

Responses from Readers

On Paxton

To the Editors: “Lightning continues to dart and play about Geoffrey Paxton’s *The Shaking of Adventism*,” I wrote the PREXAD members of the General Conference following Paxton’s speaking tour across Adventist America. The stimulus for my missive to leadership was a position letter initiated in the President’s Committee and mailed, over the North American Division president’s signature, to each of the North American union presidents, requesting them to dissuade their institutional leaders from allowing Paxton to realize his desire “to speak in a good many Adventist centers.”

Leadership’s letter continued: “Tuesday, March 14, we discussed this situation in PREXAD. . . We do not feel that it would be wise to overreact, because at this point we do not feel at all threatened and should in no way indicate any panic.

“As you know, Mr. Paxton is not a Seventh-day Adventist. He does not have the interest of the Seventh-day Adventist Church at heart. There is little or nothing that he may do or say that will build the spiritual strength of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is evident from the way he has approached the writing of his book and the interviews he has had that the book is designed to embarrass and divide the church.”

What is embarrassing is that *Time* and the Religious News Service received copies of the letter, presumably from some Adventist “deep throat.” It is difficult to decide whom to be more disappointed in, the “deep throat” or the architects of a letter, the

mind-set of which is the sectarian equivalent of Archie Bunker.

The polite disappointment I registered, by letter, to leadership, was my concern that they had begun to look on the heart in presuming to know the motives of Geoffrey Paxton. I was not attempting to defend his theology.

Shortly before closing, leadership wrote reassuringly to its highly positioned subordinates: “I should also let you know that a scholarly critique of Mr. Paxton’s book is being prepared so that our pastors and leaders and others will have some way of evaluating the content of his book and giving direction in connection with this matter.”

The question which leaps to mind is, “If ‘our pastors and leaders and others’ cannot read and evaluate the book themselves, how will they make any sense of a scholarly critique?” I dunno.

Only time will reveal whether Paxton has ulterior motives. But his repudiation of the common dismissal of Adventists as a cult, or non-Christian sect, is heartening: “No, whatever we think of this or that Adventist ‘distinctive,’ we have to recognize the movement as being Christian.”

The appearance of Paxton and his book and the response of leadership is an indication of the tendency for Adventist leadership to politicize theology. The intentional separation of King and Priesthood in ancient Israel should warn us of the compromising dangers in the incestuous mixing of theology and polity. So far, for good or ill, this politicizing has had the unintended effect of advertising books and broadcasting viewpoints that would not otherwise have had nearly the

hearing. It is fitting, in view of the nationality of the personality under discussion, to say that it boomeranged. The Adventist concerned for the free play of ideas understands that this result, over the long haul, will provide heuristic dividends.

Meditating on the theological and political struggle over Righteousness by Faith, the lapidary thought occurs that we who consider ourselves a prophetic — and prophetically anticipated — people could fail to fill our end-time role as certainly as did the Children of Israel, and with all the attendant ignominy. Good SDA hermeneutic demands the possibility: All prophecy is conditional.

Swords cross over the nervous question of assurance. What is the mechanism of salvation? Are we saved by justification alone? Or by justification and sanctification? Do they occur together? Does imparted righteousness gradually replace imputed righteousness?

A proper concern for personal salvation inspires the individual desiring assurance of a place in the Kingdom to request a direct and clear answer to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” In the current discussion, seemingly contradictory responses are provided. Faced with incompatible statements, all given with solemn authority and spiritual fervor, the typical churchgoer isn’t sure really whether to breathe or swallow.

A national magazine editor remarked, on hearing that \$600,000 had been allocated to gather in seclusion for one year twelve of America’s leading secular philosophers at Santa Barbara just to think about thinking, that the expenditure of \$50,000 odd per year apiece towards the withdrawal from public life of the average modern philosopher was a price America could ill afford not to pay. I am reminded, similarly, of the continuing plethora of denominationally sponsored conferences on Righteousness by Faith.

Unfortunately, when SDA theologians espousing tangential opinions do meet for discussion, it is at the request of leadership whose overriding concern is for a united front, the desire to procrusteanize diverging views into a cozy bed of consensus. This attempt to arrive at theological consensus,

rationally, via committee, is an effort to make theology (to borrow professor Oakshott’s phrase) “as the crow flies,” an enterprise largely foredoomed.

The freedoms the church desires to have in the world, which are elaborated continually in *Liberty*, should the more surely be exemplified within the church body and its commitment to the knowing of truth and the freedom to pursue it. To paraphrase Jefferson in his first inaugural address: “If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this church or to change its spiritual form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where the Spirit reigns free to combat it.”

If we cannot look for freedom here in the Body of Christ, we need not look for it long from the world. This entire cosmic controversy continues, as we understand it, over the issue of freedom — God’s desiring a universe that runs smoothly, happily, but freely. And what unthinkable lengths He has been willing to go, to maintain that freedom.

