



# How Should SDAs Respond?

What do we do with Revelation after it has been so badly abused by someone like David Koresh?

## Futuristic Highs at Mt. Carmel

by William H. Shea

We all know quite well what has happened to the Branch Davidian cult. The TV tape of the killings and the conflagration have run as often as the Rodney King beating tape. The media has made us well aware of these political events. But there was a theology back of those immediate political events. Ultimately, that theology stems from a particular view of prophecy. Its roots come from the SDA Church of 1929, but branches have spread so far that the Adventist roots of Branch Davidian interpretations of prophecy are hardly recognizable any longer. How did this happen and how did these views develop?

While Vernon Howell, a.k.a. David Koresh (that is, David Cyrus), has put his own Messianic and psychiatric twist on those lines of prophecy, he still stands in line with the founder of the Shepherd's Rod movement or Davidians, Victor Houteff. Houteff cast the die for Davidian interpretation of prophecy. It makes an interesting bit of

psychohistory to see how this developed. A convenient place to begin is November 1930. That was when Victor Houteff was disfellowshipped from a Seventh-day Adventist church in Southern California. What was his prophetic response to that disfellowshipping? He developed what I would call "rejection theology." Having been removed from the church by the church, he turned his prophetic guns against it.

How did he do this? With a vision on January 1, 1931. In this vision, a number of biblical elements like the parable of the wheat and the tares, the harvest of the world in Revelation 14, and other topics, were turned against the Adventist Church. Previous interpreters of these biblical passages had seen them in terms of the whole world, good and evil. Houteff now saw them in terms of his followers versus those in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He had been rejected by the Adventist denomination, and now the Lord,

working on his behalf, would reject them. This was made all the more explicit by the use of Ezekiel 9. This prophecy, which was fulfilled in 586 B.C., was now turned against the Adventist Church. The angel with the inkhorn was going to mark and distinguish his followers from the Seventh-day Adventists at large, who were to be destroyed. This was his first blunder of interpretation—to turn already fulfilled prophecy for use in his own personal feud with the Adventist Church.

Houteff's next step into the wonderland of personal prophecy was to adopt a theological Zionism. This was not Zion or Zionism for the Jews, but for Houteff's followers. He had come to this egocentric conclusion sometime between 1934 and 1939. Before the coming of Christ, God was going to re-establish a Davidic kingdom in Palestine, as it was then called. The leader of that theocracy was to be the new David, Houteff himself. God would miraculously and destructively clear out both Arabs and Jews from the Holy Land so his followers could possess the land.

David Koresh only embellished this idea by taking the name of Cyrus. David was to accomplish

with his followers what Cyrus did with the Jews—send them back to the promised land.

The contrast with Seventh-day Adventist theology here is stark. Only reluctantly have Adventist evangelists even admitted that Israel might come to exist. We still do not see that nation occupying a theologically significant role as an elect nation of God. Nor do we see any migration there of any other group to take over the land. For Adventists, there is no such intermediate step along the way to the second coming of Christ. That becomes the mere politics of this world. Not so for Houteff, or Ben Roden his successor, or David Koresh, the successor of Roden. The soon-to-be-established new Israel would be their kingdom, and they believed they would rule over it until the full coming of Christ. Then it would be transformed.

This is much closer to dispensational theology than to anything in Seventh-day Adventist prophetic interpretation. Adventists say that the restoration promises or prophecies of the Old Testament were conditional. They were not fulfilled, and they will not be fulfilled.

The third step in the drift into futurism was taken upon the death of Victor Houteff, in February 1955. In November, Mrs. Houteff said that she had received a prophetic vision that instructed her to apply the 1260 days of Revelation 11 in a literal way from the time of her vision until the coming of Christ.

This led to the establishment of the date of April 22, 1959, as the date for the Second Advent. Of course it did not happen, and this failure led to a splintering of the Shepherd's Rod movement.

