DARK STINKY PLACES

The story of Noah’s ark and the flood is a perennial children’s favorite. Yet while the story of the construction of the ark and the forty days of deluge are familiar to most, the period of days within the ark is often glanced over.

Anyone accustomed to being around animals will also be aware of the odors that animals diffuse. But just imagine not only most species, but all the species of the world, coming together for forty days (and then some). Each species with their own manner of consumption and elimination, you can just imagine the complexity of those logistics!

Now consider the level of sophistication the heating, ventilation, and air circulation systems would have required. With water coming down out of the heavens and coming up out of the ground for a full reset of the world, outside of its only window, the ark was completely sealed. And with a quasi-Armageddon occurring outside, it may have been rather dark on the inside for at least several days due to the weather conditions.

As uncomfortable as the ark may have been, one thing is for sure: it was worse on the outside. Despite the stench of animals, the darkness of the cabins, and the rocking of the ark, the safest place on the planet at that time was inside that ship. While “all flesh” was terminated outside, the vessel of life was that ark.

Similarly, the church may stink a little, and can seem a little gloomy. But spiritually speaking, when compared to the spiritual darkness of the world and the intent of the spiritual enemies on the outside, God’s church is the one place of safety.
Write out John 21:2–14 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, you may write John 21:3–6. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
PEW-WARMER TO PASSIONATE DISCIPLE

At some point in our spiritual walk within Christianity, we need to assess our presupposed notions of religion. Tragedy, for example, often sparks a reassessment of our assumptions in light of the emerging questions that pain and suffering bring. In other cases, we simply grow up and find new questions emerging, or we enter into a new stage of life where our needs change. There is nothing wrong with reevaluating our religious and spiritual beliefs. It is important how we do it.

The Seventh-day Adventist standard is to evaluate everything according to the Bible. So, for example, in this series of studies we are looking at the concept of discipleship in the Bible. Without examination, some may float through their religious experience assuming that being a member of the church is equivalent to being a disciple of Christ. Hopefully, by now, that assumption has been challenged in your mind.

Our concept of “church” must also be evaluated. Since everyone who becomes a disciple signs up to become a fisher of souls (Mark 1:17), a disciple is no longer merely watching or listening from the pews but becomes an actual worker (Matt. 9:37, 38). This work does not only entail making presentation slides and folding program bulletins at church, but it involves investing in people (Acts 14:21–23). We can expect fear in the beginning; mistakes are bound to happen; ignorance, impatience, discouragement, and even failure may occur. But these emphasize all the more the need for a mentoring process in which the novice may learn from the experienced (2 Tim. 2:2). Disciples make disciples who make more disciples. This is the soul-winning process, the Grow cycle, the agricultural model of evangelism. When this cycle then becomes actualized and a complete process causes addition to turn into multiplication, this is the engine that makes the church powerful (Eph. 4:11–12)! In other words, the church is God’s people laboring in love to make more of His people—mind to mind, hand to hand, and heart to heart.

This dynamic view of church is much different from the pew-sitting, members-only model, where people come in, listen to a sermon, and leave until they repeat the process the next week, leaving all the work to the “paid professionals.” Church is the platform where we are engaged in discipleship with Christ. In our day of being digital nomads, our generation must realize that connecting to Christ involves connecting to His body—the church. Identifying with the church and its history, enjoying fellowship with its members, and becoming involved in its life and ministry are all vital components of organic, authentic, and Christ-centered discipleship.
ESCHATOLOGICAL DISCIPLES

Though Christian discipleship may occur in other denominations, discipleship in the Adventist context differs slightly. First, the context of the last days must be taken into consideration. The theological term would be eschatological discipleship, where eschaton refers to the last days. Not that disciples in the last days are better or holier than those before them, but Adventist discipleship must reflect the unique mission and message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As simplistic as it may sound, this may not always be obvious. The distinctive message, entrusted by God to His remnant church and firmly established in the Bible, is the foundation of faith and practice for so-called eschatological disciples.

These followers of Jesus at the end of time must be taught from the Bible how God raised up the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They should be led to understand their special identity as part of a prophetic movement with a rich history and a divine mission and message.

In an age when many are skeptical of organizations and establishments, it is especially important to know the primary mission of the organization you choose to be a part of, as well as how it is structured and to what end. The Adventist Church is much more than a local church or a global organization. In many ways, it pioneered the glocal organization, where the local impacts the global and the global has a reciprocal effect on the local.

The Adventist Church has four levels with four different jurisdictions; it differs from traditional hierarchical structures in a way that reflects this glocality:

• Local church—a body of individual believers that has authority over membership and local mission (often reassesses leadership every one to two years)
• Local conference—a body of local churches within a particular area that has authority over tithe and the pastors (often reassesses leadership every two to three years)
• Union conference—a body of local conferences within a particular area that has authority over regional policies and regional mission (often reassesses leadership every five years)
• General Conference—the complete body of union conferences that has authority over church mission and church governance, regionalized into various divisions for further efficiency (reassesses leadership every five years)

The General Conference meets in business session once every five years, with one of its primary responsibilities being to review the Church Manual. This book is a collection of principles and procedures that the world church has agreed upon for operations. It seeks to actualize the unique responsibility of eschatological disciples in pragmatic form. Unlike biblical principles, it is subject to review and adapts with the times. Interestingly enough, in the section on the church board (2015 edition, p. 129), the Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual states:

[The church board’s] chief concern is having an active discipleship plan in place, which includes both the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

John 18:15–18  
Mark 1:16–22  
Exodus 18:17–27

What other verses/promises come to mind in connecting the entire Grow cycle?

