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# The Gospel Congress

by Greg Schneider and Charles Scriven

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Coming mainly from California but also from as far away as Toronto, Florida, and Australia, substantially more than 1,000 adult participants gathered in Monterey, California, July 23-26, for a Gospel Congress sponsored by Good News Unlimited, the employers of Desmond Ford and Smuts van Rooyen. They came to celebrate their new-found “freedom” in the “pure gospel,” and to ponder the meaning and trauma of their discontent with traditional Adventism. At the same time, they found themselves faced with division in their own ranks, division clearly serious though still difficult to assess as to its ultimate consequences.

The main story at the congress was the sense of liberty, of freedom, felt by everyone. A singer who remarked that he generally liked to talk to his audiences before starting his song, said that at a recent camp meeting the platform chairman had instructed him to say nothing since it was the preachers who were paid to talk, not the singers. “Here I am now at the Gospel Con-

gress,” he said, “and I’ve got back my freedom of speech.” Though it was Sabbath, the listeners felt free to greet this quip with laughter and applause.

Alan Crandal, editor of *Evangelica*, read a satirical story about Dwight Goodall, an obviously legalistic Seventh-day Adventist. When Sam, a new neighbor, tries to invite Goodall to a get-acquainted party, Goodall wonders if meat will be served — “I mean, the meat of cloven-footed animals?” At this the congregation chuckled. There was loud laughter at Sam’s answer: “Well, I’ve never eaten a cloven-hoof, but if you’d like some. . . .”

Noel Mason, a Good News evangelist and pastor to a Gospel fellowship in Auburn, California, drew a full-throated amen when he declared that the “grace of Christ cannot fit into a legalist, perfectionist wineskin.” When to an audience of teetotalers he added parenthetically, “I’ve never had fresh grape juice bust any of my bottles,” a ripple of laughter swelled into applause as people assimilated his meaning.

Ford in calling for the offering mentioned the difficulty they had in finding offering plates. The ushers then began passing around dozens of paper tubs emblazoned with the red and white graphics of Colonel Sanders’

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Kentucky Fried Chicken. Again the audience, long steeped in vegetarianism, responded with chuckles and applause.

If the sense of liberty fostered enjoyment of parodies of Adventist subcultural taboos, it also fed appreciation of remarks undermining exclusivist Adventist categories. During a question-and-answer session, Desmond Ford defined "the remnant" as "all those who are trusting in the merits of Jesus and demonstrating their trust by a whole-hearted surrender to His will as they know it." Once more, amens and applause broke out. On Sabbath morning, Noel Mason's use of the new wine and old wineskins metaphor in connection with the question, "Who constitutes the church of Christ?" led him to the statement that all people who have been called out by the grace of God make up his church. This expansive, antiexclusivist message again drew amens and applause.

It was Ford among others, however, who was concerned to put the message of freedom in perspective. On Sabbath morning he told of someone's remarking to him, "My, this is a group of liberated people!" He had replied, "Yes, but not libertines." The entire congress program, in fact, indicated concern to balance freedom with discipline. Much was said throughout the weekend on the basic message of freedom with which Ford and his fellow workers have identified themselves. But the issues of limits and discipline received attention, too. Thus, for example, the initial meeting on Thursday evening featured Smuts van Rooyen on "A Gospel Worth Dying For." And Calvin Edward's Sunday morning discourse on "The Limits of Freedom" aimed clearly at tempering the impulses of liberation so obvious among Gospel believers. The very juxtaposition of such messages with others raised the question of the purpose of the congress in relation to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

The congress program for Friday read: Alan Crandall, 8:45 a.m., "My Witnesses . . . To the End of the Earth"; Desmond Ford, 10:45 a.m., "The Church in Thy House (Guidelines for an Evangelical Society)"; Peter Johansen, 2:00 p.m., "Setting a Proper

Climate for a Growing Evangelistic Church"; and Peter Johansen, 3:45 p.m., "Selecting, Training and Motivating Leadership." This listing of titles seemed to encourage at least two inferences: 1) The gospel worth dying for that van Rooyen had proclaimed on the preceding evening was seen by congress planners as issuing in mission and in some organized expression of church fellowship; 2) Congress planners intended to encourage the organization of congregations as alternatives to membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church. As it happens, the first inference is largely correct, whereas the second one is wrong.

