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## Update - December 2004

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# Update

Volume 19, Number 4 (December 2004)

## **Jack Wendell Provonsha: A Life Sketch**

*David R. and Bronwen F. Larson*

*on the occasion of the Jack W. Provonsha*

*memorial service held September 22, 2004, in Loma Linda, California*

Jack Wendell Provonsha was born on May 30, 1920, in Moab, Utah. He died eighty-four years later near Loma Linda, California. His closest surviving relatives include his uncle, Clyde, an artist in Angwin, California; his sister, Wanda, a retired professor of nursing in Portland, Oregon; his daughter Linda, a teacher in Arcata, California; and his daughter, Kathy, a physician in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Jack's close survivors also include his grandchildren Meg, Linda's daughter, Max, Kathy's son; and his great granddaughter, Isabella, Meg's daughter. Many other relatives, friends, professional colleagues, and former students also mourn him all over the world.

If we count the French Canadian couple who adopted a little boy named Archie Shepherd at an American camp meeting in the nineteenth century, Jack was a fourth generation Seventh-day Adventist. Because his biological mother could no longer take care of him, the ministers stood young "Archie" beside them on the platform and asked for volunteers to take him home. Archie was Jack's grandfather. He assumed the name of the family who adopted him: Provonsha, originally pronounced "Pro-von-shay," an English version of the French, Provencher.

Archie grew up to be a painter and artist. He married Mary Heamen who died before her time from tuberculosis. They had five children: Ed, a physically powerful man with a legendary temper, became a rancher and sometime sheriff in Utah; Arwin, who did some ranching in Utah and many other things, including commercial and fine art; Alice, who married Haskel Bates, a witty railroad man; Gordon, ever the gregarious one, became a commercial artist; as did Clyde, by far the most serene of Archie and Mary's five children.

Jack's uncles Gordon and Clyde owned a successful advertising agency in Los Angeles. One of their models was a beautiful young woman named Norma Jean Mortenson who became known to the rest of the world as Marilyn Monroe. Clyde still possesses excellent photographs of her. Unfortunately, the negatives of these pictures no longer exist.

Despite their marital problems, Arwin and his wife Maude had three children: Merrill, Jack, and Wanda. When Jack was about fourteen years old, his parents divorced. His father remarried and lived in Utah until he died of a heart attack, well before reaching three score and ten years, while hunting in the mountains with his older brother Ed, the rancher. Maude, Jack's mother, moved to Watsonville, California, supported herself as a seamstress, and remained single the rest of her life.

Merrill, Jack's older brother, spent his life near Oakland, California. He was mostly out of the picture when the family scattered.

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*“Jack W. Provonsha: A Life Sketch” continued...*

Jack's younger sister Wanda moved to Mountain View, California, where she lived with a family who gave her room and board in exchange for performing household duties. She financed her own high school education at Mountain View Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist school.

Short, slight, and somewhat solitary, but also wiry, intellectually curious, and emotionally intense, Jack became a shepherd on his Uncle Ed's ranch. Although he enjoyed living alone on the open range and under the stars with his sheep, dogs, and harmonica, he decided to prepare for wider service by completing his education, primarily because of the influence of Ellen G. White's writings. Too young to drive, and hitch-hiking some of the distance, he traveled from Utah to Walla Walla College, a Seventh-day Adventist institution in eastern Washington, where he inquired if he could live on campus and work his way through high school and then college. Much to his embarrassment, the two young women behind the counter burst into laughter at Jack's appearance.

Thoroughly humiliated, Jack exited the office, fled Walla Walla College and hurried to Palo Alto, California. There he found a family near Stanford University who gave him room and board, plus access to their library, in exchange for household and yard work as he studied at Mountain View Academy and worked at the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Although Jack did not live with his mother and sister, they were all in the same general area again, at least for a while.

Jack met Lorraine Scharff at Mountain View and they swiftly fell in love. Although her family was also filled with grief, Lorraine was uncommonly beautiful in face, figure, and personality, so much so that other young men also took an active interest in her. So did a recruiter for the film industry in Hollywood whom her parents rebuffed. Apparently sensing that they were kindred spirits with similar backgrounds, Lorraine had eyes for Jack.

After graduating from Mountain View Academy, Jack attended Pacific Union College, a Seventh-day Adventist school north of San Francisco in California's Napa Valley. It took him five rather than the customary four years to earn his degree because he financed his own education by working on campus. While at PUC, Jack painted at least two portraits of permanent value. One was of Professor Guy Wolfkill, a popular teacher. The other was of Jesus as a muscular and virile young man in a carpenter shop, modeled by Joe Maniscalco, who went on to become a successful artist himself. Jack's large painting of Jesus, plus the sculpture he later did of his hero, Albert Schweitzer, were with him when he died more than fifty years later.

While Jack and Lorraine were newlyweds, they lived in the modest quarters that Pacific Union College provided married

students. After he graduated, they moved to Utah, where they served briefly in pastoral ministry. They soon transferred to Fairbanks, Alaska, and continued pastoring. This was a very happy time for them, a respite from the trials and tribulations they both had already encountered, despite their youthfulness.

Their joyful days ended when Lorraine, who was six months pregnant, suddenly fell ill. She died before Jack could return from his assignment at a church youth camp. Jack's first daughter, Linda, was delivered by Cesarean section, and did well. After six short years of marriage, Jack left Alaska with his beautiful daughter in his arms and his beautiful wife in her coffin. This wound never fully healed.

After Lorraine's death, Jack pursued his longstanding dream of becoming a doctor as well as a minister. He returned to Pacific Union College, completed the necessary prerequisites and then entered the School of Medicine at what we now call Loma Linda University. Jack's mother Maude, moved in with him and took care of Linda while Jack studied and worked. For several summers, he returned to Alaska to work in the construction and fishing industries.

