

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S STRATEGY

The world is suffering from a severe loss of confidence in society and its institutions—government, the family, organized religion—everything seems to be on the brink of total collapse, a total blur. It is endemic and pandemic. This is the age of cynicism and doubt. What is so alarming is that this miasma seeps into the household of faith. One writer observes, “We stand in a divided America, where the spiritually useless and doctrinally bankrupt theology of many universities and seminaries and the shallow, emotionally self-indulgent praise-and-worship addiction of many revivalistic churches glare across a seemingly unbridgeable chasm.”¹ Does this speak to our situation? We are not immune.

Arthur Koestler, the playwright, once said, “Nature has let us down, God seems to have left the receiver off the hook, and time is running out.”² J. B. Phillips reminds us that even Christians “suffer to-day, more than perhaps in any preceding age, from a sense that the world is out of control.”³ Our rejoicing at the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe may have been premature. The horrible specter of ethnic conflict and cleansing arose in its place. Christianity is put to the test as militant fundamentalist ideologies threaten to engulf us in a worldwide conflagration. Whatever the means, Satan’s goal is to domesticate the Creator, reduce Him to a god in a pantheon of gods competing for first place.

“When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3). We need as never before a robust doctrine of church, and it begins with God—a God who is in

control. "Fear God and give glory to Him" (NKJV)—the message of the first angel in Revelation 14:7 identifies this God as the Creator God who "made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." He is Author and Finisher. " 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty' " (Revelation 1:8).

We will get nowhere in our search until we face the issue of God, His place and position, who He is, and how He operates. Is He worthy of all praise?

In our society, God is caricatured, cartooned, and stereotyped. He is painted either as a pathetic, rather nice old man whom nobody takes seriously or as a mean tyrant who tortures children and makes innocent people suffer. This may be an extreme way of putting it, but it serves to highlight the reality. The pity is that religious people aid and abet these distortions by monstrous doctrines such as that of an eternally burning hell. One extreme is as bad as the other.

Our concept of God means everything. These myths prove to be mists that can be cleared away just as the low-lying clouds are dissipated by the rising sun. One thing is certain: God is no cosmic bully. It is "those who are deceived by Satan" who "look upon God as hard and exacting" and who "regard Him as watching to denounce and condemn, . . . unwilling to receive the sinner so long as there is legal excuse for not helping him."⁴

God is a parent. Jesus' favorite theme was the paternal nature of the character of God. It is as if He wanted to say to the whole world, "Let me tell you about my Father." This picture of God is central to the Sermon on the Mount and a number of the parables. It is a familiar theme also in the Old Testament. The God of Israel is a loving parent, full of compassion toward His erring children, "for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). The prophets report His great concern for us: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Isaiah 49:15).⁵

The only hope of an out-of-control planet, crashing into oblivion,

is this God—first and above all, we must see Him. First and before all, He is the un-imagined, unseen God. Not a superman or an improved human. He cannot be represented by anything that was made or seen. He was not made. His substance is not that of those things that He has created. “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24, KJV).

We must get this right; everything depends on our view of God—everything! To be foggy here is fatal. “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

The great gulf

When this new planet of indescribable beauty was still on the drawing board, the terrible rebellion was already underway. A created being, perfectly formed and multitalented, turned himself into a demon. “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” (Isaiah 14:12, KJV). How this came to pass is a mystery—one of those matters known only to God.

Ezekiel speaks with prophetic insight into the mystery of iniquity personified as the king of Tyre: “You were the seal of perfection. . . . You were anointed as a guardian cherub. . . . You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you” (Ezekiel 28:12–15). Scientists tell us that nature abhors a vacuum. “Sin was found” in this space, this void. Separation from the Source created that dreadful void. Adam did not pick up a bug. There was no virus in all of that perfect world. To be separated from God is to be cut off from the Life-Giver and sustainer of life. Lucifer pulled the plug. It is in this void created by Lucifer that sin began its terrible career. It metastasized and grew on its own, separated from the Creator. Death is all there is when separation from the Life-Giver takes place. Satan cannot create the simplest creature. He is only able to corrupt what God has made.

