EDITOR'S CORNER

Famine or Feast?

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Retired General Conference Worker/
Ponderer of Our Changing Times

As promised in our last issue, we offer herewith its companion volume devoted to the pulpit ministry. The immediate emphasis falls within the time span extending from the second half of the 20th century up to the present time—in other words, the era of "modern" preaching. But we include, as is our usual practice, timeless counsel from the pen of inspiration.

We daresay that if we polled our readers to suggest the single best sermon they ever heard, we would receive a dizzying variety of answers. Be assured, then, that your very favorite sermon is very likely not reprinted here. This is not to say—no, not at all—that we have thrown together a strictly arbitrary anthology of mediocre sermons or "filler" material in the present volume. On the contrary, each sermon has been carefully selected and endorsed by our editorial board. Considered individually, each addresses provocative, sometimes even sensitive, topics. Taken as a whole, they represent a wide spectrum of current trends and concerns—some highly alarming—among us as a people.

The names of the speakers, for the most part, may be familiar to most of our readers. We would like to suggest, however, that each reader make a concerted effort to "listen" very attentively to the "spoken" word. See whether the Holy Spirit just now may be spreading a banquet table in the wilderness—a veritable feast in the midst of the prevailing spiritual famine (Amos 8:11).

We open with a mini-compilation of Ellen White's comments on the subject of proper pastoral pulpit decorum. Read her inspired counsel, then ask yourself how nearly today's preachers measure up to the divine standard. For those who don't, pray earnestly that God will raise up preachers who will.

Long-time General Conference president Robert Pierson carried a profound burden for God's remnant church. Not long before he died, he delivered a poignant parting appeal to church leaders gathered for the Annual Council. As events would play out, the accuracy of some of the details in this sermon almost causes one's hair to stand on end.

Another brave general in God's army was Enoch Oliveira. During a time when Adventism was going through an especially turbulent theological maelstrom, he seems to have had almost prophetic insight when warning his beloved church against the dangers of insidious Trojan horses ensconced within the gates.

It would have been a delight to be present when Carlyle Haynes occupied the pulpit. As he addresses fellow ministers, you too will appreciate his nononsense approach to correct, no-frills, Biblical preaching.

I thank God for men and women who have stood for the right, though the heavens fall. One of them was...
Joe Crews. After reading his sermon on marriage, divorce, and adultery, I found myself wondering how many other pastors even dare to touch this hot topic nowadays.

Our immediate predecessor, Lawrence Maxwell, once again graces the pages of this journal via his unique way of evaluating excuses for not attending church. In the process, and in typical Maxwellian style, he makes a famous Bible story of healing come alive once more.

Randy Skeete is a familiar author in this journal, and for good reason. After recounting the story of a highly focused, mission-driven, Old Testament gentleman, see if you don’t come away from this sermon more challenged than ever to do something meaningful for the Lord without also succumbing to competing distractions.

One of the most beloved names in modern Adventist circles is Leslie Hardinge. In his penetrating study of the character of Judas Iscariot, the “listener” finds himself closer than he ever fancied to being more like Judas than Jesus. Be challenged by this masterpiece of Biblical biography, and be changed!

In my last editorial (fall 2006) I used the title, “Who’s in Charge Here?” Little did I realize at the time that this topic would receive such masterful treatment in the present issue of Adventists Affirm. Richard O’Ffill handles a very delicate intergenerational issue with all the tact of an ambassador. And indeed he is: a seasoned ambassador for our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you thirst for a practical yet succinct message on a distinctive Adventist doctrine, you need look no farther than W.D. Frazee’s brilliant coverage of the sanctuary message. It is simply amazing how he compacted so much truth about a topic that has challenged so many, using so few words. This in itself preaches volumes.

This issue ends with our reprise of a very thoughtful devotional message by Laurel Damsteegt. Even if you have seen it online before, be blessed all over again!

In sum, our sincere wish is that you will feast sumptuously on these sermons. Our earnest prayer is that your faith that God is still in charge of His remnant church will once again, more certainly than ever, be thoroughly AFFIRMed.
Don't Let It Happen
An Earnest Appeal to Church Leaders

ROBERT H. PIERSON

This will be the last time that in my present role I shall stand before the world leaders of my church, your church, our church, and I have a few words to leave with you.

I take my thoughts from something that Elder and Mrs. Ralph Neall have written describing how typically a sect evolves into a church. They say a sect is often begun by a charismatic leader with tremendous drive and commitment, and that it arises as a protest against worldliness and formalism in a church. It is generally embraced by the poor. The rich would lose too much by joining it, since it is unpopular, despised, and persecuted by society in general. It has definite beliefs firmly held by zealous members. Each member makes a personal decision to join it and knows what he believes. There is little organization or property, and there are few buildings. The group has strict standards and controls on behavior. Preachers, often without education, arise by inner compulsion.