After several broken engagements to other women, Jack spotted Margaret Anderson. An excellent student and clinician a year ahead of him in medical school, she was an appealing daughter of Swedish immigrants. Jack courted Margaret, proposed marriage, and she accepted! For the next half-century, Jack and Margaret were true companions. Although their love for each other was not the intense intimacy of young people who have never been hurt, in its own way it was true, deep, and wide.

After completing their medical studies in Loma Linda and Los Angeles, Jack and Margaret traveled with Linda to Takoma Park, Maryland, for their internships. This is where Kathy was born. Upon completing their studies in the Washington, D.C., area, they moved their family to California's San Joaquin Valley and both practiced family medicine in Riverdale, not far from Hanford. Shortly thereafter they moved to Seldovia, a remote village in Alaska, where Jack and Margaret operated a self-supporting medical clinic and Jack also served as a bush pilot.

Because by now he had become both a minister and a physician, some at Loma Linda University began to think of Jack as an ideal religion teacher for medical students. Arthur Bietz, a minister and psychologist who was pastoring the large White Memorial Adventist Church in Los Angeles and also teaching religion in LLU's medical school, took a special interest in Jack. Communicating with him between California and Alaska by mail, Arthur Bietz encouraged Jack to continue his education and to expand his theological horizons by reading the works of the best thinkers, philosophical and theological.

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*“Jack W. Provonsha: A Life Sketch” continued...*

The result of these exchanges was that Jack, Margaret, Linda, and Kathy moved to the Boston area. Jack enrolled in a graduate program in ethics at Harvard University where he enjoyed classes from Paul Tillich, Paul Louis Lehmann, Joseph Fletcher, James Luther Adams, and other famous scholars.

After completing the courses and seminars at Harvard that led to a master of arts degree in ethics, Jack and his young family traveled west by car. They camped as much as they could, bathed in rivers along the highways and ate many meals consisting of baked beans, cottage cheese, tomatoes, and the occasional slice of bread. Once back in Southern California, Margaret plunged into a busy medical practice. Jack became a member of Arthur Bietz’s team of LLU religion teachers in Los Angeles, continued his studies, and practiced some medicine. He always referred to Arthur Bietz as his special mentor.

Jack transferred to a graduate program in ethics at Claremont Graduate University near Los Angeles, much closer to his home and work. After several more years of courses, seminars, examinations, and dissertation writing, he earned his PhD under the guidance of Joseph C. Hough Jr., who is now the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. His dissertation proposed a Christian theory of normative ethics which it applied it to the recreational use of hallucinogenic drugs, a timely topic in the 1960s!

When Loma Linda University consolidated its School of Medicine at Loma Linda, so that its medical students no longer spent two years at Loma Linda and two in Los Angeles, Jack entered the most productive stage of his ministry. For almost three decades, he and A. Graham Maxwell, whom Jack had known and respected since their years together as students at Mountain View Academy and Pacific Union College, were exceedingly influential in positive ways at Loma Linda and elsewhere. Maxwell, who directed the combined religion faculty at Loma Linda, had earned his doctorate in New Testament at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

During the week their courses were always full. Hundreds of students and established professionals attended their adult Sabbath School classes on the weekends. Doctor Gerald Kirk, a Loma Linda radiologist, and his wife, Cherie, recorded many of their presentations and mailed them to thousands of eager

listeners all over the world. They were in constant demand as on- and off-campus speakers and many were eager to read everything they wrote, even though those who ran the church’s printing presses were not always enthusiastic about distributing their ideas. Jack also founded the Center for Christian Bioethics by giving the idea his blessing and speaking on its behalf. Jack was even invited at least once to give the commencement speech in a graduation service at Walla Walla College, the campus he had fled in shame so many years before.

Although he was an accomplished physician, scholar, minister, and artist, Jack was also an avid outdoorsman who enjoyed camping, hiking, rock climbing, finding and polishing rocks, horseback riding, swimming, and scuba diving. He particularly enjoyed sharing some of these activities with his sons-in-law. He spent as much time as possible each summer

recharging his physical and emotional batteries in wilderness areas. Unfortunately, those who knew Jack best and loved him most—his closest relatives, friends and professional colleagues—often felt that he had little time for them.

For several of the last years of his life, both before and after Margaret died, Jack lived across the street from Linda and her husband, Jim, a public school administrator, in Arcata, California. Their active participation in his memorial service in Loma Linda

symbolized the strengthening of their relationships that began before Parkinson’s disease required Jack to return to the Loma Linda area. This process continued during the last three years of his life while Jack lived in Southern California again.

Shortly before he died, Linda lost her longstanding position as a successful public school teacher in Northern California because she discretely opposed our country’s invasion of Iraq, a military venture which horrified Jack. “What about all the innocent children?” he wondered. Because we were out of the country during the last few days of Jack’s life, we do not know if he was aware of Linda’s moral courage, and the high price she is now paying for her principled opposition to this war. If he was, we are certain he was very proud of her. If he was not, we believe, although we cannot prove it, that someday he will know. Then he will say, “Linda, you are one of my beloved daughters; with you I am well pleased!”

Even before they retired, Jack and Margaret often traveled

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*“Short, slight, and somewhat solitary, but also wiry intellectually curious and emotionally intense, Jack became a shepherd...”*

*“Jack W. Provonsha: A Life Sketch” continued...*

to Nordland, across the Puget Sound from Seattle, where they eventually built a splendid A-Frame cabin on a bluff at the water's edge. In their retirement years they made Nordland their full-time home. Jack and Margaret relished more than a decade together in this beautiful spot, where they enjoyed each other's company and many friends and visitors, until her failing health required them to relocate across the street from Linda and Jim in Arcata, California.