But what is important here is to note that in terms of prophecy, the Houteffs had now rejected a standard principle of interpretation among Adventists. In apocalyptic literature, such of David and Revelation, prophetic times are symbolic, and should be interpreted according to the rule of a day for a historical year. Adventists have interpreted the 1260-day prophecy as fulfilled in past history, through the Middle Ages, leading up to the terminal date of 1798. Shepherd's Rods now applied them as literal and future. The prophetic Rubicon had been crossed.

We now come to David Koresh who, in his own psychotic way,

grafted on this his futuristic strain of prophetic interpretation. He simply carried the method to a more illogical conclusion. In his long and rambling radio address, after the initial raid on his compound, Koresh proclaimed himself the Lamb of God found in the book of Revelation.

On what basis could he make such a claim? He said that he and he alone knew what the seven seals mean. Since that secret is the property of the Lamb to whom the scroll with the seals was given in Revelation, he would be the Lamb.

Well, what do the seals mean? They lie in the immediate future and are of catastrophic magnitude for the inhabitants of the earth. Beyond that, Koresh played his seals very close to his vest.

Seventh-day Adventists have also said that they know what the seals represent, but they have put them back in past history. The white horse and its rider of the first seal was the going forth of the gospel at the beginning of the Christian age. Historically, by the time we come to the fifth seal, with its martyred souls under the altar, we have come to the persecutions of the Dark Ages. The sixth seal takes us through the 18th and 19th centuries with the great earthquake, the Dark Day, and the Falling of the Stars. All of this was fulfilled by or before 1833 or 1844. Only the seventh seal lies in the future. Only it is connected, in one way or another, with the Second Coming.

The contrast between these two views is direct and uncompromising. The Adventist view has seen prophecy fulfilled before the coming of Christ. The Davidian view, on the other hand, has gone more and more futuristic in its interpretation, and has brought with it all of the excesses of that school of thought.

In truth, the prophetic views of



the Branch Davidians at the Mt. Carmel compound were closer to those of Hal Lindsay than they were to the Seventh-day Adventists. That was precisely the reason why they branched off—they no longer agreed with the historicist views of the parent body. They were not sensational enough, they were not exciting enough, they did not provide that instant relevance that produces an eschatological high. They have also demonstrated how far one can go in this type of interpretation. It should be a warning to the church, since we have other futuristic interpreters and groups circulating on the periphery of Adventism.

A word should be said in conclusion about the 144,000. The Branch Davidians claim that they and those who will join them were to make up that group. The half dozen groups that split off from them in 1962, after the predicted coming of Christ failed to occur, also claimed that they and they alone are, or will make up, the 144,000.

Since the turn of the century, Seventh-day Adventists have not interpreted this number literally. They see a symbolic number with its components of 12,000 each as not made up of literal tribes of Israel, but spiritual tribes before the throne of God. The first part of Revelation, chapter 7, gives the symbolic number; the second part tells us that when this symbol is finally fulfilled, literally, around the throne of God, it will be a great multitude which no one can number. The Adventist view of the 144,000 makes it as inclusive as possible; the Davidian view makes it as exclusive as possible.

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## Fundamentalism Is a Disease, A Demonic Perversion

by Charles Scriven

On Sunday, April 25, 1993, the same day *The Washington Post* ran two essays chastising government law enforcement for its tragic assault in Waco, Andy Rooney of *Sixty Minutes* said he was sick and tired of slurs like these. Nobody's to blame, Rooney hissed, except those "religious nuts."

I'm with the *Post*: the government was impatient, klutzy—and culpable. Still, except for the children, Rooney's description fits. The Branch Davidians were religious and they were nuts—not just weird but weird to the point of lunacy.

And they were fed by fundamentalism.

All who are cousins to these crazies—and we Adventists are—should wake up to this fact. Perhaps we're not close cousins. I personally had never heard of the Branch Davidians until the media, gorging on the initial shootout, began to belch out the story. And what did I then hear? I heard about a man who had Revelation solved. I heard about a man who thought everyone was wrong but him. I heard about a man who knew all of the answers and none of the questions.

The man, and most of his followers, had once belonged to Adventist churches. Many in these churches thought—think!—that *we* have Revelation solved. Many think everyone is wrong but us. Many have all of the answers and none of the questions.