And then it passes on to the second generation. With growth there comes a need for organization and buildings. As a result of industry and frugality, members become prosperous. As prosperity increases, persecution begins to wane. Children born into the movement do not have to make personal decisions to join it. They do not necessarily know what they believe. They do not need to hammer out their own positions. These have been worked out for them. Preachers arise more by selection and by apprenticeship to older workers than by direct inner compulsion.

In the third generation, organization develops and institutions are established. The need is seen for schools to pass on the faith of the fathers. Colleges are established. Members have to be exhorted to live up to the standards, while at the same time the standards of membership are being lowered. The group becomes lax about disfellowshipping nonpracticing members. Missionary zeal cools off. There is more concern over public relations. Leaders study methods of propagating their faith, sometimes employing extrinsic rewards as motivation for service by members. Youth question why they are different from others, and intermarry with those not of their faith.

In the fourth generation there is much machinery; the number of administrators increases while the number of workers at the grass roots becomes proportionately less. Great church councils are held to define doctrine. More schools, universities, and seminaries are established. These go to the world for accreditation and tend to become secularized. There is a reexamination of positions and modernizing of methods. Attention is given to contemporary culture, with an interest in the arts: music, architecture, literature. The movement seeks to become “relevant” to contemporary society by becoming involved in popular causes. Services become formal. The group enjoys complete acceptance by the world. The sect has become a church!
Brethren and sisters, this must never happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church! This will not happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is not just another church—it is God’s church!

But you are the men and women sitting in this sanctuary this morning on whom God is counting to assure that it does not happen.

Already, brethren and sisters, there are subtle forces that are beginning to stir. Regrettably there are those in the church who belittle the inspiration of the Bible, who scorn the first 11 chapters of Genesis, who question the Spirit of Prophecy’s short chronology of the earth, and who subtly and not so subtly attack the Spirit of Prophecy. There are some who point to the Reformers and contemporary theologians as a source and the norm for Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. There are those who allegedly are tired of the hackneyed phrases of Adventism. There are those who would throw off the mantle of a peculiar people; and those who would go the way of the secular, materialistic world.

Fellow leaders, beloved brethren and sisters—don’t let it happen! I appeal to you as earnestly as I know how this morning—don’t let it happen! I appeal to Andrews University, to the Seminary, to Loma Linda University—don’t let it happen! We are not Seventh-day Anglicans, not Seventh-day Lutherans—we are Seventh-day Adventists! This is God’s last church with God’s last message.

You are the men and women, the leaders, whom God is counting on to keep the Seventh-day Adventist Church God’s remnant church, the church God has destined to triumph!

The servant of the Lord says, “Fearful perils are before those who bear responsibilities in the Lord’s work—perils the thought of which makes me tremble” (Selected Messages, bk. 2, p. 391). And in Ezekiel 22:30 we read, “I looked for a man among them who could build a barricade, who could stand before Me in the breach to defend the land from ruin” (NEB).

I believe this morning, fellow leaders, that God is looking for men and women, intrepid leaders, men and women who love God’s church and God’s truth more than they love their lives, to see that this church under God goes through to the kingdom. The task ahead of us is not going to be easy. If I understand the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy aright this morning, ahead lies a time of trouble, a time of challenge such as this church and this world have never before known.

The servant of the Lord tells us: “The enemy of souls has sought to bring in the supposition that a great reformation was to take place among Seventh-day Adventists, and that this reformation would consist in giving up the doctrines which stand as the pillars of our faith, and engaging in a process of reorganization. Were this reformation to take place, what would result? The principles of truth that God in His wisdom has given to the remnant church, would be discarded. Our religion would be changed. The fundamental principles that have sustained the work for the last fifty years would be accounted as error. A new organization would be established. Books of a new order would be written. A system of intellectual philosophy would be introduced. The founders of this system would go into the cities, and do a wonderful work. The Sabbath of course, would be lightly regarded, as also the God Who created it. Nothing would be allowed to stand in the way of the new movement. The leaders would teach that virtue is better than vice, but God being removed, they would place their dependence on human power, which, without God, is worthless” (Selected Messages, bk. 1, pp. 204, 205).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church had its alpha years ago. You and I are the leaders who will face the omega that will be of the same subtle, devilish origin. Its effect will be more devastating than the alpha. Brethren, I beg of you, study, know what is ahead, then with God’s help prepare your people to meet it!