Like a number of others, we came to know Jack more fully in his retirement years, something for which we are very grateful. Our many happy times with him persuade us that the 22nd, 23rd, and 24th Psalms are particularly pertinent to his life. The 22nd Psalm begins with a cry of anguished despair: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” The 23rd declares, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The 24th proclaims that “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.” Although all three Psalms highlight and express aspects of Jack's experience, we believe that the first six verses of the 24th most fully capture and convey the spirit that characterized his whole life (New Revised Standard Version):

“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of

the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek Him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.” ■



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*Bronwen F. Larson, was born in England and educated in Australia and the United States. She leads one of the teams at Adventist Health Study II.*

## Editorial

A short time ago the Center for Christian Bioethics lost one of our most treasured colleagues. Many of our readers have significant

personal and academic memories of Dr. Jack Provonsha. While you read this issue of Update I hope you will allow yourself time to linger with your own memories. The entire issue is dedicated to our memories of Jack. His influence both within and without Seventh-day Adventism should not be understated. His teaching ministry in particular helped shape the thought of many thousands of physicians and pastors. In a faith tradition like Seventh-day Adventism, so dedicated to the integral work of ministry and medicine, he embodied a positive and collegial relationship that we continue to celebrate here. ■

Mark Carr, PhD, MDiv  
Co-Director,  
Center for Christian Bioethics

**Update**  
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# Jack Provonsha: A remembrance

*Brian Bull, MD*

*on the occasion of the Jack W. Provonsha*

*memorial service held September 22, 2004, in Loma Linda, California*

I first met Jack Provonsha in the fall of 1959 when my classmates and I moved from the “the farm” to “the city.” Back then, medical students took the first two years of basic science training here in Loma Linda—on “the farm” where the College of Medical Evangelists had been established a half century earlier.

During the summer between our sophomore and junior years we traveled to Los Angeles, found a place to stay, and—in my case, since I was working my way through medical school—a place to work. I was fortunate in that for me both places were the same—the Santa Fe Railway Hospital. We then showed up on the wards of the Los Angeles County General Hospital for our junior year of clinical training.

It was a major transition for all of us. After the kinder, gentler existence at Loma Linda the harsh reality of life and death in the city struck us with an intensity that was an almost physical blow in the face. There was the traffic, bad even then, and the smog—which in the pre-catalytic converter years—was a great deal worse than today. Even more intimidating was the human misery and cruelty—man’s inhumanity to man—that was on display at Los Angeles County General. Every Saturday night the emergency room would fill with young men who had been shot or stabbed on the mean streets of this large city. When asked about their assailants the answer was always the same—a “friend.”

Into this world, in the guise of a religion teacher, strode Jack Provonsha. He was unlike all of the other religion faculty. Forty-five years ago when I first met him, Jack had already lived through three careers. My classmates and I saw the chance to sit at his feet as a heaven-sent opportunity. Here was one teacher who was telling us about God and life, not from a theoretical basis but from the vantage point of one who had already lived large upon life’s stage. He had been a pastor, had served in the mission field of Alaska, and was a physician. He was also a theologian who had thought deeply about ethics, and even then had begun to write about ethical matters in the clear, understandable, lucid, and approachable style that was his hallmark.

My class adopted him immediately. He became our unofficial faculty sponsor. Early in our freshman year we had, like all previous classes, chosen a faculty sponsor and I am sure that he or she fulfilled that role capably. I do not—nor do any of my

classmates—remember who it was. From the fall of 1959 until we graduated in May of 1961 Jack Provonsha filled that role. We went to his home on Friday nights, welcomed by Jack and his physician wife Margaret. He went camping with us in the San Bernardino Mountains and Mojave Desert. On those trips, like the rest of us, he slept in a sleeping bag on the ground. On such occasions, around a campfire, he would wrestle with us, with questions such as “How does God lead?”

In December, he along with several other faculty members accompanied us on a three week trip to Chiapas in Southern Mexico, where he supervised us as we held medical clinics among the Chamoola Indians in villages that could be reached only on foot. His commonsense approach to theology, to God’s call, and to how a good life is to be lived left an impression on me and my classmates that has lasted for a lifetime. And, I am sure we had an effect on Jack himself. In meeting our needs he had found his calling. From that time onward Jack Provonsha was to be, first and foremost, a teacher.

In later years, Jack’s path and mine crossed on many occasions. We taught together on the faculty here at Loma Linda for more than twenty five years. We traveled together on university geoscience trips and I have treasured pictures of Jack and I concentrating on some controverted point in an otherwise indistinguishable road cut in Eastern Montana. I have climbed mountains with him, helped him in the teaching of a Sabbath School class and happily said yes when he asked me to chair the board of the newly formed Ethics Center. My life has been immeasurably richer because in 1959 he came to this place whose motto is “To make man whole.” In coming here, to Loma Linda, Jack Provonsha had come home—he was never to leave it until retirement. We are all the richer for it. ■



*Brian Bull, MD, is currently professor of pathology and laboratory medicine, School of Medicine. Dr. Bull has previously served as dean of the School of Medicine at Loma Linda University.*

# Remembering Jack Provonsha: A theological appreciation

*Fritz Guy, PhD*

*on the occasion of the Jack W. Provonsha*

*memorial service held September 22, 2004, in Loma Linda, California*

My friend Hilda Smith, a nurse who was a student in one of Jack's classes, describes him as "quietly passionate" and "unpretentious." Like the man himself, his theology was quietly passionate and unpretentious.

