

Responses From Readers

On Church and Politics

To the Editors: SPECTRUM is to be commended for attempting to come to grips with such an urgent question as the church's involvement in politics (Vol. 8, No. 3). This response is particularly to the piece written by Tom Dybdahl. It caught my attention first because I had so often expressed (although not as well) similar views, only to be met by a fellow saint well armed with the statement in *The Desire of Ages*, p. 509, a statement which Dybdahl ignored in his article, unfortunately.

The Th.D. students at Andrews University, at one of their weekly, informal meetings, took up some of the questions raised by the SPECTRUM articles. The group, though small—less than 15—nevertheless had an international flavor, at least nine countries (including Germany and Chile) being represented. Most, if not all of us, seemed to concur in the sentiments expressed by Dybdahl; yet, significantly, there was no consensus as to the specific nature of the church's involvement. We found the issue at this point to be both terribly complicated and, potentially, highly divisive.

How, then, should the church speak? What should it say? and, to what end?

In answer to the first question, I think, with Dybdahl, that the church as an international institution ought to address itself to some questions of international moral and ethical concern. However, I envision that problems of this nature, given the complexity of the international situation, should be few indeed, and sufficiently broad, so as not

to interfere, or seem to interfere, in the internal affairs of sensitive countries.

It would seem proper that local matters should be handled by the local organization, and not by the international organization as such. For example, the General Conference would be extremely ill advised to comment on alleged violations of human rights in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe and Russia when the believers in these countries insist, for whatever reason, that basic freedoms are guaranteed by the state.

The problem of a church, based in America and conceived largely as an American institution, speaking out on international issues is further complicated by growing resentment on the part of Third World countries, toward the Western Press. These countries are angrily calling for the decolonialization of the news. (See *Time*, June 20, 1977, pp. 98,90). So that for the General Conference, situated, as it is, in America, and receiving most of its information from western news reports, to go public on non-American political issues would constitute the height of indiscretion. It is the local organization (union or conference) that ought to speak—assuming, of course, that these are run largely by nationals. However, it must be pointed out that local initiatives ought to be carefully weighed in light of the fact that the local unit is part of an international body.

What should the church say? It should not, and need not, say anything but the gospel. Dybdahl pointed out that the civil rights issue of the sixties should have been a legiti-

mate concern of the church. I would go further and say that the church should have been the catalyst to bring the matter to a head. It should have proclaimed the gospel which inextricably links Creation (from a common Father) and Redemption (from a common Savior) as the divine rationale for human equality and justice.

Now, my concept of such a proclamation of the gospel is not in word only, but by positive and courageous action. If, for example, the government of South Africa decrees that school attendance should be along racial lines, the Adventist church in *South Africa*, after making polite and proper representations to that government, should be prepared to disregard that law, and face the legal consequences bravely for Christ's sake. For if our schools are an essential part of the total church, as I believe they are, then any child, regardless of race, must have access to any one of his choice. To redirect such a child to any other institution, even if operated by us, is to run the risk—the awful risk—of insulting his dignity, thereby setting in motion serious personal and family resentments that can conceivably jeopardize the destiny of large numbers of people. We must insist that it is, indeed, as serious as that.

To suggest that the church “say” only the gospel is, therefore, a recognition of the political implications of taking that gospel seriously in word and life. The perennial scandal of the Christian church has been its failure to act courageously on the basis of the principles of the gospel regardless of consequences. For us, as Adventists, we have too often followed the policy that the end justifies the means, the end in this case being “that we be allowed to continue our work,” as though that depended entirely on the good graces of earthly governments. The means to that end has almost invariably been *silence* in the face of the most inhuman atrocities.

Just here it may be necessary to call attention to a danger inherent in the title of Dybdahl's article. In asserting that “we (meaning the church) should be involved in politics,” there is the tendency of playing down the importance of the role of hundreds

of thousands of members acting *as individuals* in their particular communities. If, as Ellen G. White says, the voices of angels are heard in the legislative halls of the nations, why should not ours also be? Why should we not as individuals lend our loud support to city and state officials who are earnestly seeking to curb the growing menace of vice in their localities?