Our best theologians, including Ellen White, know we see through a glass darkly. They know that God, and God alone, is infallible. But it isn't often that our church's

leaders, even its thought leaders, have either the spunk or the insight to say once and for all: fundamentalism is a dread disease, a demonic perversion, a groundwork for madness.

Not long ago—but before David Koresh—I gave a talk on "The Adventure of Truth" to some highly educated, second- and third-generation Adventists. Invoking the Abraham story, I said that when you truly love God you leave off arrogance of mind as well as heart. As Abraham set out, "not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8, NRSV), you walk a path of bravery and risk, all along acknowledging the imperfection of your knowledge and even of your prophecy (1 Corinthians 13:12). I also said that the contrary frame of mind was fundamentalism, a conceit that murders curiosity and leads thereby either to listlessness or to destructive passion.

The idea of truth as adventure appealed to this particular group—I was preaching to the choir. But in the conversation it came out that nearly everyone thought it was a *rhetorical* mistake to hammer away at fundamentalism. They thought that most Adventists would be suspicious of me, and reject my deeper point, if I came across unfriendly to fundamentalism, and that if I gave this talk elsewhere, or wrote it down for publication, I should avoid an explicit reproach.

Horsefeathers!

I was a fairly patient listener then. Now, after the madness and the fatal fire, and the knowledge that so many of the dead were schooled in Adventism, I'm impa-

tient. The church's leaders, including its privileged thought leaders, must acknowledge the violence of fundamentalism. Now, more than ever, we must confess that closed and cocky minds are an abomination to the Lord. God wants us always to remain open to change and renewal (Isaiah 48:6).

If I am a fundamentalist I take my convictions to be non-negotiable. I reject challenges to my belief before I have considered them. I deny my fallibility and my

need to grow.

In other words, I reject God; I worship an idol.

The wild, ominous energy of David Koresh exposed the violence of fundamentalism. But it won't do to say No to this lunatic. We must say No to the frame of mind that fed the lunacy.

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## Apocalyptic—Who Needs It?

by Beatrice Neall

How seriously should Adventists take apocalyptic books like Daniel, Revelation, and *The Great Controversy*? Apocalypticists, after all, are embarrassing to have around. David Koresh tried to precipitate Armageddon by his confrontation with the U.S. Government. David Mould mounts a billboard campaign against the pope, charging the Vatican with trying to change the U.S. Constitution. John Osborne chastises official Adventism for its ecumenical stance toward other Christians. Date-setters become increasingly active as the year 2000 approaches. Survivalists buy homes in the wilderness for the time of trouble.

These developments embarrass the main-line church. We may even wish to revise our apocalyptic stance. Aren't we triumphalistic in seeing ourselves as the one true church? Hasn't the Sabbath/Sunday issue, so relevant when *The Great Controversy* was written, become obsolete in today's secular society? Haven't Adventists erred in focusing on the pope while neglecting to take a stand against oppressive dictators of the 20th century? Shouldn't we concentrate

on the modern "beasts" of ethnic hatred, oppression of minorities, and abuse of the eco-system? Perhaps apocalyptic, with its sensationalism, represents an immature stage of Christianity. Perhaps we should replace it with the gospel of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

I suggest that we look to Jesus for enlightenment on these issues. He is central not only to the gospel, but also to the apocalyptic. As an apocalyptic figure, he ushered in the end time by setting up his kingdom. He stood under a death decree and felt the persecuting wrath of a "union of church and state." In Gethsemane, he endured the time of trouble, and on the cross, he drew to himself the plagues of scorching sun, darkness, and earthquake. He experienced death, resurrection, and translation. He stands in the tension between the gospel and apocalyptic. What might Jesus say to enthusiasts?

*Should we precipitate the final crisis?* Jesus tried to win his enemies by love. He did not precipitate the crisis—it was forced on him. Jesus would have told David Koresh to lay down his sword.