Alan Crandall did indeed point to the duties of Christians to engage in mission, stressing the need for active compassion in relation to such outcast groups as the hungry of the third world and the homosexuals in our own society. Ford pointed out that one of the marks of a true church was the maintenance of discipline, the rebuking and correction of open wrongs. He also promoted the concept of the disciplined cell group as the foundation of a strong church. Peter Johansen and his associates from First Baptist Church of Modesto, California, offered a how-to, step-by-step approach to church growth and leadership, complete with hand-outs, overhead transparencies, questionnaires and charts. Thus, all the daytime Friday speakers lent their influence to the need for discipline and order among Christians.

Did all these messages add up to a call for a new church? Some, encouraged by remarks made recently on the Adventist camp meeting circuit, might conclude that it did. While speaking to camp-meeting audiences this summer, the Ellen White Estate's Robert Olson, for example associated Desmond Ford with "demonic" forces threatening the Seventh-day Adventist church. He accused Ford of starting his own church, claiming, among other things, that he was encouraging the formation of new congregations and was holding his first alternative "general conference" at Monterey. The evidence available at the Gospel Congress does not sustain these allegations.

At their strongest, Ford's "Guidelines for

an Evangelical Society” gave only permission for the establishment of independent gospel fellowships. He insisted that only where the consciences of clergy and laity were oppressed with regard to proclamation of the gospel was it necessary to separate from the “mother church.” In such situations, “the mother church herself is responsible for schism.” He introduced his guidelines with much talk about the necessity for reform in a church where the vision of the original creative minority has become routinized. Nevertheless, his three basic guidelines hardly encouraged separatist zeal:

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1) There never has been nor will be a pure church on earth; 2) most who attend church are not fully committed Christians; 3) new churches, once large, repeat the precise history of the church from which they separated. The upshot of the imperative for reform, combined with the practical realization that no new movement is likely to establish a truly satisfactory organization, was Ford’s advocacy of a cell group strategy within existing church arrangements.

This message should lay to rest speculation about Ford’s seeking to start a new church. (It does not, of course, stop conjecture about the “mother church” or other forces pushing him into such a move.) As for the Gospel Congress amounting to a “general conference” session for this “new church,” it should be noted that there were no elections of officers, no committees drafting policy statements and certainly no formulation of a statement of fundamental beliefs. If anything, the spirit of the congress resembled that of a camp meeting rather than any sort of business session.

The question remains, however, of why any practical organizing emphasis was included in the congress. What, indeed, was the purpose of holding a “Gospel Congress,” if not to foster a new church movement?

Ford claimed the main purpose of the congress was to rally support for the evangelistic ministry of Good News Unlimited, especially the television outreach it hopes to build around the preaching talents of Smuts van Rooyen. He admitted that the scheduling of his presentation on evangelical societies next to Johansen’s on church growth and leadership encouraged the inference that a new church was in the offing, but insisted that his intentions were quite different.

Noel Mason said opportunity for fellowship among like-minded believers in the “pure Gospel” was one of the chief reasons for holding the congress. Mason, van Rooyen, and Good News administrator Calvin Edwards all agreed with Ford that they were not seeking to establish an organized alternative to membership in the Adventist denomination, but were supportive of groups whose circumstances “forced” the formation of independent fellowships. They did not wish, they emphasized, to foster schism with the established denomination.

Nor, of course, did anyone wish to foster schism within the Gospel revival movement. Yet part of the story of the congress is a story of what appears to be incipient division. Alan Crandall originally conceived the idea of the congress and, with the help of his associates at *Evangelica*, began the planning process. Crandall said that a major purpose of the congress was to have been that of unifying the Gospel revival movement by bringing together its two main leaders: Desmond Ford and Robert Brinsmead. In the early planning stages, Brinsmead and Ford expressed willingness to appear together. Then Brinsmead published an issue of *Verdict* attacking sabbatarianism and urging that no special day of worship is binding upon the Christian. Ford, who strongly disagrees with Brinsmead on this point (see Ford’s review of the *Verdict* issue, page 66), decided he could not participate in the congress lest by his presence he

appeared to condone Brinsmead's antisabatarianism. With one of their main purposes for holding the congress thus frustrated, the *Evangelica* staff dropped their plans to sponsor it. Good News Unlimited then stepped into the vacuum and became sponsor.

Some in the Gospel revival movement have clearly become discontented over what they feel to be Ford's excessive caution and conservatism in relation to traditional Adventist issues. There were some at the congress who openly, though not publicly, avowed that they were no longer Adventists. These people seemed largely to identify with Brinsmead not only on his treatment of the Sabbath issue, but also on his critical, even hostile, attitude toward Ellen White and toward most of traditional Adventist doctrine and subculture.