Review your memorized verse from John 21:2–14.
FIRE OF COALS

The Gospel of John paints a beautiful narrative found in two separate parts but linked by a particular word: anthrakia. In Greek, it refers to a fire of coals. The same word is the root for the bacterial infection (anthrax) that causes scarring, which itself apparently looks like coal (anthracite). Anthrakia is found only twice in the book of John, connecting the two scenes of Peter.

It is first found in John 18:16–27, where Simon Peter denies Jesus three times. In the first denial, Peter stands before an anthrakia, a fire of coals. As if it paralleled the denial, John details that it was cold (he was there with Peter), associating the temperature of the air with the condition of Peter's heart. Verse 18 mentions that the people around the fire "warmed themselves" and that "Peter stood with them and warmed himself." At a time when Peter should have stood for Another, he instead stood for himself. One can almost imagine Peter staring at the fire of coals while chaos ensued within his conscience.

A fire of coals is found the second time in John 21:3–19. Peter was a disciple, originally called by Jesus at the beginning of the book. But after the incidents of the passion week, Peter leaves this calling and at least temporarily takes a reprieve by going back to fishing (21:3). Because Peter is the leader of the pack, the other former fishermen follow him, returning to the only profession they had known. On their first try, despite having spent the whole night at work, they caught nothing. If anything, they should have at least been good at fishing, but even in this, they had failed.

When Jesus comes to them, rather than rebuking Peter outright for his denial, Jesus gently recreates the conditions of his first calling. Instead of a direct encounter, Jesus offers fishing advice to the fishermen, which results in the draught of 153 large fish (21:11). Having proven Himself the Lord of fish, fishing, fishermen, fishers of men, and of all Creation, He is reunited with the disciples (in the case of Peter, quite dramatically). Upon coming to shore, the disciples see bread and fish, an allusion to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fishes as well as the feeding of the 4,000 with seven loaves of bread and a few fishes.

Without saying much, Jesus communicated that without Him, they couldn't catch fish, or souls, despite their expertise. Granting another opportunity for discipleship, Christ pulls Peter aside and asks him a question three times—one for every denial. Peter had "messed up" and was pained with shame, but Christ tenderly offered him the mandate to shepherd His people. For every denial, Jesus asks him a question to heal the wound as well as to inspire him to minister to His flock—to feed the young ones, to guide the older ones, and to feed the older ones (John 21:15–19). With that, Christ concludes with the evocative words, "Follow Me.”

The church is composed of the Peters who are discouraged, who have spiritual shame and histories of pain. The church as the body of Christ is full of weak disciples. And yet is able to overcome through these anthrakia experiences. And through these experiences with Jesus, the Peters, who often can't get anything right, can be successful again—to catch 153 fish! If Christ can perform miracles with fish and with Peter, how much more with us, the church, and souls for the kingdom!
CONNECTING WITH CHURCH

“Another obligation, too often lightly regarded, —one that to the youth awakened to the claims of Christ needs to be made plain, —is the obligation of church relationship.

“Very close and sacred is the relation between Christ and His church—He the bridegroom, and the church the bride; He the head, and the church the body. Connection with Christ, then, involves connection with His church.

“The church is organized for service; and in a life of service to Christ, connection with the church is one of the first steps. Loyalty to Christ demands the faithful performance of church duties. This is an important part of one’s training; and in a church imbued with the Master’s life, it will lead directly to effort for the world without.

“There are many lines in which the youth can find opportunity for helpful effort. Let them organize into bands for Christian service, and the co-operation will prove an assistance and an encouragement. Parents and teachers, by taking an interest in the work of the young people, will be able to give them the benefit of their own larger experience, and can help them to make their efforts effective for good” (Education, 268, 269).

“Those who have newly come to the faith should be patiently and tenderly dealt with, and it is the duty of the older members of the church to devise ways and means to provide help and sympathy and instruction for those who have conscientiously withdrawn from other churches for the truth’s sake, and thus cut themselves off from the pastoral labor to which they have been accustomed. The church has a special responsibility laid upon her to attend to these souls who have followed the first rays of light they have received; and if the members of the church neglect this duty, they will be unfaithful to the trust that God has given them” (Review and Herald, April 28, 1896).

“Some of the new converts will be so filled with the power of God that they will at once enter the work. They will labor so diligently that they will have neither time nor disposition to weaken the hands of their brethren by unkind criticism. Their one desire will be to carry the truth to the regions beyond” (Testimonies for the Church, 7:20).

“Those who are most actively employed in doing with interested fidelity their work to win souls to Jesus Christ, are the best developed in spirituality and devotion. Their very active working formed the means of their spirituality. There is danger of religion losing in depth that which it gains in breadth. This need not be, if, in the place of long sermons, there is wise education given to those newly come to the faith. Teach them by giving them something to do, in some line of spiritual work, that their first love will not die but increase in fervor. Let them feel that they are not to be carried and to lean for support on the church; but they are to have root in themselves. They can be in many lines, according to their several abilities, useful in helping the church to come nearer to God, and working in various ways to act upon the elements outside the church which will be a means of acting beneficially upon the church. The wisdom and prosperity of the church casts a telling influence upon her favor. The psalmist prayed for the prosperity of the church, ‘God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause His face to shine upon us. . . . That Thy way may be known upon the earth, Thy saving health among all nations’ ” (Evangelism, 356, 357).
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How can church become a better safe place?

How is the church the safest place?

What other views, definitions, and expectations of church are there? How are these biblical or unbiblical?

What other views, definitions, and expectations of discipleship are there? How are these biblical or unbiblical?

What will it take to enact change at the local church to meet these biblical views, definitions, and expectations?

How cognizant are you of the locality, globality, and glocality of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Why does this matter?

Why is organized religion necessary?

How can we help the bride of Christ?