

## IN MEMORIAM:

## The Life and Work of Jack D. Zwemer

By Norman Jarnes



**Jack Zwemer**

Born March 29, 1924, Jack D. Zwemer was the eldest of four children. Although of Jewish heritage, his parents were Christian members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Jack remembered the compassion of his mother in sharing food from their small family farm with hungry passers-by in depression-era America. As a young lad with distinct Jewish looks, Jack also remembered Hitler's initial popularity in the pulpit at the Seventh-day Adventist Emmanuel Missionary College (later, Andrews University) in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He also recalled being taunted by neighbors as he walked home from school.

Zwemer distinguished himself in his educational endeavor, earning degrees of D.D.S., M.S. (Pedodontics), and Ph.D. (Bacteriology, Biochemistry) from the prestigious University of Illinois, where he graduated first in his class in 1946 with the highest GP in the history of

the school.

Following his graduation, Zwemer accepted a position at Loma Linda University, a Seventh-day Adventist coeducational health sciences university located in Loma Linda, California. His training and talents subsequently took him to Adventist mission fields in Africa, Papua New Guinea and Mexico. During his career, Zwemer also served on the faculties of the University of Illinois, the University of Kentucky, and the Medical College of Georgia, and he implemented Community Development Programs in connection with his work with the Adventist church, the Peace Corps and World Health Organization. Leading up to his retirement, he was for many years Special Project Coordinator for the Office of Institutional Research and Information at the Medical College of Georgia. After retirement, he worked with Pruitt Home Health and the Church of the Holy Comforter, an Episcopal church in Atlanta, Georgia.

## A Spiritual Journey

While in Adventism, Zwemer took his Adventist religion seriously, including its emphasis on a life of sanctification in preparation for an imminent final judgment of the living. This judgment would thoroughly examine the heavenly record of the lives of believers according to the spiritual standard of the Ten Commandments. Only those who met that righteous standard by achieving spiritual perfection would be accepted. Probation would then close, and those who did not pass the judgment would be lost, since Jesus would no longer function as a heavenly Mediator between sinners and a righteous God with his holy law.

Zwemer was overwhelmed with the struggle to achieve the sinless perfection required. He knew that his efforts fell short of the high and holy standard of the divine law. As the apostle Paul wrote, “[A]ll have sinned and [continue to (Greek, present-continuous tense)] fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, NRSV). He could find no resolution to the required spiritual achievement or to the consequent burden of guilt that bore down on him. As he recounted later, all help failed. In his despair he might well have ended his life had he not encountered a message of great hope.

While at Loma Linda University, Zwemer learned that Robert Brinsmead and his brother, John, were coming from Australia to America to hold some studies. Although their tour was not approved by the Adventist church hierarchy, who instead strongly opposed them, Zwemer decided to attend. As he listened and talked to Robert, the message reached through his utter despair like a brilliant shaft of light through a dark cloud.

Constructed within the legal framework so familiar to Adventism, the proclamation that Jack heard and believed was brilliantly simple. Robert Brinsmead presented Jesus as offering full satisfaction by his sacrificial death and infinite perfection by his sinless life to wholly meet the demands of God’s law for all who would believe. Not only was Jesus’ death credited to the believer, but Jesus’

sinless life also was counted as the believer’s own. Thus, an “open door” invited believers to fearlessly enter the final judgment, clothed in Jesus’ righteousness and sure of acceptance before God’s law. This message of “righteousness by faith” in the judgment was the heart of what came to be known in Adventism as the “Awakening.”

The thousands within Adventism who accepted this good news were met by a determined effort of church leadership to expunge the movement and return the church to the status quo. Those who refused to disavow Robert Brinsmead variously faced exclusion from church positions, revocation of ministerial credentials, and even formal removal from church membership.

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## The Progression of the Awakening

In the 1970s the Awakening turned its focus to the 16th-century roots of Protestantism. The legal framework of the Reformation’s doctrine of justification by faith was familiar to Adventism and harmonized with its self-image as the

consummation of the Reformation. The Awakening's Reformation emphasis captured the attention of thousands of Protestant pastors, theologians and laymen who were dealing with the subjective emphasis of the charismatic movement and its "holiness" message focusing on internal experience.