“God calls for men who are prepared to meet emergencies, men who in a crisis will not be found standing on the wrong side” (Review and Herald, November 5, 1903).
“We are pressing on to the final conflict, and this is no time for compromise. It is no time to hide your colors. When the battle wages sore, let no one turn traitor. It is no time to lay down or conceal our weapons, and give Satan the advantage in the warfare” (*Review and Herald*, December 6, 1892).

And then I call attention to a vision the Lord’s servant had, in which she saw a ship heading toward an iceberg. She said: “There, towering high above the ship, was a gigantic iceberg. An authoritative voice cried out, ‘Meet it!’ There was not a moment’s hesitation. It was a time for instant action. The engineer put on full steam, and the man at the wheel steered the ship straight into the iceberg. With a crash she struck the ice. There was a fearful shock, and the iceberg broke into many pieces, falling with a noise like thunder to the deck. The passengers were violently shaken by the force of the collision, but no lives were lost. The vessel was injured, but not beyond repair. She rebounded from the contact, trembling from stem to stern, like a living creature. Then she moved forward on her way.

“Well I knew the meaning of this representation. I had my orders. I had heard the words, like a voice from our Captain, ‘Meet it!’ I knew what my duty was, and that there was not a moment to lose. The time for decided action had come. I must without delay obey the command, ‘Meet it!’” (*Selected Messages*, bk. 1, pp. 205, 206).

Fellow leaders, it may be that in the not too distant future you will have to meet it. I pray God will give you grace and courage and wisdom.

Finally, “What a wonderful thought it is that the great controversy is nearing its end! In the closing work we shall meet with perils that we know not how to deal with; but let us not forget that the three great powers of Heaven are working, that a divine hand is on the wheel, and that God will bring His purposes to pass. He will gather from the world a people who will serve Him in righteousness” (*Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 391).

What a wonderful assurance we have this morning, brethren and sisters, that you and I are in God’s work. This work is not dependent on any man; it is dependent on our relationship with Him. There is only one way for us to face the future, and that is at the foot of the cross. A church with its eyes upon the Man of Calvary will never walk into apostasy.

Thank you, brethren and sisters, for giving me the privilege of serving you for the past 45 years, and may God bless every one of you.
In one of his famous epics, Homer describes the clever device the Greeks employed to conquer the city of Troy during the Trojan War.

To enable the Greeks to enter the legendary city by stealth, the master carpenter, Epeius, built a huge hollow wooden horse. According to Homer, 100,000 soldiers besieged Troy. The ten-year siege ended when the Greeks concealed some soldiers in the horse and then left it behind as they pretended to withdraw.

Despite the warning of Laocoön, Sinon persuaded the Trojans to move the horse inside the city walls. At night the Greek army returned and the soldiers who had hidden inside the horse opened the city gates to their comrades. In this way Troy was invaded successfully and destroyed.

Although the war between the Greeks and the city of Troy is generally considered a historical fact, the episode dealing with the Trojan horse has been considered a mythological tale. Nonetheless, from this epic we can derive some timely illustrations that are applicable to the situation our church finds itself in today.

For many years the Seventh-day Adventist Church succeeded in bravely and tenaciously resisting the fearful assaults of the enemy. The walls of the “holy city” remained impregnable. But in his determination to conquer and destroy God’s church, the prince of this world has undertaken to employ clever and deadly secret weapons.

“There is nothing that the great deceiver fears so much,” wrote Ellen G. White, “as that we shall become acquainted with his devices” (The Great Controversy, p. 516).

After many attempts to conquer the “city of God” by applying the same kind of deceitful action employed by the Greeks, the great adversary has been able to obtain his ends by surreptitiously introducing the Trojan horse of liberalism within the walls of Zion.

Now that liberalism has become operative within our church, we perceive how vulnerable we can be to the assaults of Satan. As a church we have been inclined to believe that our greatest danger of being defeated by the powers of evil would come from without. While we may be able to perceive clearly from the walls of Zion what Satan is doing to conquer and destroy the church, we do not seem able to do much about standing firmly against the evils that are developing insidiously within our midst. Ellen White warns: “We have more to fear from within than from without” (Selected Messages, bk. 1, p. 122).

Liberals Are Not Bad People
Those who are promoting liberalism in our ranks are not “bad” people. They are committed believers. Many of them exhibit the beauty of Christian virtues in their lives. Most of them love the church. They would like to share the faith and certainties of our forefathers, but in the honesty of their hearts, they do not have them. They are unable to see the uniqueness of our message, the distinctiveness of our identity, the eschatological dimension of our hope, or the urgency of our mission. Representing a wide spectrum of religious thought, they attempt to reinterpret traditional theological Seventh-day Adventist thinking by dressing some of our old doctrines in what appear to them to be new and attractive semantic garments.

