

V. An Interview with Paxton

Jonathan Butler interviewed Geoffrey Paxton at Loma Linda. The interview was edited for SPECTRUM by Tom Dybdahl.

The Editors.

Spectrum: Tell us a little about yourself, your background and how you came to write this book.

Paxton: Well, I'm an Anglican clergyman, as you probably know. I'm married and have two boys. I was president of a theological seminary in Australia, and I got interested in this project by contact with Adventists. I was ministered to, you might say, by Seventh-day Adventists in terms of their hospitality and friendliness and in terms of their application of sanctification into the area of the body, and it coincided with a time when I was looking into sanctification in contemporary theology.

Another aspect was that by virtue of my association with Adventists, I came into quite a deal of flak in the evangelical world, which eventually resulted in my losing my job. And I was very interested to see why Adventists were looked upon in such a poor way by evangelicals. That's really how it all began.

Spectrum: Were you acquainted with Robert Brinsmead?

Paxton: Yes, I'd been friends with Brinsmead ages before I entered onto this project, and for the record, it may be as well to say that I entered upon it quite independently of Brinsmead. Some people have thought because of my association with Brinsmead that he is lurking in the shadows somewhere, but it was historically quite independent of Brinsmead. I had certainly worked with him and been friends with him before I embarked on this project, however.

Spectrum: What has been the Adventist reaction to your tour in North America so far?

Paxton: "Mixed," I think is the word. I started off with, on the one hand, an opportunity to speak in Washington in Capital Memorial Church. But I also had in my possession at the time letters from the General Conference banning me from Adventist churches. I don't really know why it went ahead in Washington, because it was in an Adventist church.

And I'm not sure why the letters were sent out. It wasn't that I had said anything that was wrong, because I hadn't said anything up to that point, and yet the general leadership of the church reacted unfavorably to the book.

Spectrum: Did this surprise you, or did you anticipate some controversy in connection with the book?

Paxton: I can't say I anticipated controversy. I thought that they would be quite active and discuss it and say whether I had misrepresented the actual facts of the situation. I expected some discussion, and I expected some disagreement, of course, but I certainly didn't expect anything like an ecclesiastical ban, even from the outset. I went from Takoma Park to Southern Missionary College and was received, I felt, in the spirit in which I wrote the book. There was a friendly, Christian sort of atmosphere, and I had a wonderful time, and quite an overwhelming response from the students and a very good response from the faculty.

But by the time I got to Andrews, all sorts of strange things started to happen. I was not only banned from Adventist churches, but I was banned from the institution a day or so before the thing was to take place, with no explanation given. I also found that some of the faculty had apparently been advised not

to attend the lectures, and some of the faculty members advised their students not to attend.

Spectrum: Where did you speak, then?

Paxton: I spoke in a place adjacent to the university, where all the plans had been made. I felt it should go ahead, because, in a sense, I'm a friendly, open critic to Adventists; I don't pay any dues. I've already paid a price for this in my own constituency, and I didn't allow them to dictate to me on my approach to Adventists, and so I really felt that I shouldn't allow Adventists to dictate to

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me. So we went ahead in an adjacent complex, and a thousand folk turned up, and we had a good time.

I was really quite puzzled as to why the General Conference did this, because in actual fact, the way it appears to me, it went against them. If they had really wanted to crush me a bit, they could have done it best in a very tightly structured situation in an institution where I was out of my own waters, as it were, and where all the professors were in their own waters, and it could have been under control. But they threw it open to a much freer, much more open, situation.

I must say that in coming to Loma Linda, any disappointment that I felt from the Andrews situation was more than compensated for. I've been approached as a respectable Christian gentleman in a respectable Christian spirit. Even folk here that I knew would disagree with my theological position have met me in a very cordial, Christlike manner.

And so that's restored my hopes in Adventism a little bit, and I'd like that to go on record.

Spectrum: In the book, you make some comparisons between Adventists on the West Coast and those on the East Coast. Do you find your impressions confirmed as you take the tour, or have you modified them?

Paxton: More or less I find my impressions confirmed. They seem to be a lot more conservative on the East Coast, and a lot more free or open on the West Coast.