In the highest sense of the term, Jack was a popular theologian—a theologian for the people. He wasn't a theologian's theologian. He didn't write massive, complicated tomes for the benefit of a handful of professional theologians. He wrote small, accessible books for the benefit of ordinary thoughtful people—like the students in his classes and the medical colleagues who came to his Sabbath School class.

That's why he described his book, *You Can Go Home Again* as an "un-theology" of the at-one-ment (pp. 7, 112). By this he simply meant that it wasn't an academic exercise. It was (and still is) a confession of his personal faith and experience—quietly passionate and unpretentious. Even the chapter titles reveal his un-theology: "Clouded Windows," "The Darkness Behind the Shadows," "Fig Leaves for the Naked." The book ends with a story—an old, familiar Biblical story, which he retells so powerfully that when I first read it I almost cried. But—or better, so—he was a true theologian. Theology, he believed, is not the private playground of paid professionals. It is the vocation of all thoughtful Christians.

Jack was a church theologian—again in the highest sense of the term. He served the church, and served it well. He was no "court prophet," specializing in theological correctness. His theological service was far more valuable—and far more influential—than that. He helped the church think new thoughts. He believed that "every generation is a first generation all over again." He helped us think in new ways about God, Creation, Sabbath, and church.

Regarding God, he offered an understanding of atonement in which God is the author, not the object of atonement. The Cross was not an appeasement of divine wrath, but a revelation of divine love. For a week of prayer at Walla Walla College his theme was "Color God Friendly." His first theological book was *God Is With Us*, and it pictured a God who comes and comes and comes, whose very nature is to come.

Regarding Creation, he offered a speculative scenario that took seriously both the evidence of modern earth science and the portrayal in the Book of Genesis. Appalled by the brutality and waste of millions of years of evolutionary process, he suggested the possibility of demonic involvement. This idea has

not been widely shared, but something like it might be more productive than has yet been recognized.)

Regarding the Sabbath, he was one of the first Adventists to think of it not only as "the seal of God," but also as an existentially powerful symbol. Drawing on the insights and vocabulary of Paul Tillich, his Harvard teacher, Jack saw in the Sabbath a symbol that participates in, and thus enables us to experience, the presence and power of God to which it points.

Regarding the Church, he reframed the Adventist notion of "remnant church" in terms of mission rather than status. The Advent movement, he insisted, has the God-given role of a "prophetic minority" within the larger Christian community.

"Theology," Jack said, "is clear thinking about God." He helped his church think more clearly about God and many other subjects. This was his ministry, his service to and for the church.

Jack was a mediating theologian. His theology was a mediation between the sacred and the secular. He was broadly interested—in medicine and ethics, of course, and also literature, art, nature, and many other aspects of human existence. He was an Adventist "renaissance man."

His broad interests informed his theology. The title *You Can Go Home Again* is a deliberate contrast to the title of Thomas Wolfe's famous novel *You Can't Go Home Again*. His theology was a mediation between the Adventist community and the rest of the world. He was thoroughly aware of what was going on in the world—and for many Adventists he was a kind of window on the world. He introduced the Loma Linda community to Tillich and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

In these and other ways Jack Provonsha was a model theologian—quietly passionate and unpretentious. All the rest of us who do theology have learned much from him. The depth of our sense of loss today is an indication of our debt to him, and our gratitude for his ministry of theology. ■



*Fritz Guy, PhD, is professor of theology and philosophy at La Sierra University, Riverside. He has served as a pastor, theologian, and university president. Dr. Guy is widely known for his contribution to Seventh-day Adventist thought from the perspective of systematic theology.*

# Jack the Just: Dr. Provonsha, Loma Linda, and the Adventist wisdom tradition

*Roy Branson, PhD*

*presented Saturday, November 6, 2004, at the  
Center for Christian Bioethics Contributor's Convocation*

If you wanted a seat you had to get there by 8:15 Saturday morning. Arriving late meant sitting on the steps of the medical school's teaching amphitheater or standing against the back wall. No one was required to attend, and a sign said that no more than 135 should occupy the room at one time. But many more always crowded in: Medical school faculty—both on-call and off-duty, residents just completing morning rounds, students enrolled at the nursing, dental, and medical schools, and visitors from out of town.

Precisely at 8:30 a.m., a silver-haired, obviously fit man stood up and started lecturing. For an hour, he shared his vision of Adventism, referring to Scripture, to theologians like Paul Tillich, with whom he had studied at Harvard, to philosophers who intrigued him, like Whitehead, and to recent cases in his own, ongoing medical practice. The delivery was calm, conversational. Occasionally, he would throw out a provocative question that sparked exchanges. At the end of the hour he walked across campus, entered another hall filled with even more people, and repeated his lecture.

He was Jack Provonsha, MD, PhD. Together with A. Graham Maxwell, chair of the division of religion, he was the soul of the Loma Linda University medical campus. Week after week, through the 60s, 70s, and into the 80s, Dr. Provonsha personified at the denomination's medical school (and largest university) a commitment to the harmony of medicine and ministry, faith and reason, and moral and physical law.

Dr. Provonsha's life and character contributed to his embodiment of the Adventist ideal of integrating health and religion, faith, and reason. Regulars at his Sabbath morning classes knew that Dr. Provonsha had graduated from Pacific Union College, with a BA in theology (a schoolmate, Neal Wilson, later became president of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination). After graduation, Dr. Provonsha went off to pastor in Alaska. After several years of taking care of the full range of human needs, he returned from that frontier experience to earn an MD degree. When his interest in theology persisted, he earned a master's degree at Harvard and a PhD in religious ethics at Claremont Graduate University. Inevitably, he became a professor of philosophy of religion and Christian ethics at Loma Linda University School of Medicine, while always continuing to see patients in his medical practice. Members of his classes also

quickly learned that he followed the traditional Adventist lifestyle—and more (for example, not eating meat at all, and even on Saturdays wearing a backpack while taking a daily early morning hike in the hills near his home).