The statement of Ellen G. White in *The Desire of Ages*, p. 509, does not enjoin political passivity. Her own life (particularly in regard to the Fugitive Slave Laws, as Dybdahl pointed out) testified to the fact that she was not apathetic on questions of important moral concern. According to the context of that reference in *The Desire of Ages*, she was speaking to those who were seeking, in her day, to establish the kingdom of God on earth through political reforms and strategy. As is well known, this was a widespread attitude and expectation toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. And there are still those today who see the task of the church as that of “helping cities become cities of God.” Any Adventist in his right senses knows that such a program is doomed to failure from the start. Knowing the prophecies as we do (for example, that “evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse . . .,” 2 Tim. 3:13), we, of all people, need have no illusions as to the effect of our participation.

So, then, to what end is our involvement?

The end should be “faithfulness, not effectiveness,” as Dybdahl said. We are compelled, out of loyalty to our Lord, to say something, to do something. Anything else would constitute a failure to confess Him before men; for what I envision in the concept of “politics” is not *pure politics* as such, but rather the response to those human issues where the woes of society and the teachings of the lowly Galilean meet in tension.

Therefore, I conclude three things. 1) The church must express itself on moral questions of national or international concern.

2) The church should speak most frequently as a local body, in which position it is likely to be better acquainted with the relevant issues which impinge on any given situation.

3) The church can speak most eloquently through individual members living out the principles of the gospel in word and life in their separate communities. John the Baptist, most likely, would never have confronted Herod if a committee had first to meet and deliberate upon his proposed activity and the possible consequences of blowing the whistle on that first century “watergate.”

Roy Adams
Berrien Springs, Michigan

To the editors: SPECTRUM is unsurpassed as a medium whereby Adventists can freely debate in their quest for clearer Christian truth. I especially appreciated Tom Dybdahl’s article “We SHOULD Be Involved in Politics” (Vol. 8, No. 3). It could hardly be more appropriate or more keenly conscience pricking. The Adventist Church has lulled itself into a supposedly neutral position of noninvolvement in politics. Indeed, paraphrasing from the article, this noninvolvement is nothing but tacit endorsement of whatever rulers or policies prevail—be they corrupt, degrading, or outright cruel. However, I must disagree slightly with what I believe the author inferred.

Concededly, when we as Christians stand silently by while innocents are tortured, our gospel of good news may sound hollow and unrealistic. But I find that by appointing ourselves, as a church, the critics of all that is evil or corrupt in foreign states, we would very seriously jeopardize, if not erode completely, our capability of carrying Christianity to many, many nations. The author notes that “we do not become involved because we think we can turn this world into God’s kingdom.” But by proceeding to outrightly condemn every governmental injustice, it would appear that we would be attempting “to turn this world into God’s kingdom.” The Christian’s position should be to tell of a better world order, not try to forcibly create it.

On the other hand, we as a church should be directly speaking out against tyranny and inhuman oppression wherever we can. The distinction, I suggest, should be that wher-

ever our Church can speak out without the central government’s associating it too closely with political ends, i.e. trying to upset that government, it should do so. In the other dominions, we must modify our outspokenness where necessary, but without compromising our personal Christian lifestyle. However, even in those restrictive countries, our positions on immorality and cruelty should be extremely clear—just not purposely aggravating.

The author is accurate and correct when he declares that “John the Baptist’s life and ministry stand in judgment on our silence.” It is also true, though, that we have no record of any verbal attacks by Jesus on the sometimes barbaric Roman government of His day. Even as He constantly spoke out against the scribes and Pharisees, He also indicated, as with the woman caught in adultery, that outright condemnation is not always our loving Lord’s exclusive way of working against evil. We need to be the most active guardians of uprightness wherever we can be, but the spreading of the good news of another world government will certainly sustain our movement, and prove our faithfulness, where we seem to be hypocritical.