Those who had the opportunity to hear Paxton speak in several locations discovered that the pre-eschaton, unquickened Paxton was a bit of a chameleon. In Loma Linda, when queried about the theology (regarding the atonement) contained in the 1978 missionary book, *Can God Be Trusted?* he said that he believed what it said but also more, and had words of approbation for the character of the author and others who teach that position.

But we follow Paxton from Loma Linda to Portland and see his colors change. What he had described as “a fairly unsophisticated portrayal of the meaning of the atonement,” in Loma Linda became in Portland “a complex and intricate approach the extent of which is debatable [but] more extensive than is healthy.” And then he turns Jeremiah, predicting, “If this approach to the atonement gains supremacy in Seventh-day Adventism, it will reduce Adventism to lawlessness, and it will mean the end of Adventism as it is historically.” “Adventism,” he promised, “will become a worse form of Babylonianism than at the beginning.”

But he’s not through. Siphoning off the

sound of his own voice, he announces, “that this [demonstrative] approach to the atonement finally reduces Adventism to something worse than sloppy, sentimentalistic Babylonianism.” And then rejects the picture of God’s love portrayed by Dr. Maxwell saying, “It’s not an ooey, gooey, funny sentimentalistic sort of throb in the heart of the pancreas somewhere.” It’s not an “airy, fairy, eternal attribute as such.”

A few minutes later Dr. Glenn Ruminson kindly but properly chastened Paxton’s excess this way: “The charging bull of rhetorical labeling has two horns; one horn is a horn which crystalizes concepts — the characterization allows us to see what is being said just

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by a phrase, the other horn is an emotional horn which for a person in favor of the subject encourages very strongly a movement in that direction, and for a person who seems not in favor, it clouds the issue.” “[Let’s] turn back the rhetorical bull that’s been let loose in the barnyard.”

Glenn Ruminson’s “twin-horned, rhetorical bull” — a generic bull’s eye — describing the truth that although specific theologies come and go, rhetorical totalism hangs ubiquitously in the air, searching for the theologian-on-the-make, and in Geoffrey Paxton I believe it found one.

Wherever he went, Paxton made sport of Elder Don Neufeld whom he quoted as saying, “It is the genius of Adventism to have many gospels,” bragging that his response was, “I hope when the loud cry is given everybody doesn’t run in a different direction.”

Paxton has his fun, and the temptation at this point is irresistible to note that it isn’t

only lady prophets who are given “wax noses,” but male reformers, too, by Desmond Ford and Hans LaRondelle — lobbing reformation hand grenades back and forth in the pages of SPECTRUM. Crediting Paxton the phrasemaker, we might ask, “Will the real Martin Luther please stand up?”

Confronted by the Janissaries of the reformers, we may be consoled by Chesterton’s reminder that many dogmas are liberating because the damage they do when abused cannot compare with the damage that might have been done had not whole cultures felt their inhibiting influence.

In sorting it all out, there are some rough guidelines that may warn us of extremes as we choose a theology. For example, we must not fall prey to “chronological snobbery,” C. S. Lewis’ term for “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of one’s own age on the supposition that what is most recent is best.” At the same time, theology must be seen as more than the handing down of the parerga from generation to generation.

Also, when listening to our theologians, we must listen for either manifestation of the theological nostrum peddler. Doubt him if he promises a remedy that is exclusively ours or for the dogmatic advertising of a theological elixir — a remedy for every sickness.

While the theologians need not agree, they must avoid theological hubris, realizing they are not Paul, and that it is unseemly for any of them to suggest that their theological opponents be cast out. But we should understand at least why they disagree. And without falling victim to the solipsist’s cynical conviction that truth is subjective, we must realize that within certain definable parameters — say the confines of the Christian faith — theological tendencies are, at least in part, a function of the individual theologian’s personality or temperament.

If the view of the Gospel which attracts us most is largely a function of personality, which view would draw the most of it? Or, could we attract more adherents by maintaining several? Paul says if even an angel should come preaching another Gospel we should evict him. Does Paul demand, then, that we choose a theology, and having chosen, consider the others anathema? I think not.

Each of our religious expositors has brought his personal life's history and chemistry to the reading of Scripture, and each understands the one, true, paradigmatic Gospel the way we hear them expound it. Some are probably more faithful to the true — and yet unseen — fact of theology. Nevertheless, each of us will always move toward a view which he or she finds most winsome.

When Jesus said, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all unto me," He didn't mean just inadequate, or just authoritarian, or just passive-aggressive, or just schizoid personalities. He meant the whole hospital full of persons in need of healing. And woe unto him that bolts the door to the emergency room!

I hope — along with Don Neufeld — to be saying something more interesting (when defending the continued existence of a plurality of understandings of the one Gospel) than that variety is life's great spice. Although the Bible contains sufficient and saving truth, it remains for any scholar — or group of scholars — to abstract its basic message to everyone's satisfaction, parsimoniously. And that fact is much less a commentary on truth than on the capricious nature of human personality.