Dr. Provonsha reassured the Adventist medical community that their vocation rested on a theological base with which they felt comfortable. Many students came to Loma Linda from Adventist colleges where required undergraduate Bible courses emphasized the sinfulness of humans and human culture. Professors in some of these schools described a human depravity which might be total, but was well-nigh irredeemable, short of the eschaton. Dr. Provonsha, on the other hand, told his classes that because of God the Creator it is possible to look at humanity and nature and see “a universe that is fundamentally a friendly place.” Consequently, there is, he assured his classes, “the possibility of affirming the body...of understanding the essential goodness of the body.” Indeed, he came close to defining sin as “whatever act or practice depletes this aspect of God's creation.” It was easy for health-related professionals to equate spiritually with health when he said, “holiness is wholeness.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Provonsha's general approach was shared by A. Graham Maxwell, who also taught an equally well-attended Saturday morning Bible class. Born in England, Dr. Maxwell had earned a PhD in New Testament at the University of Chicago at a time when it was uncompromisingly “liberal.” He did not agree with the conclusions about the Bible that his teachers had reached, but he did reflect their insistence that one studies the Bible with one's intellect; that God is not an impenetrable mystery, but a being one can grasp with one's mind. Dr. Maxwell staked his life on the conviction that human beings can learn that God is reliably compassionate and trustworthy.

Drs. Provonsha and Maxwell's conviction that religion begins with God the Creator; their confidence that our God-given reason could discover continuities in God's creation—the natural and moral laws of the universe; their commitment to drawing the best of human thought into their instruction of the remnant, made them the leaders of a tradition important within both the biblical and Adventist communities. For some fifty years, Drs. Maxwell and Provonsha, together with another generation of their younger colleagues, have persuasively articu-

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*Jack the Just, continued...*

lated, in fact embodied, the wisdom tradition within Adventism.

### The wisdom tradition in scripture

Walter Brueggemann, PhD, is probably the most widely-read Old Testament scholar of our time. In his recent *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Dr. Brueggemann declares about the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes that “it is most unfortunate that for a very long time, Old Testament interpretation has treated wisdom as a stepchild, or an outsider, when in fact it is a major project of faith and reason held together in supple and sophisticated ways.”<sup>2</sup>

The wisdom tradition at Loma Linda continues both the context and content of biblical wisdom. After Israel’s experience of having its very own monarchy, that kingdom’s defeat and exile into Mesopotamia, and Israel’s subsequent return to some form of self-rule in Jerusalem, the Hebrews reasserted their identity through writings. Part of that effort emerged in the editing of Israel’s history; the retelling of the stories of Joseph, Moses, and Daniel emphasizes their intellectual attainment and wisdom to the point that they are the outstanding sages of surrounding imperial courts. First Kings asserts that “Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt...men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.” (4:29-34)

Another part of the post-exilic assertion of Israel’s intellectual equality with other cultures is the editing of wisdom literature. Proverbs includes sayings coming out of family and clan life, but the context of most of the sayings is the court and schools instructing future leaders how to rule wisely—and not just in the court of Solomon and his successors. Cuneiform tablets from northern Syria (ca. 2400–2250 B.C.E.) contain wisdom literature. Mesopotamia also had collections of sayings, such as the “Counsels of Wisdom” (ca. eighth-century B.C.E.), that included a negative version of the Golden Rule: “Unto your opponent do no evil; your evildoer recompense with good. Unto your enemy let justice be done.” In Proverbs, sayings from Solomon’s court are put alongside entire collections from other courts of the time. For example, two chapters in Proverbs 22:17-24:22, are a slightly edited version of a collection of Egyptian sboyet or teachings: “The Instruction of Amen-em-

opet.” An example of the borrowing from Amen-em-opet is his advice:

“Do not associate to thyself the heated man, Nor visit him for conversation. Preserve thy tongue from answering thy superior, And guard thyself against reviling him. (Amen-em-opet, 11:13-17)

This admonition appears in Proverbs as:

“Make no friends with those given to anger  
And do not associate with hotheads  
Or you may learn their ways  
And entangle yourself in a snare.” (Prv 22:24-25)

Wisdom literature was a way for Israel to be credible in an international intellectual community. Norman Whybray has described Hebrew wisdom as “the intellectual tradition,” defending the plausibility of Israel’s belief in Yahweh within a sophisticated, international culture. Dr. Brueggemann compares the context for the Hebrew wisdom literature of post-exilic Israel to the context of the 19th and 20th century

Christian apologists, Schliermacher and Tillich, who directed their writings to the “the cultured despisers of religion.”

Interestingly, Dr. Tillich was one of Dr. Provonsha’s teachers, and is often cited in his writings. Dr. Provonsha approvingly quoted another theologian who echoed Old Testament wisdom’s concern that the next generation of leaders take very seriously the intellectual culture around it.

Dr. Provonsha once reported

“Renowned Jewish scholar and thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel once said to me, ‘You Adventists have a wonderful message, but you must learn to present it with greater sophistication so that people will take you seriously.’ And he was right, if we recognize that sophistication and simplicity are not necessarily antonyms.”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Provonsha and his successors at the Center for Christian Bioethics, not only parallel the context but also the content of the Hebrew wisdom. In Proverbs and wisdom generally, God the Creator is the focus.