The concerns of this group received some public attention during the question-and-answer panels Sabbath afternoon and evening. Ford himself gave resounding defenses of both the Sabbath and Ellen White's prophetic gift, drawing applause which, though fervent, was somewhat scattered. The support Ford received from his Good News associates was somewhat less than wholehearted. Van Rooyen, for example, drew laughter and applause when he responded to a question on the difference between the official Seventh-day Adventist position on Ellen White and the position of the staff of Good News. "At this point," he confessed, "for me the difference is that the denomination has a very set view, and I find myself very confused."

In sum, at the points where the people had opportunity to speak, they evinced a division among themselves over the doctrinal issues of the Sabbath and Ellen White. This division, in turn, was roughly — not perfectly — paralleled by a division of loyalties between the two major leaders of the Gospel revival, Desmond Ford and Robert Brinsmead.

That the Gospel movement has two distinguishable wings seems clear, too, from a remark by Alan Crandall, who is now serving as pastor of a Napa, California, Gospel fellowship and pursuing graduate study in Berkeley as well as editing *Evangelica*. Although enthusiastic on the whole about the

congress, he is uncomfortable with Ford's dogged courting of the Adventist denomination and is quite sympathetic with the positions of Robert Brinsmead. Obviously disappointed in Ford's refusal to appear with Brinsmead as originally planned, he described the congress that did occur as the "Des Ford caucus" within the larger Gospel revival movement.

Ford and the rest of the staff of Good News readily admit that there are two wings in the Gospel revival. Ford even granted the fairness of Crandall's description of the congress as a "Des Ford caucus." They displayed no perceptible hostility to the Brinsmead wing, although Mason, Edwards and Gill Ford, Desmond's wife, complained of Brinsmead's stridency and lack of pastoral concern for the Gospel movement during his recent tour through the United States. Edwards explicitly dissociated Good News from attacks on Ellen White and other Adventist distinctives.

If the signs of division signaled trauma within the Gospel revival movement as a whole, Smuts van Rooyen's presence at the congress symbolized the pain — as well as joy — that individual participants have experienced. The people listened to van Rooyen with an air of expectancy that seemed to go beyond just his reputation as an outstanding preacher. The title of his opening-night sermon, "A Gospel Worth Dying For," was especially significant in light of the possible death of his own academic career subsequent to his resignation under pressure from Andrews University (see page 40). He proclaimed that only if for all of us, as for Paul, "to live is Christ," can it follow that "to die is gain." He laughed and his audience laughed with him when he pointed out that if for him "to live is my academic career," then to die could only mean that "my brilliant brains will rot in the grave." This was his self-effacing testimony to what he was ready to sacrifice for the Gospel. On Sunday his closing message again touched on the personal dimensions of the crisis he and his hearers have struggled through in relation to the Gospel and their inherited commitments. He

likened the turmoil the disciples experienced when they found that their cherished beliefs about Christ's mission were wrong to that of the Adventist Gospel believers today. Alluding to his own sleepless nights over the past few months, he said, "I was so very sure I was right and I discovered I was wrong." He then looked at his audience and said, "Oh, it's deep trouble, isn't it?" Quiet amens rose from many of his hearers. His hearers understood the difficulty of adjusting to a new understanding as old wineskins begin to break. The first concern is the future of the two wings of the Gospel movement. Ford and his associates continue to hope that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination will hear and accommodate their gospel message. As Calvin Edwards put it, "I hope for a time when my having worked for Good News will be a high recommendation for employment anywhere in the denomination." Brinsmead's followers and some of the Gospel fellowship pastors see such a hope as at best forlorn and perhaps unworthy. Brinsmead has already announced his intention to organize the Free Christian Alliance, a para-church organization. Its purposes were

fuzzy even in the minds of his supporters at the congress, but the move seems at least to communicate the Brinsmead wing's preference for a clean break with Adventism. Barring an arrest of current attitudes in the "mother church," an official Adventist accommodation to Ford seems unlikely. If it should occur, however, would the Gospel revival movement split irrevocably? If the denomination continues to isolate Ford, will the Gospel believers reconcile their differences and provide a coherent alternative to traditional Adventism?

Questions of the second kind concern the meaning of the liberty in Christ the Gospel believers are now savoring. Will these people in time also hear and respond faithfully to the call to discipleship and service sounded by Ford, Edwards, Crandall and others? One may grant that the gospel of the objective work of Christ is better than the spiritual narcissism of perfectionists who inflate their personal moral battles into a conflict of cosmic significance. But will this gospel set people free only to drift into the secular narcissisms of the modern world? It is too early, of course, to tell.