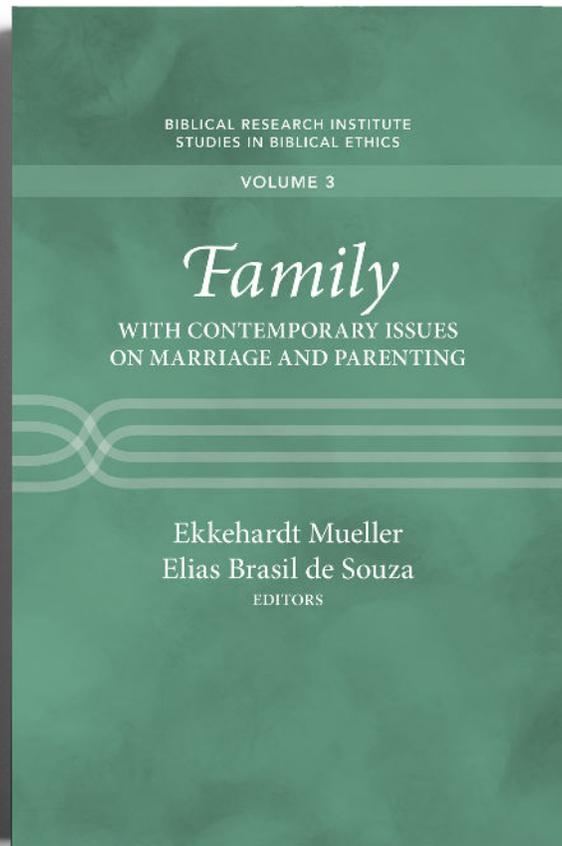
Fig. 1. The BRI team: Alberto Timm, Elias Brazil de Souza, Frank Hasel, Clinton Wahlen, Daniel Bediako (from left to right) (Photo Credit: Márcio Tonetti).



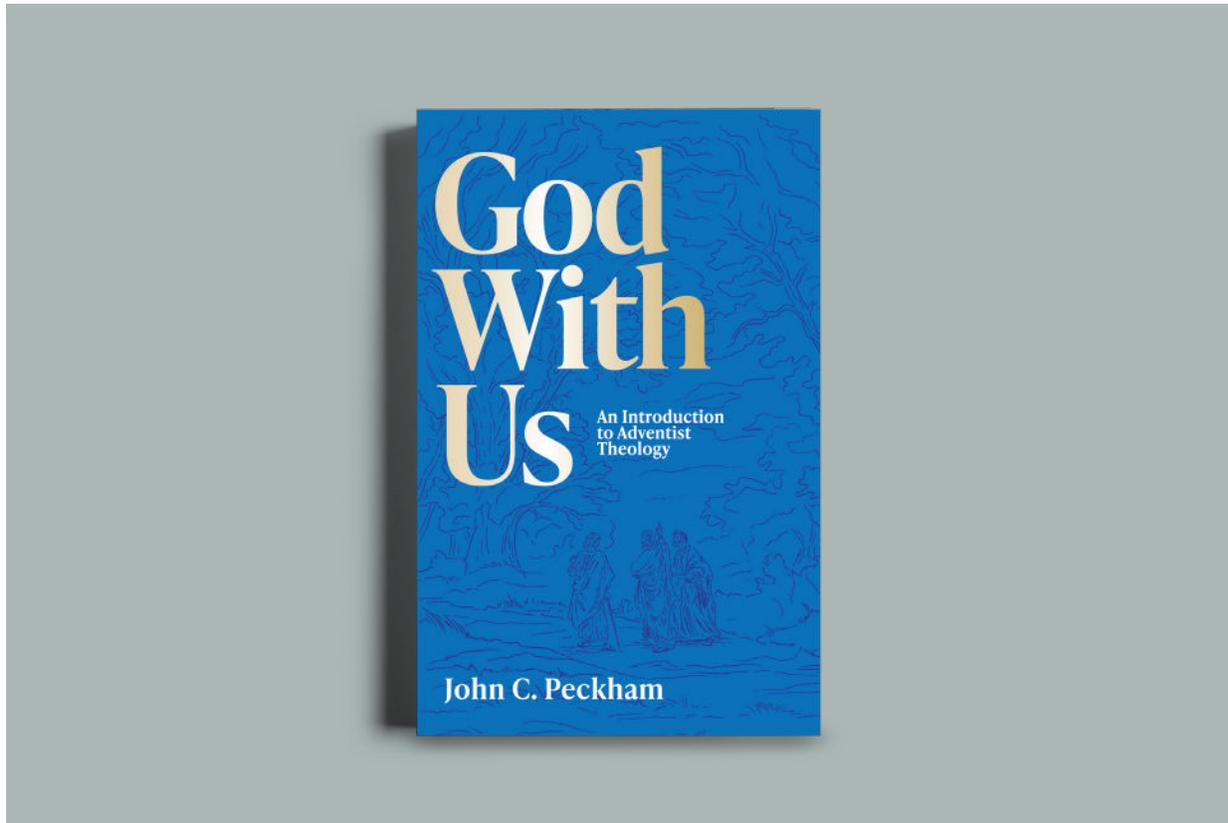
Fig. 2. The theology teachers of SAD at the Adventist Study Center in Jerusalem (Photo Credit: Magdiel Perez Schulz).

New Release!

FAMILY: *With Contemporary Issues on Marriage and Parenting* concludes the three-volume series on marriage and sexuality published by the Biblical Research Institute. Some topics that are addressed in the book are: “Romantic/ Love Marriages and Arranged Marriages: Biblical and Sociocultural Perspectives,” “Child Marriage,” “Incest,” “Sexuality, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Writings of the Early Adventists and Ellen G. White,” “Bride-Price and Dowry,” “Genetically Engineered Embryos,” “Surrogate Motherhood,” and “How Parents Can Live and Model a Contagious Spiritual Life,” among many other important subjects. A major goal of this volume is to bring clarity to these challenging topics and thus help readers deal with issues regarding family and sexuality based on the authority of God’s Word.



Available Now!



God With Us: An Introduction to Adventist Theology

The General Conference Biblical Research Institute (BRI) and Andrews University have partnered to publish a new book by John C. Peckham titled *God With Us: An Introduction to Adventist Theology* for general and classroom readers that theologically examines each of the Adventist church's fundamental beliefs.

The title of Peckham's book beautifully describes the organizing principle behind his treatment of Adventist doctrine and shows that, in the most profound way, every aspect of foundational biblical theology, as understood by Adventists, is framed by God's desire to be with and for His people. We see that most obviously in Creation, the Incarnation, the Sabbath, the Second Coming, the Sanctuary and in every other aspect of our Fundamental Beliefs. Peckham's insightful interaction with other theological positions gives the reader a deeper understanding of the beauty, coherence, and uniqueness of Adventist theology. His book will be a significant reference point for Adventist theology for years to come.

Author: John C. Peckham

Can be ordered at [Andrews University Press](https://www.andrews.edu/press) and on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Index to Reflections

The first issue of *Reflections* was published in January 2003. Since then, we've published many articles. While it's possible to use Acrobat to simultaneously search all past issues of *Reflections* for one word or phrase, some readers have asked for a formal index. From now on, you will find a pdf index at the end of each newsletter that you can download.

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