“The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
By understanding he established heavens;  
By his knowledge the deeps broke open,  
And the clouds drop down the dew.” (Prv 3:19-20)

Wisdom’s path to God is through appreciation and observation of God’s creation. Wisdom looks at particulars, notices the

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*“The wisdom tradition at Loma Linda continues both the context and content of biblical wisdom.”*

### *Jack the Just, continued...*

connection between acts and consequences, and generalizes about the relation of idleness and laziness, between righteousness and well-being. Observation, analysis, and generalization lead to a consensus about the moral order created by God. Wisdom is conforming to that order and enjoying the benefits that follow. Deviant behavior, acting against the flow of the Creator's cause and effect, is described as "folly" or "foolishness." The Hymn of Job and Ecclesiastes both explore wisdom of a counter order, one that dares to question why the innocent suffer, and indeed, despairs of a moral order. The prologue and epilogue of Job articulate the basic outlook of Proverbs.

The wisdom tradition in Christianity typically emphasizes Christ's incarnation as much as his passion. His life and teachings become a guide to moral behavior. Ben Witherington believes that particularly the Q document within the synoptics "is a wisdom collection," quoting aphorisms, beatitudes, riddles, and parables of Jesus, and presenting him as the Wisdom of God. "Something greater than the wisdom of Solomon is here with Jesus" (Lk 11:31)<sup>4</sup>. He also believes that both the Gospels of Matthew and John came out of Christian school communities, and in their distinct ways, were attempting to train other teachers in the wisdom of Jesus. Like all wisdom literature they were trying to shape human behavior through images and metaphors

The epistle of James, now seen by some commentators as being written very early and possibly even by the brother of Jesus, is another example of the wisdom tradition in the New Testament. Jesus is not portrayed as wisdom, but allusions to Jesus' aphorisms are treated as though they are part of the Jewish wisdom tradition. This wisdom is not of a "counter order," but reminiscent of Proverbs. "Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you, let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom." (James 3:13) The wise person is as patient as Job, and full of good deeds, particularly on behalf of the poor. "What doth it profit, by brethren, though a man say he hath faith and have not works, can faith save him?" (James 3:14).

Jack Provonsha embraced this example of the wisdom tradition, along with the emphasis the epistle of James places on the importance of moral behavior.

"It has been a part of the synthesis of Adventism to see grace and works as integral parts of one complete whole, avoiding cheap grace on the one hand and salvation by works on the other. Paul and James both belong in the Book...What we are saying is that grace is not a substitute for goodness. Grace is the way to goodness! We can become the kind of person we truly wish to be. It may take time, perhaps even more time than we have in this life, but we can do it by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

### **The wisdom tradition in Adventism**

Drs. Provonsha and Maxwell's embodiment of the wisdom tradition was not a betrayal of Adventism. An identification of holiness with wholeness and healing; a confidence in the reliability of reason to understand Scripture and know God's character; a conviction that moral behavior should conform to continuities discovered in God's creation, is true to a stream within Adventism that had already emerged within the lifetimes of its founders.

As the reality of the Great Disappointment sank in, time ceased being a sufficient arena in which to gain ultimate assurance. The unpredictability of salvation in temporal events was one motivation for the disappointed Adventists to seek solace in space. The unreliability of predictions turned the former Millerites towards the recurring, reliable patterns their reason discerned in nature. Nothing was more tangible than the body. Sylvester Graham, a former Presbyterian minister, was perhaps the most influential health reformer of the mid-19th century. Mr. Graham was the inspiration for the health reform regimen the young Adventist leaders were exposed to at Our Home on the Hillside in Danbury, New York. Mr. Graham had defined "true religion" as consisting of obeying all the constitutional laws of human nature.<sup>6</sup> The worn-out leadership of the Adventist community recognized the wisdom of discovering and following the laws of human nature and health. Adventists, including Ellen White, did not make careful distinctions among laws. For her, natural law, the laws of health, and the Decalogue were all God's laws. It was responsible and wise to observe all of them. D.T. Bourdeau identified the "laws of our being" as part of the law of God.<sup>7</sup>

Adventists moved from relying on miracles for healing, to adopting health reform practices and to sending their youth, like John Harvey Kellogg, to mainstream medical schools. With the strong support of the Whites, Dr. Kellogg transformed the Western Health Reform Institute into an institution providing orthodox medicine. The affiliated medical school produced graduates ready to pass state licensing examinations.

Wisdom tradition's commitment to acquiring the best knowledge available in society was alive and well within Adventism. After Ellen White, in 1906, at the age of 78, insisted that the denomination start a medical school in Loma Linda, its leaders debated for four years whether to train graduates to practice mainstream medicine. The future of the wisdom tradition in Adventism hung in the balance. Finally, an 82 year-old Ellen White responded to an official request for guidance. She proclaimed that,

"The medical school at Loma Linda is to be of the highest order...for the special preparation of those of our youth who have clear convictions of their duty to obtain a med-

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### *Jack the Just, continued...*

ical education that will enable them to pass the examinations required by law of all who practice as regularly qualified physicians, we are to supply whatever may be required.”<sup>8</sup>

Three years later, Ellen White recharged and expanded Adventism’s wisdom tradition. She urged the colleges of the denomination to recognize the “legal requirements” which made it “necessary that medical students shall take a certain preparatory course of study,” and recommended that the colleges implement the measures needed to “carry their students to the point of literary and scientific training that is necessary.”<sup>9</sup> The issue was hotly debated, but from 1928 on, the Adventist Church followed Ellen White’s admonition, that its colleges be accredited. The effect on the church has been fundamental. Adventism would not seek a sanctuary of escape from the world; Adventism would excel within society.