Why are these people advocating liberal views among us? Why are they so enthusiastically playing the role of apostles of change in our theological system?

First of all, it seems to me, they are eager to discard the “cult” label that has been used so widely to characterize Seventh-day Adventism. They long to see our religious movement become a part of what they consider mainstream Christianity. In their endeavor to attain religious “respectability,” they suggest the reinterpretation of some historical views of our theology that they believe are Biblically indefensible.

Although accepting some aspects of our distinctiveness, such as the Sabbath and our health principles, they believe that the time has come for revision in our theological system. In fostering such a revision, some feel uncomfortable with the “remnant” concept as understood by the founders of our message. They believe that all “sectarian mentality” should be rejected as presumptuous and arrogant.

Other liberals, in their endeavor to make our theology more “relevant,” question the integrity of the sanctuary doctrine and unite their voices with those of our opponents in this matter. They explain the two-phase ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary as a face-saving device created by Edson, Crosier, and others to bail our pioneers out of the Millerite failure.

There are those who are alarmed about what seems to them to be excessive borrowing by Ellen White of material from a variety of sources. Misguided by distorted ideas about the way inspiration works, they are willing to challenge the validity of her claims, rejecting her prophetic authority.

Some liberals define our eschatology as a by-product of nineteenth-century North American culture and, as such, as deserving of substantial reformulation. They insist that after 145 years of proclamation we can no longer preserve the fervent expectation that permeated the church in its formative years.

Liberal scientists in the church insist that the Creation doctrine should be reevaluated in the context of current scientific information and hypotheses.

According to the February 5, 1990 issue of Christianity Today, the obsession for change in the Seventh-day Adventist ranks had its beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s, when our students in much larger numbers than before began to attend non-Adventist seminaries and universities seeking advanced degrees. Some of these students, in spite of unfavorable circumstances, were able to preserve their religious experience and came forth strengthened in their convictions. Others, influenced by modern Biblical criticism and liberal theology, reshaped their beliefs.

What Is Being Gained by These Attempts at Change?

What are we gaining from the liberal attempts to make our message more “palatable” to the world? When so many seeds of doubt, uncertainty, and strife are sown, what else can be expected? Liberalism is reaping what it has sown. It sowed unbelief, and it is harvesting apostasies.

During the early 1980s, an unprecedented number of ministers and lay people left the church in Australia and New Zealand. During the 1970s our church in those two countries lost one believer for every three who came in. In 1981, after a particularly notable attempt to effect a liberal change, the percentage of loss rose to 46 percent. It peaked at 63 per cent in 1982 and then settled down at approximately 50 percent—a loss of one member for every two believers.
We must not remain indifferent to such staggering losses. We must not minimize the tragic consequences of our internal confrontations caused by new theologies. The casualties are thousands of perplexed souls who, spiritually confused, are departing from us, throwing away their confidence in the validity of our message. They have lost the landmarks of our faith and no longer have a clear understanding of what we stand for.

The following set of North American Division statistics reflects the consequences of ongoing theological and other attempts to change our beliefs in the United States and Canada:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Annual Growth Rates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1931–1940</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941–1950</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951–1960</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961–1970</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971–1980</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981–1988</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
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What is the message in these numbers? Oscar Wilde, famous dramatist of the past century, with inimitable irony affirmed that “there are three kinds of lies in the world: common lies, small lies, and statistics.” Thus Wilde underlined the fact that statistics may deceive and lead us to wrong conclusions. But even though statistics are susceptible of incorrect interpretation, we dare not minimize their importance in an analysis of the crisis that we face. They can help us understand the gravity of our problems.

It is true that we can be deceived by numbers and conclude that in spite of what seems apparent the North American Division is still growing. But it is not growing. According to reliable sources, 30 to 35 percent of our believers no longer attend church. With this decrease in attendance has come a decrease in offerings. Sharp cutbacks in church budgets have been approved. Enrollment in our schools is declining. Institutions have been closed. We are in the process of trimming down our church’s operations and reducing our task forces. The market for our books is shrinking. Denominational periodicals have been merged, and yet their circulation has still dropped. We have come to a time of financial restraints, with most conferences cutting back on their ministerial forces. These are inevitable consequences of what has happened in theological areas.

After so many seeds of doubt and uncertainty have been sown within the church by those who are obsessed with the desire to reinterpret our theology, after so many years of theological disputation, what else should we expect? We are witnessing the inevitable harvest of liberalism. When unbelief is sown, the harvest is bound to be apostasy.

After its insidious penetration within the walls of God’s city, liberalism in its various shapes and forms has succeeded in opening the gates of the church to the invasion of such other evils as pluralism, secularism, humanism, materialism, futurism, and preterism.