The 1980s ushered in radical changes in the Awakening as it jettisoned, one by one, sacrosanct elements of Adventism. Doctrines it discarded included the "investigative judgment" in a heavenly sanctuary, seventh-day Sabbatarianism, and the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White. This departure from Adventism presented a major challenge to the ongoing viability of the Awakening, which had been supported and promoted primarily by churchgoing Adventists. Some of these now returned to Adventism, others established independent fellowships outside Adventism, still others joined mainstream churches, and some stopped attending church altogether.

As the old Awakening was in transition, a friend of this writer had a curious dream. She saw a beautiful stained-glass window set in a frame, and a voice spoke, declaring that the frame would change but the window would remain, and when the light shone through it, it would become more beautiful than ever. When she awoke, she was puzzled, having always been confident that the framework for the gospel never changed.

But change indeed did come in the 1990s. The legal framework ("nomism," from the Greek *nomos* = law) for the Awakening — as well as for Seventh-day Adventism and Protestantism — began to collapse. It became clear that Paul's doctrine that "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28, KJV) had been seriously misunderstood. Because Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, his mission was to bring the Christian message to all humanity, free from the religious barriers of Judaism. Paul's issue with the law was not about common morality but about ensuring that the Jewish law — the Torah or Jewish religion — did not bar Gentiles from the community of believers.

As this understanding of Paul's missives about law collapsed the legal framework of the Awakening, its leading spirits came to an intersection in their journey. It was at this crucial juncture that Jack Zwemer provided a viable direction for the progression of the Awakening spirit. Robert Brinsmead, following the route of previous notable Adventist advocates of righteousness by faith, moved into a *possessional* view of God *in* and *as* everything — including self-divinizing Gnosticism, panentheism and, ultimately, pantheism. Zwemer took the opposite road — a *relational* view of God as *with* and *in relation to* everything.

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## The Relational God

Over the years, Jack Zwemer had been a close friend and associate of Robert Brinsmead and was sometimes referred to as his "idea man." Now, with the dawn of the 1990s, Zwemer was gripped by the thought that, in the Christ event, "God as Jesus

adopted humanity as his own reality,” thus manifesting, as the Human One, a new mutual relationality with profound implications and consequences. Although Brinsmead was reluctant to pursue this thought, it continued to resonate in Zwemer’s mind. As the Awakening’s Publishing Editor, this author (Norman Jarnes, son of Peter Jarnes, a Professor of Religion at an Adventist college prior to being terminated in 1969 for refusing to disavow Brinsmead) was convinced that Zwemer was on the right track. Thus, in the 1990s Jack Zwemer began his work writing about the relational God, manifested in God’s *becoming* human as Jesus Christ.

During this time, while Editor of *Outlook*, Zwemer became a member of a local Episcopalian church in Augusta, Georgia, where he lived. He also frequently flew to Australia, where he continued his cordial acquaintance with Robert Brinsmead, whose homestead and Tropical Fruit World tourist farm in New South Wales adjoined Zwemer’s own Australian property near Brisbane and the Queensland Gold Coast.

From the 1990s until his death in 2017, the extensive research associated with Zwemer’s deep theological interest resulted in a prodigious volume of material spanning a quarter century (1990-2015), including numerous citations, digests and reviews of others’ work that place his own leading-edge material in the slipstream of history. His writings from 1997-2015 are now published by Worldview Publications as online *Outlook* articles, with those from 1990-1996 pending online publication. In light of the axial Christ event, Zwemer’s

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work explores such challenging topics as the nature and history of God, the origins of the universe and of humankind, and the dawn and importance of self- and “other”-consciousness. He examines the Genesis Creation, the controversial question of theodicy — of why there is natural and moral evil and suffering — and the nature of God’s relational covenants with humanity in the Old and New Testaments. Zwemer also defines the error of religion and the meaning of redemption. And as both an accomplished scientist and lay theologian, he develops a cogent and credible postmodern worldview that includes both scientific and biblical perspectives without conflict or exclusion.

Along with many others of his family, friends and acquaintances, this writer is profoundly grateful for Dr. Zwemer’s friendship and insights. Moreover, *Outlook* is deeply indebted to him for his many years of groundbreaking research and writing for Worldview Publications. In the words of the Revelator:

I heard a voice from heaven saying . . . : “Blessed are [those who] die in the Lord.” “Yes, says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.” — Revelation 14:13, NRSV.