



ADVENTIST  
Review

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Cutting Edge

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# burnout

## OF GNATS AND CAMELS

*How to prevent issues burnout*

BY JENNIFER JILL SCHWIRZER

**T**HE POOR FOLKS AT TAILORTOWN\* Seventh-day Adventist Church! They had a severe case of “issues burnout.” Issues burnout is an affliction that comes from prolonged battles, both within and without, over the many standards and doctrines we have been given through the Bible and the inspired writings of Ellen White. You know the typical ones—jewelry, music, women’s ordination, diet, dress, the humanity of Christ . . . the list goes on. The issues themselves do not bring on the condition of burnout, but a steady diet of them does. These dear people at Tailortown had endured a steady diet of issues, and they were suffering the symptoms. I wasn’t, so I would read Ellen White counsels as if they were poetry, which they were to me. This made for a rocky beginning with them.

But things have improved.

I had felt compelled to help—I wanted to belong to a harmonious church, especially for the sake of my children. One of the things I did to aid in healing was to ask them what it was they had been through. It turned out that a certain woman whom I will call Tanya Strand had become a powerful leader in the district years back. She was full of intelligence and energy—one of those charismatic types who command a following. Pretty soon she had a few dozen people marching behind her advocating things such as home schooling, natural diet, and country living. All good things. But then it was head coverings for women, no Christmas for any-

one, no church socials, even no sex outside of procreation!

Eventually Tanya left the church (she had issues burnout too!), then left Christianity to become a Jew, left God to become an atheist, and died of cancer. Obviously a sad story with seemingly no happy ending. At least not yet.

The church was left with a certain amount of shell shock. When controversial issues were mentioned I could feel tension mount in the air, and so I learned to talk about such things as the weather and my pets. When the conversation took a spiritual turn, I held back from being as deep and “heavy” as I like to be. Eventually their comfort zone grew to encompass me. Now I am part of the family.

But the issues still remain, because we can’t escape them. We have been given reams of counsel in the Bible and additional millions of words in the writings of Ellen White. We can, if we want to, read about almost every issue we confront, evaluating life down to the minutia every moment of the day. And that’s good. The last thing we want is to go into brain atrophy. No danger of that happening when we have counsel on everything from Sunday laws to women’s underwear.

But what about all these issues? Hasn’t life for Seventh-day Adventists sometimes become fraught with stress because some “hot potato” issue takes predominance? Haven’t fellowships been shattered at times over things—large and small—that people differed on?

So often people enter into an issue full force, resolute and



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sure of their position. There is a mortality rate for these resolutions, but some people have the strength to maintain their beliefs and practices forever, no matter how strenuous. And while some are strong-willed and motivated on issues, there seems always to be some more sensitive types who get burned out. If issues burn long and hard enough in gentle, previous members' minds, these people are liable at long last to run from the church in hopes of finding peace.

For this reason some have ignored all issues, developing the attitude that "nothing matters except Jesus." While this is essentially true, we should never forget that at one time Jesus was the issue. The testing truth for the time of the early church was the Messiahship of Jesus Christ. Now, there was an issue! And it caused "the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed" (Luke 2:34, NASB). Yes, at the foundation of the existence of the Christian church there was a line in the sand. Jesus was on only one side of that line, and the "church" of the preceding time was divided over it.

Even today the doctrine from which we derive part of our name looms large on the horizon. According to the Bible, the whole earth will one day be divided over the Sabbath (see *The Great Controversy*, p. 605). In the same way, we today can expect some issues to become lines in the sand, over which we must choose sides. A healthy attitude about issues does not reject all of them, but rather exercises selectivity over which ones will move us to action. What is the biblical criterion for which issues are really issues? What about those less important—even invalid?

### Fish Flakes and Wine

At our church's last cooking and nutrition class, a new member who was doing a food demonstration put fish flakes and wine in the soup he was making. Other members who loved the health message were aghast when they saw the unkosher items being added. I could see how something as small as a few fish flakes and two tablespoons of

wine could become a real problem if not handled with grace.

We could start a movement in favor of fish flake and wine abstinence, complete with opinion polls and thought papers denouncing the evils of grape fermentation and marine life as food. Or we could get on the other side of the issue and defend the demonstrator's right to season his food according to his own

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conscience, documenting the inconsequentiality of the traces of alcohol after cooking the soup and the benefits of trace minerals found in seafood. We could have a board meeting called, which would probably appoint an ad hoc committee to research the issue and report to the board with their compiled data. Then we could publish a book on our findings, with the final decision made after years of deliberation, in hopes of influencing other churches and individuals to take the issue seriously.

Or we could just say, "Oh, well, let's talk to him about it later"—which is what we did, and everything worked out very well.

### Strain or Swallow?

Small issues don't need to get big attention. Jesus made this clear when He pointed out that Pharisees "strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24, NASB). He was telling us clearly that there were majors (camels) and minors (gnats). He was warning against giving camel attention to gnat issues. Implicit in His warning was the danger of making gnat issues out of camel ones.

Jesus gave us some real guidance in determining what a major issue really is.



Just before the gnat/camel analogy, He said: "You tithe the mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (verse 23, NASB).

There are three things classified as "weightier provisions of the law": justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Justice and mercy have to do with our treatment of our fellow humans. Are we fair to them? How about kind and forgiving? Does the issue at hand expedite compassion to fellow sinners?

Faithfulness, defined by some as "the love of God," has to do with our response to God. Specifically, it spotlights the response of faith or belief. The response of faith to God's message is what enables us to meet the first two criteria of justice and mercy to our fellow humans, for our heartfelt appreciation of Christ's sacrifice is "faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6). As we behold the cross of Jesus, we imitate His sacrificial love toward those around us.