Dennis W. Casper
Spokane, Washington

To the Editors: I found SPECTRUM Vol. 8, No. 3, very stimulating, as usual. I particularly appreciated the various perspectives on the problem of the church’s relation to politics. Although Dybdahl and the other writers made some incisive points, I cannot completely follow his conclusion that the church’s lack of political involvement is a weakness. He seems to imply that it is selfish of the church to confine its political endeavors to those issues vital to its self-preservation, such as religious liberty, while not risking itself for more dangerous causes. It seems to me that there is an ethical misconception here. Institutions are governed by a slightly different set of ethics than are individuals. No individual Christian could justifiably make self-preservation his highest goal. This is not Christianity, it is selfishness.

But for the church, the body of Christ, survival and growth is primary, unless in order to survive the church must act in a way forbidden by a specific command of God. Otherwise, no action which brings ruin on the church is justified, no matter how worthy the motive. One may debate whether the church's first priority is evangelism or social reform or something else, but one thing is undebatable: if the church ceases to exist, it cannot do anything at all.

There are many repressive countries in which the policies which Dybdahl advocates would amount to institutional suicide pure and simple. It is easy for us, with our ever-so-accurate American hindsight, to criticize the German Seventh-day Adventists, but if we had to go through a similar experience in which America was at war with, say, Russia, what horrible things would America have to do before we made the difficult decision to ignore the biblical injunction to "be in subjection to the governing authorities" and to resist the government, knowing that "He who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God" (Romans 13:1-2)? In the same issue of SPECTRUM, Erwin Sicher argues that since a certain amount of cautious Adventist opposition to the German government was successful on some points, "the silence of the church on many critical issues of the time is regrettable." But this is the old fallacy of "If some is good, then more is better." I prefer Patt's conclusion that by restricting its activities to the "religious" field and excluding "political" comment the church managed to retain its existence through the war. I think this is commendable.

Certainly, a certain amount of social comment by the church is in order. Dybdahl notes that the church has in the past spoken out on slavery and temperance with Ellen White's blessing. But note that slavery and intemperance are mainly sins of the *populace*. A government does not smoke, drink, or hold slaves. Torture, on the other hand, is basically a *government* activity. Dybdahl advocates that the church condemn political torture even at the risk of being expelled from the country. But what kind of value system is it that will sacrifice the ongoing

work of eternal salvation of souls for a temporary salvation of bodies? If you will pardon my putting it rather crudely, the salvation of souls should always preempt the work of postponing the sufferings of a few individuals from now until the lake of fire.

"To say nothing in the face of evil is to condone it," writes Dybdahl. Not necessarily. When Christ was confronted with a request to arbitrate between two brothers, one of which had cheated the other out of his share of the inheritance, He refused to get involved (Luke 12:13-14). Was He condoning dishonesty? Although living under a "corrupt and oppressive" government, Christ "attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 509). Was Christ, then, a coward or a hypocrite? No, it was just that righting all of society's wrongs was not his task—nor is it ours.

Tim Crosby
Ooltewah, Tennessee

To the Editors: Mr. Dybdahl ("The Church SHOULD Be Involved in Politics," Vol. 8, No. 3) has unfortunately mixed his discussion of church involvement in politics with specific suggestions regarding the politics in which the church should be involved. In so doing, he reveals his own political biases and limits his credibility. He is sure to arouse the hostility of religious liberty enthusiasts by labelling that prince of human rights, religious freedom, a "sectarian" issue. He also seems strangely out of step with the times by dismissing temperance in a similar fashion.

Dybdahl does a curiously contradictory violence to the facts by claiming that Adventists both favor the status quo *and* support conservative politics. Perhaps he is not aware that, given a Democratic congress and Democratic president, conservative politics are not exactly the status quo. And he is slanderous towards the great majority of

Adventists in claiming that they “eagerly seek” their “share of America’s wealth and power.” Is it possible that someone who works in Washington could confuse the desire for a certain well-being and education with “wealth and power?”