**Pluralism**

To diffuse the polarization we are facing, some articulate scholars suggest the official adoption of theological pluralism, the acceptance of peaceful coexistence of conflicting, even opposing, views among us.

“On fundamental beliefs, unity; on nonessentials, liberty; in everything, love,” is the popular dictum that inspires pluralistic scholars in their appeal for flexibility and openness. But who is going to determine what is essential and what is negotiable? Individuals, independent ministries, theological societies, the annual council, or the church as a whole under the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Would we be able to retain our self-understanding as God’s last prophetic movement, if we were to fragment our beliefs by including in them divergent schools of thought?
We need theological unity in our preaching and in our publications, but above all, we need unity in the theological departments of our colleges and universities. I submit that no school of theology, under pluralistic influences, shaken by the confrontation of ideas, is able to produce preachers with strong convictions. Without preachers having certainty, there is no power in their preaching.

The successful spread of the Gospel over the Mediterranean world in the days of the apostles threatened Christian unity. People of widely divergent backgrounds were baptized, bringing into the church some of the popular religious concepts of the age. Thus, there was a real danger that the teachings of the church would be affected by syncretism. Aware of this danger, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to maintain unity. See Ephesians 4:4–6.

Addressing “the churches of Galatia,” the apostle expressed his regret for the way the Galatians, under pluralistic influences, changed their minds and turned away from the grace of Christ to a “different” gospel (Galatians 1:6). Was Paul being narrow-minded in his appeal for unity? After all, those Jewish-Christians certainly preached salvation through Christ. They never denied, as far as we know, that it was necessary to believe in Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. Why then was Paul so vehement in his opposition to this Jewish-Christian preaching? Because the Judaizers insidiously distorted the Gospel of Christ, throwing the believers into a state of mental and spiritual confusion. At the real risk of being labeled intransigent, Paul exhorted the Galatians to pay no attention to those messengers who, claiming ecclesiastical authority, were disrupting the peace and unity that had existed among the saints.

**Let’s Learn From Methodist Experience**

Methodism in our day is known for its wide latitude of beliefs. Its clergy have freedom to subscribe to different schools of Bible interpretation. Attempts to define basic Methodist doctrine have met much opposition, and Methodist theology has become surprisingly divorced from its own tradition. Persons who want to be accepted as church members are no longer required to endorse any specific creed. To the question, “What do Methodists believe?” ministers and laity respond by saying that they believe in Jesus.

Today the Methodist Church is in a steep numerical decline. “In the 1965–1975 period the United Methodist Church lost over one million members,” says C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, p. 32. And who is responsible for this sharp defection? The exodus that the Methodists are facing is not to be blamed on outside forces. The real blame lies within their church. If the Methodist Church were attacked by enemies from outside, if it were suffering persecution as a result of its endeavors to evangelize the world, there would be hope. But the world does not persecute a church that seems to stand for nothing. The Methodist Church is declining as a result of its failure to preserve its own religious heritage.

Can we learn some profitable lessons from its perplexing experience?

**Preterism, Historical Criticism, and Futurism**

A segment of the Seventh-day Adventist scholarly community no longer accepts the principles of prophetic interpretation that made our church what it is.

In the books of Daniel and Revelation, our pioneers found our time and our mission. Applying the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, which had been used by the majority of Christians over the centuries and which earned the subsequent endorsement of Ellen G. White, our forefathers were able to unfold the history of the long conflict between Christ and Satan. They were able to look upon themselves as an integral part of the cosmic program.

Today, however, we sense a gradual rejection of the historicist approach and a growing acceptance of the Counter-Reformation schools of prophetic interpretation. Furthermore, historical criticism does not allow for true long-range prediction. As a result, in some quarters our message has been changed and has lost its distinctiveness and its power.

Moving the fulfillment of the long-term prophecies to the end of the age (the futurist
view), or relegating their significance to the distant past (the preterist view), or denying true long-term prophecy (the historical-critical view), makes the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation irrelevant, and transforms the Adventist movement into just another denomination without power and special prophetic message.

**Secularism**

Another intruder that is expanding its presence within the walls of God’s city is the trend known as “secularism,” often defined as the organization of life as if God did not exist. Its growing influence is producing a decline in attendance, reduced commitment to Christian ideals, and an increasing tendency to view the church—any church—as obsolete and irrelevant. Professional growth and prestige, business and profits, economic status and academic attainments are overestimated, while Christian virtues are neglected, or relegated to second place.

According to Norman Blaike, American Christians today can be divided into two groups, the “supernaturalists” and the “secularists.” The “supernaturalists,” Blaike observes, are generally to the right theologically, while the “secularists” are to the left. The “supernaturalists,” he states, prize Christian virtues such as devotion, piety, and church commitments, while “secularists” admire tolerance, success, efficiency, and academic achievements.

