

Sex and Adventism: An Interview with Charles Wittschiebe

by Tom Dybdahl and Mike Hanson

The subject of the following interview, Dr. Charles Wittschiebe, taught pastoral care for many years at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Now retired, he lives in North Carolina where he continues to lecture and write. His recent book, God Invented Sex, is reviewed on page 58 of this magazine.

The Editors

Interviewers: What has been the response to the book?

Wittschiebe: The response to the book has been excellent, in the main. Relatively little criticism, that I know about. It's sold almost 30,000 copies, which by denominational standards is a best seller. The publishers put a postcard in the book asking what people thought about it. They got about an 8 percent response. The normal response is only 3 percent, which again says something.

Many people write and say: "Long overdue." Or: "Wish you would have had something like this out when I got married 20 years ago, 30 years ago." This is a rather common refrain that I've picked up. A few people, of course, are

Tom Dybdahl is press aid on the congressional staff of Representative Ned Pattison (D.-N.Y.). Mike Hanson is pastor of the Mount Pisgah Academy church.

critical, but that is to be expected.

Interviewers: Your book has been referred to as an Adventist sex manual. How does it differ from other books?

Wittschiebe: It differs in that it's not a How-To-Do book, but a How-To-Feel-About book. There is nothing in there about positions, no diagrams, no time schedule for foreplay, no biological data, very little on hygiene, and little on the procedures of contraception. I felt that we ought to have a book that would deal with the feeling tone of sex, rather than the mechanics of it. A man who loves his wife can be a little bit clumsy and have pleasure and give pleasure. If a man doesn't love his wife, he may be just a skilled seducer.

However, I don't see why Adventists couldn't read some well-selected manuals that are not written for pornographic or for sensational reasons. Some of them are very reliable and sound and worth reading. If Adventists got only five or six helpful hints from a book like that, it would be worth reading.

Interviewers: Which group or groups have had the most positive reactions to the book?

Wittschiebe: It seems to go right across the spectrum. I get comments from young people saying they like it very much—especially young wives, young husbands. I've also had comments from medical people, from people in the middle years and later years. One of the oldest persons

who asked me about her sex problem was a woman of 79. Sex doesn't have to stop even at that age. She was actively faced with a problem at 79. And I have gotten 30 to 40 percent of my mail from older people over 60.

Interviewers: What criticism have you had on the book?

Wittschiebe: Very little. I have been attacked much more in my public speaking. At one church on the west coast, I was attacked as though I was presenting a worldly viewpoint that was practically pagan. Someone wrote to the president of the university. They don't usually write me. They write somebody else. But within the week, I got a request from that same

“Take the celibacy system. It is a horrible thing to try to impose on people. And we have a few Adventists who are trying to do that today. One man recently talked to a group of conference workers and advocated gradually abstaining from sex.”

church for permission to use these tapes for the ministers in the whole conference, which indicates how things balance out.

Interviewers: As yet, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not really developed a theology of sex. What is your thinking on this matter?

Wittschiebe: Well, I feel that we have grossly neglected this whole area. Only recently are we putting out a book for our schools that includes the reproductive system. And the Devil, you see, through the ages, has not only attacked the Sabbath and mutilated it, but he has also attacked marriage and sex with great success. The Devil has always been able to use sex to cause trouble, either by having people act loosely and carelessly, or by having them say there should be no sex.

Take the celibacy system. It is a horrible thing to try to impose on people. And we have a few Adventists who are trying to do that today. One man recently talked to a group of conference workers and advocated gradually abstain-

ing from sex. I think this is a heresy of major proportions.

Furthermore, we need the theology of sex to answer some questions about certain areas. Artificial insemination, for example, or what constitutes adultery. Is it only intercourse between a man and a woman who are not supposed to be having it? Or can it include perverted forms of intercourse within a marriage?

A theology of sex is certainly, it seems to me, as much needed as a theology of recreation, of diet, or of dress. If we don't talk positively and constructively here, we're always on the defensive. We're retreating from the Devil. We don't give our youngsters a way of life and thinking that's positive.

At the Andrews University Centennial, when I spoke on Friday evening about Adventist youth and the sexual revolution, at the last minute I got the inspiration of asking these young people to stand and made a dedication to God that they would conduct their sex lives in a way to please Him. A great number stood. It was the first time I've ever tried that. It was heart-warming to see this.