The issue of human rights (political torture, etc.) has always existed, but Dybdahl’s discussion of it at this moment is a little suspect, since human rights is “in,” so to speak. His discussion of human rights is also suspect because he totally ignores what seems to be an equal candidate for domestic church involvement: government interference with and domination of business and private life. Thus, his choice of issues comes across as fashionable and emotionally inspired, rather than as objectively thought out.

We should remember, too, that the framers of the Constitution were at least as worried about church control of the state as they were about religious freedom. As an American, I would not be interested in seeing any church, including the Adventist Church, play an active role in American politics, at least as Dybdahl seems to outline that role.

Jeff Pudewell
Santa Ana, California

Tom Dybdahl Replies

I think Mr. Pudewell has missed my meaning on two major points. I have no desire to see the Adventist Church actively involved in American politics. (By the way, the title of the article was not of my choosing.) My concern is to have the church speak a prophetic message over against all governments, including our own. If we did so, there is no danger that we would be welcomed by the powers that be in any state.

As to the issue of torture, I was using it as an example precisely because it is “in.” I hoped it would be an issue with which most readers were familiar. I believe that any activity which seriously affects people’s lives is the proper concern of Christians, whatever political label may be given to it. The church should speak out on a whole range of issues that are destructive of human life, from civil rights to government interference with businesses and individuals, which seems to be

your favorite issue. What disturbs me is not the church’s failure to speak out on any particular issue, but its silence regarding many vital human issues.

You suggest a contradiction between conservative politics and the status quo. My Webster defines conservative as “tending or disposed to maintain existing views, conditions or institutions.” If that is not a definition of status quo, I don’t know what is, and it certainly describes Adventist politics in recent decades.

I make no apology for the statement that we Adventists eagerly seek our share of America’s wealth and power. Several studies have shown that we are very upwardly mobile. And whatever descriptions you may choose for it, the typical American Adventist life-style stands in rather stark contrast with that of Jesus Christ.

I also must take issue with Mr. Crosby’s dual ethic, at least in this particular instance. The church’s first and only concern must be to be faithful to its Lord. If the church is doing God’s work, we have His promise that the very gates of hell will not prevail against it. If, however, the church’s survival depends upon our silence and caution, we are in serious trouble indeed.

Speaking against evil may indeed lead to death. It has for Christians throughout history. But always the blood of martyrs has been seed. Jesus cared enough for people to die for them.

Neither can I accept the separation of “the salvation of souls” from “the postponing the sufferings of a few individuals,” and the rating of the former above the latter. I believe John condemned Herod’s sin not because he craved headlines—or his own death—but because he wanted to see Herod saved in God’s kingdom. To condemn torture, for example, is a way of speaking God’s word to both victim and oppressor; deliverance for the tortured and a call to repentance for the torturer. The salvation of souls and postponing of sufferings of individuals are two facets of a single activity for the Christian: loving people.

The example of Jesus’ silence you refer to (Luke 12: 13, 14) is very unclear. The one brother is aiming to protect his selfish inter-

est, and there is no evidence as to whether he had actually been wronged. The situation is not analagous to one where there is a clear evil being practiced.

The quote from *The Desire of Ages* (p. 509) is a difficult one. But it is moderated by its context: the chapter containing it is entitled “Not With Outward Show,” and is a warning against believing that our efforts to improve this world will bring in the kingdom. (A timely warning, I might add.) And if we take this statement as the sum of her views on the subject, then we have Ellen White contradicting herself with her own involvement in antislavery, temperance and religious liberty activities—all actions involving civil reforms.