John the revelator rounds out the picture of this fallen angel:

“When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child” (Revelation 12:13). I once heard a celebrated clergyman, when confronted with an unusual outbreak of evil in his parish, throw up his hands and say, “It almost makes one believe in a personal devil!” Adventists take the position that indeed sin and evil are personified—in an actual person—contrary to the position that evil is an unnamed influence. This robust theology of the church that we seek must have a clear view, a realistic concept of the enemy: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

The Creator foresaw the fruit of rebellion, the evil it would bring. Only He knew the severity of the emergency, the threat to the whole universe. Only He could penetrate the depths of the mystery. He alone could provide the remedy. He does not leave us lost in space on a runaway planet doomed to extinction. He sees the future clearly and develops a plan for rescue and survival.

He could have abandoned the plan. Deity—Father, Son and Holy Ghost—was faced with a decision. Shall the plan be deferred? The Father speaks:

For this is what the LORD says—
he who created the heavens,
 he is God;
he who fashioned and made the earth,
 he founded it;
he did not create it to be empty,
 but formed it to be inhabited—
he says:
“I am the LORD,
 and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:18).

This was the first disclosure of God's secret plan. His vision is

not just a forecast of future happenings. It is more than a master plan. God's vision is a living, pulsating thing. It is the living, active instrument of salvation for the planet and its inhabitants. It is dynamic, always in motion, the living active instrument of salvation for the planet and its inhabitants. It is His will, and it is already done (Numbers 23:19). A motion picture can seem so real we are moved, but the vision *is* real time. This new world was a part of God's dream, His vision. He saw us and loved us yet unborn.

"The Father consulted His Son in regard to at once carrying out their purpose to make man to inhabit the earth."⁶ The decision was that this new world would be the place where the bold, brash intrusion of sin and the intruder would be met and routed. God's righteousness would triumph. From this unlikely crowd—"senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Romans 1:31, NABRE)—a new people would come forth, His church, God's new community, model of what God has in mind. He has declared the church to be the place where people should see in microcosm what the kingdom is like, how it works. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10, KJV).

This little world, which Carl Sagan calls "a mote of dust circling a humdrum star in the remotest corner of an obscure galaxy,"⁷ nevertheless becomes the center of the universe. God had created many worlds, but the situation in this one is entirely different. This new element, which I call the intrusion, poisons the atmosphere, threatens the beautiful picture—threatens relationships between God and His creatures. This intruder must be dealt with. The carrier of the virus lurks in the shadows, eager to spread its misery and death. Containment will not do—it must be annihilated!

"Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1, 2).

Separation is fatal

Separation, no matter how small, is a serious matter and must be dealt with. God never intended that He should be separated for one moment from the ones created in His image. From the outset He scheduled daily visits. The Creator's universe is one. Separation at any point—anywhere in creation—affects the rhythm in all God's domain. This void is a breeding place for sin.

Satan is the separator. Sin is his instrument. Sin must be an awful thing to cause such a rupture in God's family. This separation is exceedingly painful to God—He felt it from its inception. But the Creator still longs to have that communion with His children. He is determined to maintain communication—no matter what the cost.

Satan the accuser had made a sinister case against the Creator, libeling His name, charging that He was responsible for all the misery and suffering that he (Satan) has caused. The once supertalented leader of the heavenly choir, the covering cherub, grew bolder and bolder. Angels and inhabitants of the unfallen worlds began to wonder, *When will the Commander speak? His authority as moral governor of the universe is at stake.*

“My God is a mighty man of war”

None need wonder. Above the confusion and strife, that authoritative voice speaks. The Creator declares war on the peace breaker: “And I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman [the church], and between your offspring and hers; he [Christ] will crush your head [a deadly blow] and you will strike his heel [a painful wound]” (Genesis 3:15; interpolations added). The promised Son will come—promise becomes flesh. His “blood alone is efficacious. It alone can make propitiation for our sins.”⁸ It is the Son's blood that speaks most effectively. The struggle for control of a lost planet in one sentence: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

The crippling terror and doom of the sentence of death that hung like Damocles's sword over the human family gives way to

the One who has the last word. Unbelievable! How does Yahweh do it? He has His weapons, the Cross and the church, that have always existed in His heart and mind, ready to spring into effect “in His time.” The Lord’s preparation is thorough; it must be thorough. The highly inflammable seeds of the rebellion must be completely destroyed, not a trace left. “Affliction shall not rise up the second time” (Nahum 1:9, KJV).