### **The Adventist wisdom tradition at Loma Linda**

When Drs. Provonsha and Maxwell came to teach in Loma Linda in the 1950s they were able to build on a wisdom tradition already sanctioned by Adventism’s principal founder; a wisdom tradition whose importance for religious education had been described eloquently by none other than John Calvin.

There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the closer observation of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons...Indeed, men who have either quaffed or even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of divine wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

Drs. Provonsha and Maxwell reassured generations of young students, immersed in courses of study based on the scientific method, that faith is also the quest “to know the truth about God.” Pursuing scientific knowledge and seeking knowledge about God, Drs. Provonsha and Maxwell insisted, are parts of the same quest. Generations of some of Adventism’s most capable, accomplished young people learned to not shun the creation, but to embrace it as God’s. Students at Loma Linda, on their way to being leaders of local Adventist congregations, of Adventist health-care institutions, indeed of the denomination, were convinced that they could be both faithful Adventists and also reasonable members of their culture.

Dr. Maxwell attempted to reassure Adventists that they didn’t have to be fearful of an arbitrary, irrational God. Rather, “God invites us to trust Him. He is not asking us to take a chance, to risk a leap in the dark. Nor is he expecting us to

accept mere claims or trust some inner feeling or some sign or miracle that Satan could counterfeit. God is simply asking that we consider the evidence, so readily available.”

In other words, Dr. Maxwell told his students and the church: If you are as reasonable in your religion as physicians and scientists are in their work, then you learn to know you can trust God as much as you do your conclusions in science.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Maxwell left an enduring legacy in Adventist thinking by turning the traditional Adventist image of the heavenly sanctuary upside down. Instead of the sanctuary representing a place where humans are judged by God, it is actually a picture of God being evaluated by us and the universe. In fact, the delay of the Second Advent is the result of divine providence permitting yet more eons for the beings of the universe to weigh the evidence. The sanctuary becomes a grand seminar discussing the trustworthiness of God, or a cosmic representative democracy, with God constantly up for election, or a supreme court, with God’s both presiding and sitting in the docket. For Dr. Maxwell, history is a time for calmly reaching wise judgments, an extended experiment, in which the standard for a wise decision is not God’s arbitrary will, but the reassuring, reasonable, and accessible continuities of moral law.

Dr. Provonsha also assured his students and the church that *You Can Go Home Again*. In this book, which he said grew out of his Sabbath School class at Loma Linda, he describes a loving God, whose law “can aid uncertain trust, that is, law as a disclosure of the way things really are. (Recall that the law of the Ten Commandments describes what God intended human creation to be.)”<sup>12</sup> It is not surprising that Dr. Provonsha turned a discussion of the atonement and law to the doctrine of Creation. Among the teachings of Christianity, he said elsewhere, “it is hard to imagine one more foundational to Adventist thought than the doctrine of creation.”<sup>13</sup> If one emphasizes God as Creator the realization grows that “ours is an orderly universe, there is purpose and rule of beneficent law in it.”<sup>14</sup> Differences between the sacred and secular vanish. “The laboratory can be as holy as the chancel and the marketplace as sacred as the sanctuary.”<sup>15</sup>

The ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister who donned a white coat to practice medicine was not about to give up sacraments: “The Sabbath can call attention to the sacredness of all time, and we ordain ministers and priests to remind us of the sacredness of all callings.”<sup>16</sup> Nor was he about to pit the “natural” remedies against the latest discoveries of science and technology. They come together in the “creation thinking,” that led Adventists to their emphasis on health healing.

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*Jack the Just, continued...*

True, “Ellen White had much to say that was critical of drug therapy as it was practiced in the last century—as well she might. But it also followed that resistance against medicinal treatment softened as medical practice became increasingly scientific, based on an understanding of human physiology not available earlier. ‘Natural remedies’ came to be those that were consonant with the body’s physiologic processes—even if they were packaged as pills and injectables. The Creator can also be at work in the scientist’s laboratory!”<sup>17</sup>

In case anyone had not gotten the point, Dr. Provonsha was careful to drive home his understanding that Adventist theology endorsed both clinical medicine and basic science. “Affirmation of nature as a domain of the Creator’s activity is a fruitful soil for scientific investigation and application.”<sup>18</sup> Dr. Provonsha’s entire theology led to him to assuring his medical students, and other leaders of the Adventist church, that “the restoration of health to mind, body, and world is the creative purpose of a redeeming faith oriented to the Edenic ideal.”<sup>19</sup>

The younger colleagues of Drs. Provonsha and Maxwell have become senior members of the Center for Christian Bioethics, and of Adventism’s wisdom tradition. They self-consciously continue to teach their students and the Seventh-day Adventist Church that God is reasonable, that the universe is reliable, and that its laws, including moral ones, are discoverable if we are calm and wise in our common search for truth. The present vice president for spiritual life & wholeness at Loma Linda University, Gerald Winslow, accepts one of Dr. Maxwell’s fundamental metaphors. In his book *Triage and Justice*, Dr. Winslow relies on John Rawls’ philosophical construct of a community of rational people in an “original position” agreeing through discussion on just contracts and their implicit moral duties.<sup>20</sup>

In a subsequent essay, Dr. Winslow describes the millennium of the Apocalypse as a kind of prolonged Rawlsian conversation, presided over by a patient, Maxwellian God.

“The image of partnership with Christ in millennial judgment...brings into sharp focus the character of a God who does not mind explaining at length the basis for proper judgment. If the saints are supposed to join in reigning and judging they must understand the principles upon which the kingdom of God is founded...I like to think that the millennium symbolizes the willingness of God to take a very long time, from our present perspective, to make those principles clear. As I imagine it, then, we imitate God whenever we take time to explain to one another the principled bases on which we make our own moral decisions.”<sup>21</sup>

For Dr. Winslow and the other members of the Loma Linda wisdom tradition, the paradigm for the ideal community is rea-

sonable conversation, the kind beloved by the wisdom tradition from two millennia before Christ.