On Faith Statements

To the Editors: Elder Hackett’s editorial (Vol. 8, No. 4) speaks of the historical opposition of Seventh-day Adventist to a creed. That opposition still exists and probably for the same reasons that it existed in the nineteenth century. A creed, under whatever name it flies, becomes at best an occasion for dissent, dividing rather than uniting a church. At worst, it freezes understanding, discourages spiritual and intellectual growth, and results in a fellowship mouthing the worn-out truths of a past generation. Elder Hackett denies the creedal nature of the statements he is proposing but describes them as the “basic tenets of faith.” One of us needs a new dictionary. He makes a strange equation between the “nonnegotiable landmarks of truth” and “current majority understanding.” He is apparently unaware of the contradiction in terms. I am left feeling that I would rather stay with a view of truth as unfinished, with all the risks that it entails, than to embark on this fearful venture of nonnegotiable, noncreedal statements designed to protect the church from the “subtle influence of the unclear and doubtful.”

Also, the author of the editorial cautions against the use of the statements as an inquisitorial tool. But here he is certainly less than consistent, for that is exactly what he has designed them to be. It is apparently not

intended that they should be voted by the General Conference in session lest they be interpreted as creeds. Nevertheless, they are to be used to decide “how deviant should the church allow a member’s viewpoints . . . to be” and as an administrative tool “to evaluate persons . . . as to their commitment to what is considered basic Adventism.”

Albert E. Smith
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To the Editors: In setting forth the criteria for determining whether someone is qualified to serve the church, Willis Hackett (see SPECTRUM, Vol. 8, No. 4) left the distinct impression that being a Seventh-day Adventist Christian is chiefly a matter of holding a certain number of beliefs. In this connection he states that administrators, church leaders, controlling boards and leaders at all levels of the church will be the ones to judge and determine who is holding those beliefs and whether or not that person is worthy of employment or continuing employment in the church.

There are several important implications in this clear statement of ecclesiastical authority. Nowhere has Elder Hackett suggested that administrators and church leaders should themselves be judged as to their fitness for leading the church and their orthodoxy with regard to the landmarks. To assume that by virtue of their office they are beyond the pale of misjudgment and are the only ones charged with the responsibility of preserving the landmarks, is indeed risky. The preservation of the landmarks is too important to be left in the care only of administrators and church leaders. It is, in fact, a sacred responsibility of every believer; moreover, administrators and church leaders must themselves be constantly judged as to whether or not they are preserving the landmarks and carrying out the mission of the church.

The second important implication of Elder Hackett’s statement is its failure to emphasize the personal relationship with Christ as the basis of all church doctrines and teaching. Certainly, no one can be a Seventh-day Ad-

ventist Christian without holding certain beliefs, yet, being a Christian does not consist in holding belief A plus belief B plus belief C, and so on; it consists chiefly in living in a deeply personal relationship with Christ. This relationship is the matrix out of which Christian beliefs grow and within which they are nourished.

So when I say “I believe,” I am describing a positive act or attitude of committal to something beyond myself, that is, to God. This is why the first article of any Christian creed or landmark must inevitably be “I believe in God.”

To affirm such belief is to live by the power of that to which my faith is directed and that power is nothing else but God in His gracious self-bestowal. It bothers me a great deal that this emphasis is neither implied nor raised in Elder Hackett’s editorial.

If the church leaders pursue the course of action outlined by the editorial, it will produce two results. It will force many good Christians to become hypocritical, and it will create a cleavage in the church. There is enough evidence in church history to justify those two assumptions. Further, it can be shown that those who were most insistent in enforcing absolute conformity within the church were the ones most responsible for the divisions. If we believe in the Bible and the Bible alone, then our confidence in the Power of the Gospel must not be replaced by any other attempts to enforce conformity.

Walter Douglas
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Berrien Springs, Michigan

To the Editors: SPECTRUM provided a valuable service to the Church with its special section on a proposed Adventist creed. However, one piece of editorial judgment was puzzling and disturbing — the decision to let author “William Wright” (“Adventism’s Historic Witness Against Creeds”) use a pseudonym.

Why is this secrecy necessary? Presumably “Wright” is employed by the church and wants to protect that position. Perhaps there is some other reason for his anonymity. In

any case, this stance is not consistent with either the tone or substance of the article itself. “Wright” is arguing in effect: the proposed statements of belief are potentially very dangerous. They likely will promote division and discord. They are not in harmony with the church’s historical opposition to creeds. Yet, in the midst of a serious controversy about the adoption of these statements, “Wright” refuses to be identified, even though he is advocating what he believes to be the orthodox Adventist view.