It is war! A fight to the finish, with only one survivor: the beneficent Creator and His entourage, His witnesses—“they that are with him” (Revelation 17:14, KJV). So, we all are involved. That is why we need a more sharply defined picture of church. We cannot afford to be fuzzy about the matter. We need a more robust theology of church because we face a cosmic monster who is intent on destroying us. He would corrupt the narrative. He is a crafty propagandist—a smooth talker.

We do not have the answer to the terrible inequities of life, war, bloodshed, sickness, human trafficking, the inhumanity of man to man, the suffering of the innocent—and death. It is then that the enemy subtly raises the charge, “Where is the God of justice?” This is the great insinuator’s most powerful weapon in his attack on the saints. Satan charges God with all the suffering and evil in the world. He paints the picture of a horrible God—a monster. To meet the attack, we must have full armor (Ephesians 6:13).

We cannot afford to send Christ’s followers into battle totally unprepared to meet the reality of the battle. We are not wise enough to put together a neatly packaged formula to cover all the horrors and holocausts. But we are not without weapons: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4). “In purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left” (2 Corinthians 6:6, 7).

The stark reality is that Satan the usurper has claimed earth

as his property and has in fact set up his kingdom here. The situation calls for a strong deliverer. It is good to know that our Commander-in-Chief is not in some distant headquarters but with us everywhere we go. "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18).

The *goel*

In Hebrew culture the most awesome figure is the judge. And then there is the *goel*. He is the one who redeems the property that has been lost. Sometimes by an unfortunate circumstance, or if the heirs act foolishly, the property is lost. The *goel*—a close relative—can take up the case of the unfortunate family. The word *goel* came to mean "to redeem" or "the redeemer." It is rendered in the King James Version as "kinsman" (Numbers 5:8; Ruth 3:12; 4:1, 6, 8), "redeemer" (Job 19:25), and "avenger" (Numbers 35:12; Deuteronomy 19:6). "Jewish law gave the right of redeeming and repurchasing, as well as of avenging blood, to the next relative, who was accordingly called by this name."⁹

Jesus is the strong Deliverer, the Kinsman-Redeemer. Jesus is our Elder Brother, the nearest of kin. He is the Guarantor. He is our Sufficiency, able to pull it off, take care of business. It's a done deal.

But the surprise is that the Creator makes the church His primary instrument. Enfeebled as it may be! It becomes our business to unmask Satan, disrobe him, call him out for what he is. God chooses human beings, individuals, to be witnesses to the good news that the *goel* brings justice. The first angel of Revelation 14, who proclaims "the everlasting gospel," declares, "Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come" (Revelation 14:6, 7, KJV). Judgment is good news; the people of God preach it and summon the world to prepare for that great day by repentance and submission to their Creator.

Heaven's colony

Heaven saw the defection for what it was, a challenge to God's

justice and matters of God's vision, His universal rule. His power is driven by love. Love for those unborn children who would make up His family, who would fill the vacancies made by the rebellion. Heaven's census is to be restored to full strength. There is a book that records the names of those who took part in the rebellion and were cast out. That space must be and will be filled with the redeemed.

The colony has the same foundation as the mainland—same constitution and bylaws. There is correspondence here. The throne is established on justice. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne" (Psalm 89:14).

Likewise the colony. The mission of God's chosen vessels is to establish a community under His kingdom of justice in a rebellious society that will bring glory to God. This place—the colony—is a blessing to all humankind, the just and the unjust. It is to dispense blessings to all people—light bearers—that these servants of God come bearing gifts. The colony does business as the Kingdom. The psalmist exclaimed, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of our God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts" (Psalm 46:4–6).

The citizens of the colony are representatives of the mainland. The Creator carefully chooses His agents, and they work by precept and example. A group of European explorers came upon a French worker-priest in the most desolate of places. When they asked him how and why, his terse reply was, "So that the rumor of God should not completely disappear from the earth." The Creator has declared that He would raise up witnesses in every time and clime. "The Lord has never left Himself without a witness."¹⁰ There is a long unbroken line of witnesses, loyal to the God of heaven—men, women, and children—scattered like beacon lights in the darkest corners of the earth. They are chronicled in Hebrews 11.

Among his witnesses were men of yore, who left big footprints: Enoch, who "walked faithfully with God" (Genesis 5:24);

Abraham, of whom the Lord said, "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment" (Genesis 18:19, KJV).