I'm not sure that it wouldn't be good to do this more often. The Devil is asking for their loyalty and he's getting it—on the part of many. Why not present God properly here and His love for them? As I tell the young people, the only restrictions He puts down are adultery and fornication, and with our people, masturbation. Within these limits, He says: “I want to have you enjoy sex all your lives after you are married.”

In the Song of Solomon is a beautiful illustration of how deeply God is pleased with the physical attraction between two people. Too often it looks as though the Devil invented sex, and so God says: “You mustn't enjoy it.” Too often that is how it has been portrayed.

Interviewers: In what ways do you feel that the book has been of benefit to the Adventist Church?

Wittschiebe: I think it's doing some good in the sense that it's bringing the topic out into the open where we can look at it. This brings sex back into its important level as part of the pre-fall creation of God. It's bringing it into more intelligent relationship with the mores of the world, and helping us contrast what we believe as against what they believe.

In that sense, I think it will do a service. And if it stimulates ultimately the calling of a conference on marriage and sex and related topics—which I feel that we urgently need—I think it will have done a great deal of good.

Interviewers: How would you describe the general attitude toward sex in the Adventist Church today?

Wittschiebe: Here you're asking for an opinion that would require a pretty thorough sampling of a lot of people, which we don't have. But generally, I think we have been somewhat too conservative in our handling of this. This is one topic people don't seem to want to take care of.

Another thing, I think, is that we have made anybody who works in this field a little nervous because he might be subject to attack. If you go into this field, you have to expect to be criticized. You would not be attacked for supporting motherhood, you know, or for supporting righteousness by faith, or better Sabbathkeeping. But when you specifically go into this field, you touch nerve spots, especially in people who are sensitive or neurotic about this. They react to what they consider to be a danger. You set them off and they attack you rationally and logically. But many times the basis of their attack is emotional. It involves an area of their own lives that they have never been quite able to face comfortably. But they don't see this and you can't always bring it to their attention. They feel you're imputing something to them unfairly.

But as I've gone around the country and talked on this subject, I feel that there is a basically healthy view there—pretty balanced. But many people still feel guilty about what is really a normal, happy expression of sex. Many Adventists feel this because of their upbringing. You know, they were taught to believe that sex was dirty and nice people indulge in it only in a dark room, partly clothed, and then with reluctance and regret and apologies. Then we have another group that is very liberal. But we have more, I think, who are struggling with neurotic inhibition.

Interviewers: Among other aspects of sexuality, the book deals with various aberrations and perversions. Is this becoming a serious

problem within the church?

Wittschiebe: I don't think I would say there is a developing problem. I think it has been present to some degree always among us—but hidden from view. Now we have more homosexuality coming to light. This has been present through the years, from my knowledge of schools and people. It probably is increasing because of the worsening condition of the emotional climate of many homes. Homosexuality—in the current view—comes out of the emotional scarring of young people in their homes. That being the case, the more damaged homes you have, the more chance for increased homosexuality.

Now our church, I think, has been behind in knowing how to deal with people with these troubles. We've made them think that the message was not for them. That homosexuality was the unpardonable sin. And they could only get help from the Lord if they quit. But we haven't

“You would not be attacked for supporting motherhood. But when you talk about sex, you touch nerve spots, especially in people who are sensitive or neurotic about this. Many times the basis of their attack is emotional.”

helped them to quit or told them how to quit. We haven't even told them how they got that way. And some homosexuals are pretty much preconditioned this way in their 11th, 12th, or 13th year of life. How much responsibility do you put on a youngster that age for moving in that direction? Do you see what I mean? Then when he's 18 or 19 we say: “Oh, he's a homosexual,” as though he had chosen to be that kind of person. And he may not have. I mean, we must have compassion and sympathy for these people and yet still hold up the Biblical principles. In other words, we must mix therapy with evangelism, and therapy with pastoring.

Interviewers: Was the book written for any special group?

Wittschiebe: It was written primarily for those who are married and those contemplating

marriage. But I think it's very much in order for college young people and even for seniors in academy. Young people can handle this book more easily than some of the older people. Much of what's in the book young people are comfortable with, including those of college and academy age. And I understand that they're reading it.

Interviewers: What is being done with the royalties from the book?

Wittschiebe: The royalties of the book are going into a fund to assist Seminary students who don't have enough funds to complete their ministerial training. I don't want people to think I chose the subject because it would mean a source of income for me, because of its notoriety or its popularity. I want people to know that the more it sells, the more money will go into the fund for the students, and not into my pocket.