*Should we fraternize or confront?*

Should Adventists fraternize with Christians of other faiths? Or should we denounce them as Babylon? Jesus feasted and fraternized with Pharisees such as Simon and Nicodemus. He was frank, but spoke the truth in love. Ecumenism is not a sin if the truth is not compromised. Jesus did not denounce the religious leaders of his day before his arrest. Bashing the pope at the present time is premature. The pope is not currently trying to change the U.S. Constitution. The encyclical to which David Mould refers merely asserts the right of workers to observe their day of rest. (Adventists fought for the same right.) The document has nothing to do with enforcing Sunday-worship upon non-believers.

*Should we set dates?* For 2,000 years, every date set for the end of the world has failed. Apocalypticists have supplied hundreds of rationales for the Lord to come by a certain date (the end of a millennium, the 120 years of Noah, a generation from the Falling of the Stars or the establishment of Israel), but God has ignored them all. "History overwhelms apocalyptic"—time keeps marching on in spite of efforts to stop it. Jesus not only refused to supply a date, but forbade others to do so (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:6, 7).

*Should we flee to the mountains?* (An Adventist paper advertised, "three-bedroom ranch, excellent for the time of trouble; all modern conveniences." But is a home that receives mail, telephone, and other services hidden?) Now is not the time to be isolated from the world, but to penetrate the world with the gospel. Now is the time of Global Mission (Matthew 24:14).

But apocalyptic should not be rejected because enthusiasts have abused it. Abuse does not cancel use. And detractors can distort as well.

**A**ren't we naive to see ourselves in prophecy? Sects often see themselves as the fulcrum of history—the stone that strikes the image, the 144,000 on Mount Zion. Are Adventists naive to see themselves as “the remnant,” the one true church? Though we are a small subdivision on the Christian landscape, we do have the remnant message and proclaim the last warning to the world—the three angels' messages.

*Shouldn't our concept of “antichrist” be relativized?* Though history has seen many oppressors, the sequence of powers listed in Daniel 7 still holds. Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin are gone; communism is crumbling; but the Papacy still grows in power.

*Isn't Sabbath/Sunday an antiquated issue?* Whether one agrees with *The Great Controversy* scenario or not, the biblical picture of the final conflict has to do with worshiping God or an anti-God power (Revelation 14:6-12). Also, in a violent world, the pressure for a religious solution is increasing. The Religious Right is eager to legislate such a solution. Furthermore, the three angels' messages are exceedingly relevant to a world that has forgotten its Creator.

*Isn't the gospel enough?* Some

theologians would like to center all theology on the cross. But Christian theology must have two foci—both the first and second advents of Christ. If we have only the cross, we are of all people the most miserable (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). God gave apocalyptic to dramatize the struggle between good and evil, to arouse the world to its danger, and to inspire the hope of ultimate victory. In his apocalyptic discourse, Jesus told the signs of his coming—signs that in every age have produced a sense of urgency to prepare for his coming.

*How then shall we live?* The purpose of apocalyptic, as with all scripture, is to inspire a life oriented toward Christ and his coming (Matthew 24:42). At the end of his apocalyptic discourse (Matthew 25) Jesus spelled out just what this life is like. Surprisingly, it is not something heroic. It consists of being filled with the oil of the Spirit, developing one's talents in service to God, and caring for the needy and oppressed. Apocalyptic demands nothing more—nothing less.

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placed on apocalyptic—Day of Armageddon—theology, with its persecutorial paranoid overtones, we have inadvertently fed the dark side of the wounded and vulnerable souls like David Koresh.

As an illegitimate child with learning difficulties, his early life could not have been easy. Dropping out of school in the ninth grade certainly did not enhance his already low self-esteem. When he did join the Adventist church in Tyler, Texas at the age of 18, his grandmother reports he was treated with disdain because of his long hair, style of dress, and musical tastes. Instead of being accepted for who he was (as AA accepts any alcoholic), and unconditionally loved in the church, he was apparently judged and criticized. As a result, he moved on to join the Branch Davidians in Waco. We Adventists will never know just how much that failure to love and support a lonely and insecure young man may have contributed to the present tragedy.