James Walters, a key participant in the founding of the Center for Christian Bioethics, and the editor of several volumes in theological and biomedical ethics, praises those who regard law as wisdom. They have achieved the highest level of moral development. Dr. Walters explicitly praises the wisdom literature in the Bible. While it may have over-stressed the strictly personal, but it is most helpful as an example of “careful reflective thought on the breadth of human experience and knowledge.” Dr. Walters, both articulating the outlook of most scientists, and the wisdom tradition in Adventism, commends “principles which comport with and are not alien to generally perceived human experience. They are a necessary component in ‘the vector of law.’”<sup>22</sup>

David Larson, first an undergraduate student of Dr. Maxwell’s, then his colleague, and Dr. Provonsha’s successor as director of the Center for Christian Bioethics, has spent almost his entire professional career at Loma Linda University. He aggressively takes the commitment to a reasonable faith into an examination of miracle and prayer. Miracles can be morally dangerous, he insists, even if they are defined as “events that defy the laws of nature as we presently formulate them.” After reeling off ten dangers of miracles, Dr. Larson attacks trying to induce God to perform miracles by “attempts to excite ourselves and others into heightened states of religious fervor,” as “ethically retarded and theologically infantile.” It is immature Christians, Dr. Larson declares, who “experience God in the extraordinary, whereas mature Christians discern God in the ordinary. When the ordinary is examined more closely, it is not mundane after all.”<sup>23</sup> Dr. Larson celebrates the continuities of life honored by most wisdom literature.

Never does Dr. Larson sound more like previous and present colleagues at Loma Linda, and more clearly express a rational wisdom tradition within Adventism than in his description of prayer. The point of prayer is not to ask for miracles, says Dr. Larson. Prayer helps us respond graciously and responsibly to what is. Dr. Larson’s prayer sounds very much like a briefer version of Dr. Winslow’s millennium:

“Prayer enables us to understand our circumstances more accurately, to list our options more imaginatively, to select among our alternatives more wisely, to live with the pluses and minuses of our choices more cheerfully, and to accept the limits and opportunities of life more graciously.”<sup>24</sup>

Up to 1844, Millerites asked the question, “what is true?” and used their reason to find an answer. Indeed, William Miller referred to the Bible as “a feast of reason.”<sup>25</sup> He was committed

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to arriving at the truth by using his reason to assess the empirical evidence. After the Great Disappointment, Adventists increasingly employed their reason to pursue another question: How to live between the present and the future Second Advent? The quest for direct knowledge of God turned more and more toward discovering principles for leading the moral life. Before 1844, Millerites expected salvation to arrive; an event to be welcomed, over which they had no control. After 1844, many Adventists have turned their attention to what reason can discover of God's work in the world. In the forefront of Adventists engaged in discovering God, are the thoughtful, patient, and intrepid thinkers of Adventism's wisdom tradition. ■

<sup>1</sup>Provonsa, J.W. *God is With Us* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968) 65.

<sup>2</sup>Brueggemann, W. *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 314.

<sup>3</sup>Provonsa, J.W. *A Remnant in Crisis* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1993) 71-72.

<sup>4</sup>Witherington, B. *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989) 233-234.

<sup>5</sup>Provonsa, J.W. *A Remnant in Crisis* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1993) 108,109.

<sup>6</sup>Gerard Damsteegt "Health Reform and the Bible in Early Sabbatarian Adventism" *Adventist Heritage* 6 (Winter, 1979), 15.

<sup>7</sup>D.T. Bourdeau, "Health" *The Health Reformer* 1 (August, 1866): 5-6.

<sup>8</sup>Neff M.L. *Invincible Irishman: A Biography of Percy T. Magan* (Mountain view, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1964) 27.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Calvin, J. *Institutes of the Christian Church*. 1994; 53.

<sup>11</sup>Maxwell, A. G. *Can God Be Trusted?* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1977) 48.

<sup>12</sup>Provonsa, J.W. *You Can Go Home Again* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982) 100.

<sup>13</sup>Provonsa, J.W. "Creation." *Remnant & Republic: Adventist Themes for Personal and Social Ethics* Ed. Charles W. Teel Jr. (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University, Center for Christian Bioethics, 1995) 37.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 48.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 41.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 43.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Provonsa, J.W. *God is With Us* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1968) 65.

<sup>20</sup>Winslow, G.R. *Triage and Justice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1968) 65.

<sup>21</sup>Winslow, G.R. "Millennium." *Remnant and Republic, Adventist Themes for Personal and Social Ethics*. Ed. Charles W. Teel Jr. (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University, Center for Christian Bioethics, 1995) 173.

<sup>22</sup>James W. Walters, "Law," in *Remnant and Republic Adventist Themes for Personal and Social Ethics*. Ed. Charles W. Teel Jr. (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University, Center for Christian Bioethics, 1995) 111-113.

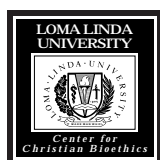
<sup>23</sup>Larson, D.R. "The Moral Danger of Miracles." *Spectrum* 18. April, 1988:13.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid,15-17.

<sup>25</sup>Freed, A. "'A Feast of Reason': The Appeal of William Miller's Way of Reading the Bible." *Adventist Heritage* 16. Spring, 1995;14-21. cf. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, p. 20: "The study of prophecy offered rational men the opportunity to see God's plan unfold in history and produced tangible and coherent proof of religious doctrine."



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