They built altars that dotted their world as they moved from place to place as witness to their God (Genesis 12:7). They were hospitable—friends of God and friends to their contemporaries. Abraham's household numbered more than a thousand souls. He recognized other God fearers, paid tithe to Melchizedek, and knew the kings and clerics of his day. The men and women spoken of in Hebrews 11 were lights in their time, lights for all time. They had a single-focus message—God: His character, power, and strength. He alone was to be worshiped.

From the record we can deduce that God's witnesses were also in pagan lands. Somehow the Savior has reached their hearts. And so you have Job, Melchizedek, Hagar, Rahab, the Magi, the Ethiopian treasurer, Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and others who were not of Israel but by the Spirit's movement became followers of the Creator God and subsequently His witnesses. No child is left out!

At times those who have no knowledge of God aside from that which they have received under the operations of divine grace have been kind to His servants, protecting them at the risk of their own lives. The Holy Spirit is implanting the grace of Christ in the heart of many a noble seeker after truth, quickening his sympathies contrary to his nature, contrary to his former education. The "Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9), is shining in his soul; and this Light, if heeded, will guide his feet to the kingdom of God. The prophet Micah said: "When I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me. . . . He will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold His righteousness." Micah 7:8, 9.¹¹

This is true for as long as time shall last. Their witness enlarges the colony. There are some who renounce the rebel government and acknowledge God as their King and follow Him. As the gathering goes forward toward its ultimate goal, the witnesses' message and mission are unchanged as they reflect the character of the righteous Judge in message and lifestyle.

The final gathering

“Though earth was struck off from the continent of Heaven and alienated from its communion, Jesus has connected it again with the sphere of glory.”¹² The Creator created instruments for the reconnection, for healing the breach—namely the Cross and the church. The Cross negated sin's power, and the church provides a safety zone, a place where repentant sinners may recuperate and grow and witness to the “God who gathers.” His very name has connotations of “Gatherer.”

We must come to see the church as God's supreme instrument in this gathering—the reconstitution of a fractured and atomized planet, its inhabitants scattered, diverse, antagonistic, alienated by nature. The breach must be healed, distance overcome. He is determined to present to the Father a fully healed planet—Eden revisited. We must keep this thought up front. It is the church as Christ's agency that He uses to complete the job.

It is to God's glory that He uses the church to accomplish this end. The church is the framework, the picture window. We see it taking place. It is the crucible; the Holy Spirit is in charge. The church is the workshop. All are involved. Let men, no matter how godly, stand back. Don't try to rearrange the furniture. Let God be God and let the church be the church. All of this is above human machinations. This is the place where marvelous transformations take place.

We must do nothing, allow nothing, to distract from the main line—not doctrinal disputes, personal ideas, organizational concerns, race, or class—let nothing separate us from full concentration on our task. All other matters pale in significance. As Ellen

White would say when a brother introduced an irrelevant subject for discussion, "Too late in the day brethren, too late in the day."¹³ We should not allow any pursuit to delay the development of God's plan.

The church is people, humanity—a worshipping, witnessing people. "There is nothing that Christ desires so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and character. There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Saviour's love. All heaven is waiting for channels through which can be poured the holy oil to be a joy and blessing to human hearts."¹⁴ God wants and will have witnesses.

1. Chris Armstrong, "300-Year-Old Man Returns to Lead His Church," *Christianity Today*, posted August 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/300-year-old-man-returns-to-lead-his-church.html>.

2. Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine* (Last Century Media, 1982), 339.

3. J. B. Phillips, *Making Men Whole* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1952), 7.

4. Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1900), 204.

5. Charles E. Bradford, *Find Out About Prayer* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1993), 27.

6. White, *Lift Him Up*, 19.

7. Quoted in Guy Kahane, "Our Cosmic Insignificance," *Nous* 48:4 (2014): 761, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nous.12030/pdf>.

8. Ellen G. White Comments on Revelation 8:3, 4, in Francis D. Nichol, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1957), 971.

9. M. G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Goel," accessed November 16, 2017, <http://eastonsbibledictionary.org/1516-Goel.php>.

10. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1946), 426.

11. Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1917), 376, 377.

12. Ellen G. White, "This Do and Thou Shalt Live," *Signs of the Times*, November 24, 1887.

13. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 78.

14. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 419.