But wait a minute, it is not just us Adventists who are setting up people for elitism, religious addiction, and cultism. Equally culpable are the members of any religious organization who put their religion ahead of their spirituality. Anyone who considers himself morally superior because of his religious belief. Anyone who sits in judgment on the personal choices of another human being whether those choices are sexual, religious, or political. Anyone who says his way is the only way to God. Anyone who would try to set himself up as the only source of religious truth or as conscience for another person or who would attempt to dictate what someone else should believe. Anyone who holds a dysfunctional theology like the old manipulative, fear-inducing Baptist doctrine of a God who condemns people who don't measure up into a burning pit of fire and brimstone for all eter-

## Did David Die for Our Sins?

by Douglas Cooper

The public relations department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has done back flips in an attempt to distance itself from former member David Koresh. They certainly have a right and even a duty to do so. After all, he was disfellowshipped from the church in 1981 and much of his radical theology is of his own making.

However, I suggest that all of us

who are or were Adventists recognize the fact that a piece of us is inside that Waco compound. We have all been part of a religious family that has its dysfunctional side, and our black-sheep brother David is acting out the role of scapegoat very effectively for us. With our religious addiction and bent toward our own kind of more dignified cultism, with the emphasis we have

nity, a doctrine that has probably done more harm and kept more people away from real spirituality than any other teaching ever devised by the mind of humanity.

When religion is fear, guilt, and shame based, it becomes religiosity or religious addiction. This sets vulnerable people up to move into extreme positions like cultism.

## Kissing Cousins or Kindred Spirits?

by Charles Teel

Seventh-day Adventist image makers rushed to assemble press kits, complete with family-tree genealogies that identified the occupants of Ranch Apocalypse as mere kissing cousins. A tree trunk labeled Christian was hastily drawn boasting a Protestant arm, a millennial movement branch, and relatively young adventist shoots that include the Seventh-day Adventists. Fully two forks down from this Seventh-day Adventist shoot are the Branch Davidians. Reformed twice. Second or third cousins at best. Shirttail relatives only. And by marriage. Perhaps.

Seventh-day Adventists join with those of all faiths—and those of no proclaimed faith—who are profoundly repelled by the fundamentalist ingredients that fueled the fire of Ranch Apocalypse. Such ingredients include a literalist approach to Scripture, the assumption of unquestioned authority on the part of congregants, the exclusive withdrawal from ongoing history, the substitution of eschatological fantasy for present reality, and the enforcement of rigid behavioral proscriptions—with the community's leadership allegedly not being bound by key proscribed behavioral norms.

Are we appalled by these traits because they are so foreign to our

Is David Koresh the Messiah? No. Did he die for our sins? Quite possibly.

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lived experience—aberrations characteristic of no one in our circle closer than kissing cousins? Or are we appalled because David Koresh's reading of the Apocalypse, charting of eschatological events, listing of behavioral demands, and assumption of authoritative rule elicit strong identification buried deep within our collective soul?

Koresh's broadcast appeal referred to apocalyptic symbols and presuppositions embraced by traditional Seventh-day Adventism. His call to unlock the Apocalypse, to break the seven seals, and to anticipate the battle of Armageddon mirrors calls made by evangelists who attracted our grandparents, our parents, ourselves. (We remember such calls because these fantastic portents were illustrated by vivid visual representations: the first cloth hanging charts were followed by papier-mâché props, plywood cutouts, Ducane Projector transparencies, glow-in-the-dark black-light visuals, and—most recently—state-of-the-art multimedia productions.)

The transcript of a 1987 Southern California presentation by Vernon Howell (a.k.a. David Koresh), affirms numerous symbols that stand as traditional Seventh-day Adventist pillars. He de-

clares his membership in the Seventh-day Adventist community of faith (“... we, as Seventh-day Adventists, have our foundation in the sixth seal, don't we?”), aligns himself with Adventist evangelization approaches (“That's what we teach people in the Revelation Seminars, right?”), and affirms familiar signs of the end (the seven seals, the seven angels, the seven trumpets, the Dark Day, the falling of the heavenly bodies, the book of Daniel, the 1260- and 2300-day prophecies, and the antitypical Day of Atonement). Ellen White's *Early Writings*, *Word to the Little Flock*, *The Great Controversy*, *Prophets and Kings*, *Selected Messages*, and the *Testimonies* are used not only for their biblical understandings, but also for their behavioral proscriptions (“Now I'm not a scholar in Sister White's *Testimonies*, but I will say this much: I will say that not one of you is living up to the light in the *Testimonies*—not one in this room.”)