The same thought is echoed in

Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O, man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (NKJV).

These are the weightier matters that our pharisaical natures tend to overlook. Ironically, so many of the “issues” that come our way seem to choke the love out of us instead of instilling it within us.

I would like to propose a simple solution to the issues dilemma. When issues arise, we would be preserved from undue stress to ourselves and others if we made sure they fell within the following criteria: Does this issue need to be addressed because people are being treated unfairly or cruelly? Are they being led into unbelief and rebellion? Will bringing about the needed changes nurture people’s faith? Will it vindicate the oppressed and humble the proud? If the answers are yes, then the issue is important.

Use the great siphon of God’s law to determine which issues are worth focusing on.

### How to Handle the “Camels”

It was midweek at camp meeting—noontime. The women from Loma Linda Foods were frying their mock chicken; teenagers were buying Snapple; and the pastors were milling around arm in arm with their wives. An innocent scene if there ever was one, save for the occasional child who had to be shooed away from a second free sample helping.

Two men stood in the foyer with their Bibles open, flipping pages and comparing notes. They only added to the quaintness of the scene—that is, until they began to argue. Decibel by decibel their voices rose until they were spitting their opinions like poison darts out of a straw. Soon the atmosphere around them went sour as their voices cut into the air. Heads turned, eyes rolled. “They’re at it again,” someone sighed.

“What are they arguing about?” another asked.

“The humanity of Christ” came the exasperated answer.

How sad. One of the most sublime truths of the Bible, one of the finest gospel themes, provoking eye-rolling sighs. Travesty! The humanity of Jesus, “everything to us” (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 244), can seem to become as annoying as a horse fly on a hot summer day.

There is a lesson here. Even the worthy issues, the important topics of

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study, the essential themes of the Bible, can sour upon the lips of a debater.

There are two steps in preventing “issues burnout.” As mentioned previously, the first is to make sure the issue is, in fact, an issue before time is devoted to wrestling with it. This means that many of the things that become “hot potatoes” in the church should never really be served at the potluck—they are individual and should be kept personal. Jesus called them “gnats.”

In contrast to gnats, there are big issues that deserve our focus and energy, both individually and as a body. These issues have to do with

the honor of God and the salvation of people. These are the “camels.”

Once we are sure the issue is a camel, another question arises. How do we deal with it? Assuming we have studied the matter out and arrived at a conclusion, how do we share that conclusion with others? Or maybe we should ask how *not* to share it.

### Fasting for Strife and Debate?

Recently I received a letter from someone who had a burden in the area of music. Being a musician myself, I find this a relevant topic. The writer and I were in disagreement. This individual clearly believed that the issue was a “camel,” implying that people who agreed with him would one day “largely populate the church of the remnant.” He went on to defend his position by belittling mine. He wrote, “Your position is reminiscent of the rubric, of the postmodern mind-set, which is an attempt to use subjectivism to paint absolutes into a whitewash of grays.”

“Whew!” I said, reaching for my dictionary. The letter went on in the same basic tone, full of implications that I was confused and unprincipled. Halfway through I put



the letter down and wondered if I should pursue it. The discussion had degenerated into a debate.

Later that day as I mused over the letter and the spirit I perceived was behind it, I thought of a passage found in Isaiah 58:4: "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike

with a wicked fist" (NASB).

The text is directed at God's people, who are asking God why He

has not heard their

prayers. God gives them the reason: "Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers" (verse 3, NASB). These people were practicing a self-discipline (fasting), but were not spiritually bettered by it. In fact, they regressed into a mode of verbal and even physical abuse! They had denied their bodily flesh but indulged their carnal flesh, building up their pride at the expense of their believers.

In the same way, we may adopt a stance that on the surface seems to be born of deep conviction and piety, but the manner in which we defend our position betrays our less-than-pious motives. The more correct our position, the greater the tragedy when we defend it for "contention and strife."

As I considered whether or not to pursue the issue at hand, I remembered the final scenes of the life of Jesus. I decided to reread the Gospel accounts and ascertain the manner in which our Lord handled conflict. I followed Him from the Garden of Gethsemane to the court of Annas, and then to Caiaphas. I watched Him remain unprotected in a guardroom while waiting to be tried before the Sanhedrin. I watched Him before Pilate, then Herod, then Pilate again, as He passed from magistrate to magistrate, weary and alone. I saw the six trials, the four condemnations, and the six scenes of abuse. And I heard

these proud and godless men ask Him question after question. What did Jesus do? For the most part, He remained silent: "As a sheep before her shearers is dumb" (Isa. 53:7).

I began to examine His responses to the various accusations and plying questions that were flung in His face. Numerous times in the Gospels Jesus refused to give a specific answer—and most of those times He replied with nothing but silence. Of the nine times He did answer, six bore witness of His divinity or His coming judgment. The picture I received from all this was that of a Saviour who would not stoop to harsh, mean-spirited debate, whatever the provocation.

Now, let's think about this. Jesus was not willing to cavil *even about a life-and-death issue*. He stood in defense of His Messiahship—yet He refused to promulgate even central and salvational truth in a spirit that belied it. Method and message were inseparable

in the living example of Truth.

When an issue passes through the strainer, obsess! Get on your knees, confess your weakness, and tell the Lord to make His camels your camels. And spend your time and energy the way Jesus spent His—in uplifting humanity and sharing the good news of the gospel.

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\*Not its real name.

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For additional insights on the importance of Christlike attitudes in His church, please see "Confessions of a Convert," p. 14.

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