We all — but especially leadership — must suppress the concupiscent longing for one correct theology, the hunting for which is comparably disappointing to the search for pterodactyl eggs. Our leaders should busy themselves, instead, nurturing the remnant — Isaiah's important calling we remember.

Then perhaps we can shed the religious odium that clings to our Laodicean name (our drab institutional servitude) that Adventism might crystallize as the denomination where the worshipper truly became the church; a church whose expositors are most "concerned to describe. . . God in words which do the least damage to all the facts as given"; and most importantly to explain, understandably, in the idiom of our time, why it was that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and rose the third day.

Douglas Hackleman
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To the Editors: Lewis (Vol. 9, No. 4) makes a point of logic which, from the context of this letter, appears to be based upon the following assumptions:

1. Paxton is an opponent rather than a fellow Christian.
2. Winning debating points is the equivalent of finding truth.
3. If others are shaking, never mind our instability.
4. The faith issue is only one of many doctrinal issues rather than the watershed of the church.
5. Paxton and God must wait until we precisely define what God has done or is doing.

Implicit to the Lewis logic — to reject these assumptions is to be illogical. However, could not these assumptions be symptomatic of the triumphalism which has plagued our evangelism, tarnished our witness and thwarted our apprehension of the precise definition for which Lewis hopes?

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On Professional Organizations

To the Editors: In her listing of Seventh-day Adventist professional organizations, Jocey Fay failed to include the association of foreign language teachers. The information on this organization follows:

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS
Adventist Language Teachers' Association

President: Wolfgang Kunze
Andrews University
Berrien Springs, MI 49104

Established: 1967

Number of members: More than 100

Membership: Open to Seventh-day Adventist teachers of one or more classes of modern or classic foreign language or English as a second language in church school, public school, college or university. Full membership fee \$6.50

Student member: Any graduate or undergraduate foreign language major or interested student who is taking a degree in foreign language. Student membership fee: \$3.50

Institutional membership: \$10 per calendar year per full-time language faculty member.

Purpose: 1. To foster and maintain a standard of excellence in language teaching in Seventh-day Adventist institutions in accord with the philosophy and objectives of Seventh-day Adventist education.

2. To explore and make known to members new developments and opportunities in language teaching and learning.

3. To promote the study of foreign language and the ideals of the organization.

Publications: *Alta Vox*. Published in the fall and spring of each year, and sent to full members.

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On “Genesis”

To the Editors: I would like to make a few comments regarding your “Genesis” issue (Vol. 9, No. 4).

Lawrence Geraty is correct when he surmised that some of us had wanted the Geoscience Field Conference to devote itself to the creationist interpretation, but I am puzzled that he thought this somehow unscientific. The public schools and state-supported universities present only the evolutionary interpretation. Scientific magazines present only the evolutionary interpretation. *Scientific American* devoted a recent issue to evolution; the entire issue was exclusively devoted to evolution. There was not one article written from a creationist viewpoint. The so-called Nobel Laureates of America have gotten together more than once and issued joint statements condemning any suggestion that any viewpoint except the evolutionary viewpoint should be presented to America’s young people. All of us on the Geoscience Field Conference have heard the evolutionary viewpoint again and again and again. Personally, I have heard it for more than four decades. At last, here was an opportunity to hear the creationist viewpoint presented for just four weeks. Frankly, it was a disappointment—a puzzling disappointment—that some members of the group felt a burden to consume this valuable time presenting an evolutionary viewpoint.

All of us want to believe the truth, so far as it can be determined. But how are we going to know what is true unless we test the evolu-

tionary viewpoint by a deep and careful study of the creationist interpretation? Personally, I had hoped that these four weeks would see the evolutionary viewpoint challenged from every possible angle. I was grateful to those people who challenged it.

Lawrence Geraty quoted me correctly in saying that some of our scientists are finding good support for the creationist position. Geraty himself refers to the three senior members of the Geoscience Research Institute and also to Ivan Holmes and Clyde Webster. These five presented some particularly good material. But I notice that they were very open about the fact that they were looking for answers to the problems posed by the evolution theory. It was equally evident that some of the other speakers were not looking for answers to those problems. What impressed me was that answers were being found by men who were looking. But they were not being found by men who were not looking for them.

I think that some of our young scientists, with the best of good intentions, thought that if they made a few experiments in their laboratories they could smash the entire evolutionary structure with a single, simple blow and emerge the great champion of biblical creationism. So they performed their experiments and made their observations and discovered to their very great surprise that the evolutionary theory was supported by far stronger arguments than they had ever imagined. Tragically, some of them capitulated to the evolutionary theory and even went so far as to tell our church members that they also ought to go over to the other side.

And I would like to encourage our young men who are overawed by the evolution theory and who feel that they ought to fight creationism and oppose those within the church who defend creationism that if they will come over on the creationist side and seek supportive arguments for creation and oppose the evolution theory, they will find the battle just as exciting, and in the end much more satisfying.

Lawrence Maxwell
Editor
Signs of the Times