What values are served by this caution? What interests are advanced by not putting one’s name and oneself behind an argument that concerns issues of principle of the first magnitude? Writers — and journals — ought to be responsible for their ideas in the most literal sense. If they believe passionately in their position, they should be willing to accept the risks of advocacy.

Joe Mesar
Anita Alverio

SPECTRUM’s policy is not to publish anonymous or pseudonymous articles. Unfortunately, the author, who is denominationally employed, would only publish under a pseudonym. The editors believed the article important enough to suspend editorial policy in this one case.

On Vick’s Theology

To the Editors: I could not resist the urge to let you know how pleased I was to see an article on Ted Vick’s theological work appearing in the pages of SPECTRUM (Vol. 8, No. 3).

Vick is a Seventh-day Adventist who, due to unhappy misunderstandings, is being prevented from carrying out his powerful sense of mission for the church to which he committed himself and his career. The tragedy that his services are unappreciated and unwanted by some who do not understand what he has been doing has always caused me pain — as I know it still causes him not only pain and hardship, but also mental and emotional agony. Thus, to read an article that

evaluated his work with some objectivity was sheer joy.

Walden's article did, however, cause me some pain on another count. I happen to be one of those fortunate souls who attended the "old seminary" and sat at the feet of Roland Loasby, Edward Heppenstall and Winton Beaven. If, perhaps, the horizon of their students (or the students of their students) extends a little bit farther than theirs did, and I am not at all sure that it necessarily does, it is because we stand on their shoulders and have benefited from the battles they fought in the name of intellectual freedom within the Seventh-day Adventist tradition. It pained me, therefore, to see that nobody in the editorial board of SPECTRUM remembered that it was Professor Loasby (not Lohsbe) who led the way.

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On Intellectuals in the Church

To the Editors: Alvin Kwiram's article "Can Intellectuals Be at Home in the Church?" (Vol. 8, No. 1) was a most welcome and timely one. The implications of the issues he raises extend beyond that of a group of people classified as "intellectuals" to the very future of the church. All social institutions, including religion, must continually define their role and adapt their methods to changing politicosocial circumstances. Any institution which attempts to deal with complex issues and changing values by adopting techniques of past decades will soon find itself devoid of the very things vital to its continuance as a viable institution — namely, the vitality of its youth and innovation of the intellectually talented. Ultimately, it can only die the natural death of its remaining

constituents. As Dr. Kwiram so aptly points out, the church, with its combined neglect and open discouragement of any critical intellectual analysis — and, I might add, with its current emphasis on evangelistic techniques initially designed for the simpler psychological and social circumstances of previous generations — is faced with just such a prospect.

It is in this context that I find Richard Hammill's response (Vol. 8, No. 3) quite disappointing. He states that intellectuals "do not understand the true nature of Christian religion," thereby dismissing the issue on the grounds of a lack of understanding by those who are raising the critical questions. While this may be a brilliant tactical maneuver, it does nothing to clarify or solve the problem.

The problem extends beyond a neglect of spiritual assistance to the intellectually minded, as Richard Hammill contends. The problem is the active neglect and exclusion of the intellectual. The apathy and "spiritual coldness" of our sophisticated young people, to which Hammill alludes, is only an additional symptom of this basic neglect. A special ministry to the "intellectual" is not a solution and may well be antiproduative. What is needed is a more sophisticated approach to current problems. This can only be accomplished by more active participation by those intellectuals dedicated to a critical analysis of the problems and issues facing the church, participation not only at the level of publications and conferences, but active participation in the administrative and policy-making boards and conferences at the highest level of the church organization. It is indeed a revealing commentary on the present state of the church that Hammill found it necessary to draw a distinction between intellectuals as a group and the church leaders. No distinction should be necessary.

H. Dale Baumbach
Sunnyvale, California