I do feel that in the light of the present itinerary, I should make an additional comment. I have been disappointed with Andrews University. I know that pressure was brought very heavily on the men handling the situation in Loma Linda, but they stood firm because I take it they believe that there is a very precious principle involved here: the principle of Christian liberty and of the priesthood of all believers. I was literally shocked by Andrews. I didn't think they would capitulate so readily. Very precious principles were surrendered, and I feel very disappointed that this center of theological learning should capitulate to hierarchical dictates.

Spectrum: Do you feel that part of the reason for your mostly good reception on this tour might be anti-Washington feeling, a kind of theological populism among Adventists who see you as someone who has taken on the powers in Washington?

Paxton: I think there's always that danger. I think that you'll always get people, and even movements, who will want to use someone. Controversy and antagonisms bring together very strange bedfellows; we've seen that in the New Testament and we've seen that in history. I think that's always a danger. And I dare say that I have encountered some folk like that along the way. But they've not been in the majority by any means.

The majority of response has been that a lot of Adventists have been confused about justification. They've felt acutely a sort of Laodicean state of affairs, and they've been very much in the dark about why the situation really is like it is. I've had a lot of folk come to me, not least of all young folk,

who've said things like: "We've praised God for your book, you know it put everything into perspective and said things I've sort of been coming to myself." Other folk came and said even that they'd been converted through reading the book, and I've even met folk who've become Adventists through reading the book.

One of the other things that I've picked up along the way is that I really believe that a lot of Adventist folk are fed up with being sort of dealt with in a heavy way from the top. And I think they don't see me so much as a sort of crusader against general leadership, but that they see me as a symbol of something that they feel strongly about.

Then I think there are those who genuinely see very precious principles at stake; the priesthood of all believers and religious liberty. They want to stand by that, and I don't think it would matter whether it was me or anybody else, they would still stand by that, and I would certainly applaud that, of course.

Spectrum: There is a group of Adventists in Australia who are very much involved in theological discussion, maybe in a way that Adventism was in an earlier era. But I'm not sure that's true in America. How much are you seeing Adventist history and theology through the lens of Australia?

Paxton: Well, I suppose it has to be that way to some degree because I'm an Australian and I come from there, and I don't think anyone can shake off his connections. We have, for instance, in the whole country of Australia perhaps the population of greater Los Angeles, for a start, so this obviously makes discussion a lot easier. However, whether that is true or not, I see it as a side issue, because in my research I certainly tried to quote a wide range of Adventist thought on justification and tried to look at the thing very much in a wider context. I think the issue should not be where it comes from so much as whether it is correct.

Spectrum: You refer to Ellen White as a wax nose among Adventists that can be bent this way and that. She is quoted on both sides of this question of righteousness by faith, though you avoid using her in your book.

Can she be quoted accurately on both sides of the question?

Paxton: She surely can be quoted on both sides of the issue, there's no question of that. She's not alone there, as Luther scholarship will show. Luther is quoted in the same way, and so is the Bible itself. Everybody thinks the Bible teaches a particular approach to things, so in that respect Ellen White can be quoted on both sides.

I keep out of the issue, as you say, in the book for two reasons: one, I feel that it would sort of muddy the waters when I feel that I have a clear enough case without it; and second, even now, I always feel somewhat loathe to quote Ellen White because when everybody quotes her on different positions, it helps eventually to minimize her authority.

Spectrum: What is your prognosis overall for Seventh-day Adventism? Do you see it as evangelicalizing and moving into the mainstream a little more, or do you see it as kind of ghettoizing and entrenching itself in sectarian terms?

Paxton: That question almost exceeds my competence. But what I feel strongly is that Adventism is standing at a crucial point in human history. I am not a skeptic. I could argue a good *prima facie* case for Adventism if I wanted to, but that's not for me as a Babylonian to do an Adventist's work for him, you know. Another way of putting it is that Adventism stands face to face with the sieve. And I honestly believe that God is now sieving this movement after 133 or so years of existence so that the chaff will be put on one side and the true remnant movement will remain.

In my role, I don't make any pretentious claims. God once used an ass, and I say that gives me good precedents, and He may be using an ass today to sort of shake a little.

There are lots of things we've talked about, how that there are needs for more openness; scholars and leadership need to get together. People who are where they are because of sanctificational prowess and because of academic skill need to get together, lest sanctificational prowess and academic insight war against each other. And the leadership needs to make more vital, meaningful contact with the grass roots of the church.