The process of secularization is affecting not only believers but also institutions. According to George Marsden, Duke University historian, the religious character of many erstwhile Christian institutions has been eclipsed, with “nobody noticing and nobody seeming to mind.”

In the past two decades we have seen Seventh-day Adventist institutions affected by substantial changes that have not all been on the plus side. Surreptitiously, secularism makes inroads that tend to eclipse the religious character of these institutions. Religious services are still held in their chapels, but they are more a form than a spiritual force.

Theological liberalism makes an immense contribution to this insidious secularism of believers and institutions by its rejection of an authoritative church, an authoritative Bible, and an authoritative body of truth. It is more than willing to accommodate religion to the spirit of the times.

**Other Evils**

Other evils, such as exaggerated academic freedom, the historical-critical approach to Scripture, and theistic evolution (with its very long chronology) are making their contribution to the undermining of confidence in basic beliefs, and leading congregations to spiritual disaster.

It is impossible to prevent the teaching of aberrant views within the church, when the concept of academic freedom without sound confessional responsibility is accepted. Defenders of academic freedom in our midst state that we are not a creedal denomination, and so every believer should be free to endorse different theological views. But we understand that if an individual is a Seventh-day Adventist, he or she should subscribe to our Fundamental Beliefs in their entirety. Otherwise, he or she ceases to be a Seventh-day Adventist.

I still remember the strong opposition manifested by some Adventist scholars when the historical-critical methodology was condemned officially by the General Conference on the basis that this method, by definition, excludes our belief in the transcendence of the Scriptures.

I believe, however, that the church has the unquestionable right to decide which approach should be used by our scholars and preachers. This is our only safeguard to protect our religious heritage, which subscribes to the Reformation principle that the Bible is the infallible Word of God and its own interpreter. Theistic evolution (or progressive creationism) is a concept accepted by a growing number of scientists in our ranks. It involves the subordination and accommodation of the Scriptures to the Darwinian view of gradual evolution. Those who endorse this school of thought no longer regard key portions of the Bible as reliable sources of historical information. In
taking this position they place scientific hypotheses above Scripture, making science a judge of the Word of God.

The Fifth Column

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) left a million dead. When the conflict seemed to be reaching its climax, General Emilio Mola commanded four columns moving toward the capital of the country. But in addition to his four columns he was counting on a fifth column, one that had entered Madrid behind its defenses, to deliver the city to him when the decisive moment arrived.

Among the lessons that history teaches us, we find the fall of empires and institutions that succumbed to internal forces. The historian Gibbon (1737–1796) ascribes the fall even of Rome to internal, not external, causes. He mentions the fourteenth-century Italian poet, Petrarch, who described the fall of Rome as follows: “Behold the remains of Rome, the shadow of its early greatness! Neither time nor the barbarians can glory in having brought about this stupendous destruction: It was accomplished by its own citizens, the most illustrious of her children.”

Many civilizations have been defeated by the internal sabotage of fifth columnists. History warns us what can take place in the church. External opposition is not our worst enemy. Instead, the insidious deteriorating influences introduced by Satan, our great adversary, do the most harm.

What has been the greatest defeat suffered by the Christian church? Was it the loss of life as a result of violence, martyrdom, and torture? No. The church’s greatest defeat took place when it accepted the favor of the Roman Empire and lost its purity and fervor. When the church left the catacombs, it adjusted to the splendor of the world. Satan’s fifth columnists—his Trojan horse—weakened the church internally, paving the way for dilution of faith and the establishment of pseudo-Christianity.

Conclusion

The picture I have presented of the Seventh-day Adventist Church can be considered bleak and dark. But in my closing remarks, I would like to present a brighter side. In spite of the problems we face today, we have many reasons to believe in the triumph of our message as long as we stay faithful to the Bible. A revival will come and our eyes will see powerful miracles of evangelism.

Our message and movement deserve to be characterized by a triumphant spirit. They are not based on “cunningly devised fables” but on the unshakable foundation of “the sure word of prophecy.”

“The church may appear as about to fall, but it does not fall. It remains, while the sinners in Zion will be sifted out—the chaff separated from the precious wheat” (Selected Messages, bk. 2, p. 380).

The conviction that God guides this movement allows us to declare, without a shadow of doubt, that the fire on Seventh-day Adventist altars will never go out. The determination to win the world to Christ will motivate us in our united evangelistic program. The world will be lighted with the glory of our proclamation of the Advent hope.

NOTES

1 See Australasian Record, October 28, 1989.
Lawfully Joined

JOE CREWS

Try to picture two kinds of family scenes for comparison purposes. In one home there are three wives, all married to the same man, each with one or more children. The families live together and the husband and father of the three families is always there to give disciplinary authority and security to the overall household.

Now picture another situation. A man has been married to three women in succession. They have all borne him children and have been put away by divorce one after the other. The families are living apart, and the children are growing up under the trauma of financial and emotional insecurity without a father.

Which of these imaginary situations do you perceive to be worse? The law of the land forbids one and accommodates the other. Perhaps if we could look at all the aspects purely from the social and humanitarian standpoint, we would say that the latter scene is worse than the former. Viewing it from the traditional Judeo-Christian position we would probably condemn the first family as being more clearly in the wrong.

Looking at it solely from the Biblical perspective, is there really much basic moral difference between the two situations? According to the Scriptures, marriage is a lifetime commitment. To divorce an innocent companion and marry someone else is even more strongly condemned than the popular polygamy practiced in Old Testament days. Both are frustrating to God’s plan and purpose. The children probably suffer more under the divorce procedures than under the polygamy plan, but neither can be defended nor tolerated under the searchlight of revelation.

Whether several wives are married at the same time, or in succession, the will of God is violated.

How can we explain the contradiction between Christian practice and Bible principle on this point? More and more church members are acting as if there were no restrictions on the number of marriages they can contract. The moral conscience of entire denominations has shifted and adjusted to the massive incidence of divorce within the church.

Although the majority of Christian bodies have given formal assent to what the Bible teaches about divorce, there seems to be very little done in publicizing their position. Church officials and pastors often have to be pressed for a clear-cut statement of the official doctrinal position. The reason for this may hinge upon the embarrassing number who have continued as divorced church leaders with the tacit approval, at least, of the congregation.
Unfortunately, if problems of divorce are not dealt with at the time they arise, it is impossible ever to sort out the issues and take any action later on. Because many such cases involve charges and countercharges, often unsupported by evidence, pastors are reluctant to be drawn into the explosive morass. Church boards also stay away from the unpleasant task of having to take sides against one of their own who has, perhaps, been a respected past leader in the church. Consequently the issues are left fuzzy. It is easier to give the benefit of the doubt and many guilty spouses are allowed to remain in unconditional fellowship even after remarriage.

Admittedly there are difficult complications which seem to defy human solution. Each individual case is marked by its own bewildering circumstances. There may not be any satisfying answer that will be completely just and equitable for each party involved. But whatever action is taken by the church should be in complete harmony with the Bible counsel on divorce, and that counsel is not muddled or ambiguous. Jesus stated in the most positive language that only one condition could justify the act of divorce and remarriage, and that was adultery. “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery” (Matthew 19:9).

Please note that Christ charges adultery against a husband or wife who divorces a spouse and marries someone else, except when that spouse has been unfaithful. If the companion has been guilty of fornication (porneia, or sexual impurity) the exception would provide for the innocent one to divorce and remarry without guilt.

The unusually severe position of Jesus on this subject of divorce has been the subject of endless debate. Even His Own disciples were astonished at the uncompromising nature of His position. They said, “If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry” (Matthew 19:10). There was no ambiguity in the minds of those disciples about what Jesus meant. They understood that He was forbidding all divorce and remarriage except on the grounds of adultery. Christ’s response to their amazement confirms that they had the proper understanding of His statement. Until fairly recently, much to their credit, it can be said that most Protestant and Catholic church bodies have interpreted the words of Jesus very much like those listening disciples did. Unfortunately, with the mushrooming divorce rates, the Biblical doctrine has appeared more and more offensive and disagreeable to the growing number of divorcees within the church. Attempts have been made to reinterpret the doctrinal position of some of the churches on the subject, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

It would be proper, at this point, to consider a sampling of the Spirit of Prophecy counsel which guided the early Seventh-day Adventist Church in the strong Biblical stand it took on the divorce issue.

“A woman may be legally divorced from her husband by the laws of the land and yet not divorced in the sight of God and according to the higher law. There is only one sin, which is adultery, which can place the husband or wife in a position where they can be free from the marriage vow in the sight of God. Although the laws of the land may grant divorce, yet they are husband and wife still in the Bible light, according to the laws of God.” The Adventist Home, p. 34.

“Your [one contemplating divorce] ideas in regard to the marriage relation have been erroneous. Nothing but the violation of the marriage bed can either break or annul the marriage vow...Men are not at liberty to make a standard of law for themselves, to avoid God’s law and...standard of righteousness...God gave only one cause why a wife should leave her husband, or the husband leave his wife, which was adultery. Let this ground be prayerfully considered.” Ibid., pp. 341, 342.

“There are many unhappy marriages because of so much haste. Two unite their interest at the marriage altar, by most solemn vows before God, without previously weighing the matter, and devoting time to sober reflection and earnest prayer. Many move from impulse. They have no thorough acquaintance with the dispositions of
each other. They do not realize that the happiness of their whole life is at stake. If they move wrong in this matter, and their marriage life proves unhappy, it cannot be taken back. If they find they are not calculated to make each other happy, they must endure it the best they can.” *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 120.

In one situation Mrs. White counseled that the moral offender should be permanently excluded from church membership. Details of the moral lapse are not clarified in the letter (later included in vol. 1 of the Testimonies). The recommended action shows that some violators of God’s law should trust for salvation outside the church.

“It is impossible for E to be fellowshipped by the church of God. He has placed himself where he cannot be helped by the church, where he can have no communion with nor voice in the church. He has placed himself there in the face of light and truth. He has stubbornly chosen his own course, and refused to listen to reproof. He has followed the inclinations of his corrupt heart, has violated the holy law of God, and has disgraced the cause of present truth. If he repents ever so heartily, the church must let his case alone. If he goes to Heaven it must be alone, without the fellowship of the church. A standing rebuke from God must ever rest upon him, that the standard of morality be not lowered to the very dust.” *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 215.

Based upon such statements from the Spirit of Prophecy and the unequivocal statements of Christ on the subject, the position was taken and held through the years that ones who deliberately abandoned an innocent spouse to enter a marriage relationship with another person would be committing adultery. They would be disfellowshipped from the church, and, furthermore, as long as they continued to live in that sinful relationship with someone whom they were Biblically forbidden to have, they could not be received back into church membership.

This is in perfect accord with the Bible requirements of repenting and forsaking the sin. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).

For many years the church operated under this sound spiritual principle with a minimum of controversy and discord. But as divorces became more commonplace in the world, the divisive custom began to make more and more inroads into the remnant church. Following his favorite mode of attack, Satan intruded little by little into the family of God with his pernicious, creeping compromise. Divorces for many unscriptural reasons became more frequent. Later the guilty, remarried spouses were bringing their new companions and applying for readmission into the church. Often the applicants were talented individuals who had once served as respected leaders and officers in the church. Sympathies were aroused, and deep emotional feelings began to favor the finding of some way to get the disfellowshipped ones back into the church.

Almost anyone can empathize with fine, gifted people who ask for baptism, especially when they appear deeply sincere and committed. It is easy to take the impulsive position that these applicants should be accepted posthaste and assigned church responsibilities equal to their ability. But should such a decision be made on the basis of our feelings, or should it be made on the basis of the Word of God? As much as we might want to ignore it or deny it, these people have committed adultery, and are continuing to live in a relationship which the Bible calls sin. If God condemns this state of things, can the church dare to give its approval?

By baptizing and receiving them into the body of Christ, we are assuring the candidates that they are children of God and are received by Him. But how can we comfort people with this assurance if they are still living out of harmony with God’s law, and if God really does not approve them? Would it not be offering dangerous consolation which might lull them into a fatal acceptance of a nonexistent security?

Some might object to this course on the basis that forsaking the sin in this instance would involve breaking up another marriage, and two wrongs could never make a right. The answer to that objection is that we should not urge upon them what to do.
about their relationship. We can and should tell them exactly what the Bible says on the subject. Indeed, these people knew that truth long before they willfully involved themselves in the adulterous marriage.

This is what makes their situation so serious. The church should make it very clear that it can give them no comfort and approval beyond what the Bible gives.

No pastor has any right to make an exception to what the Word of God teaches about adultery. The church and its ministers should let this couple know that there is no earthly authority which has a right to go beyond the counsel of God; therefore they do not qualify Biblically to enter the body of Christ. This is not saying that they cannot be saved. God has authority to make any exceptions He wants to make on the Day of Judgment. In His omniscience He understands the motives and secret circumstances, but He has not given His church the right to make exceptions, neither the conditions under which those exceptions could be made. Lines must be drawn where they are drawn in the Bible, and emotional personal sympathies should not be allowed to weaken that decision.

Even if a church or pastor could be found who would accept a couple into church membership, even though they were living in an adulterous relationship, this would not enhance their chances of being saved. God’s disapproval of the sin of divorce and adultery must be registered so as to impress the guilty ones of the awful nature of this transgression. Under the convictions of the Holy Spirit they will have to decide what to do about their unlawful marriage. No one should urge them to break up their present marriage. They must decide what should be done for their own salvation. Whatever their decision, the church should then encourage them to be faithful, attend church, and trust in the mercies of God. But to accept them back into the church would be altering God’s Word to meet our desires instead of God’s conditions.