Koresh, as with William Miller and a great cloud of Adventist witnesses, engages in a biblical interpretation that observers past and present characterize as “wooden literalism.” Comparing scripture line upon line and precept upon precept with less than a clear regard for historical context and using a (non) method that “lets the Bible serve as its own interpreter” leads inevitably to alarming consequences. Koresh becomes, in effect, the keeper of the text. Keepers of the text who employ this woodenly literal hermeneutic begin “helping” the Bible interpret itself—unfettered by accountability to established norms of responsible reading. Quickly, leaders find themselves and their communities explicitly identified in the text.

The adage that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” is particularly instructive when applied to biblical interpre-

tation. Those interpreters who call others to embrace this fundamentalist grid—be they fundamentalist Catholics, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Branch Davidians, Jonestown recruits, followers of Khomeini, or members of the Charles Manson family—achieve power and authority by promulgating a law of literalism. Everything, even the most obscure formulae, symbols, and numbers, must be unlocked. Such definition leads inevitably to absolute authority of the interpreters and the demand for absolute obedience by the flock. Biblical authority corrupts and absolute authority corrupts absolutely.

In apocalyptic literature, prophecy goes into overdrive and symbolic language abounds in cosmic proportions. Readers and hearers of apocalyptic are hurled through time and space as they journey into the heavenly and earthly and subterranean spheres while piecing together fragments of humankind's shared story. Divine and demonic symbols of the great controversy between light and darkness flash larger than life on the screen of universal history. Beasts rampage and nations give obeisance. Harlots seduce and populations succumb. Winds blow and the earth shakes. Bowls are poured out and history screams. Woes are flung against space and the universe is hushed. In such a context, literalists, absolutists, and would-be demagogues have a field day.

Fundamentalist biblical interpreters have found everything in apocalyptic literature. Twin-tailed P-38 airplanes, the fall of the Turkish Empire, and the qualified assertion that the European Common Market will never become a reality. (Indeed, so committed to a particular interpretation were our Seventh-day Adventist forbears of the 1940s that a variant interpretation on the King of the North once

evoked a fist fight between two Seventh-day Adventist divines—both seasoned and ordained clergymen—in Room 200 of Irwin Hall at Pacific Union College.)

Give or take a symbol or two, such games are harmless enough. Bruised limbs and egos can heal. But when apocalyptic interpreters presume to label entire religious faiths as Babylon, while at the same time identifying their own community as constituting God's True Remnant, the ground is laid for the sins of triumphalism, exclusivism, and pride. The abuse of authority blooms to full flower. Stir in a paranoid mindset that comes to anticipate—indeed invite—persecution at the hands of those branded as Babylonian whores and fornicating daughters of whores, and a self-fulfilling prophecy of destruction is set in motion.

Make no mistake: when Seventh-day Adventists heard Koresh's impassioned and detailed interpretations of the Apocalypse, we heard our shared history. Many of us were frightened by what we heard.

The fundamentalist law of literalism, abuse of authority, exclusive

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*The Apocalypse is not merely a puzzle to be pieced together or a chronology to be calculated, not a mathematical formula or historical secret, but a liberating discovery, a magnificent hymn of praise to be celebrated.*

triumphalism, sensationalist eschatology, paranoid suspicions of persecution, and sectarian withdrawal from history need not carry the day when dealing with the apocalyptic. We have another option. The Apocalypse is not merely a puzzle to be pieced together or a chronology to be calculated, not a mathematical formula or historical secret, but a liberating discovery. Revelation is a magnificent hymn of praise to be celebrated.

The Apocalypse affirms the good news that the Kingdom will triumph! The baby wins over the beast. The woman with child wins over the harlot. Faithful remnants endure as unrighteous Babylons crumble. Shouts of Alleluia! replace woes that have been poured out upon abusive systems. The lamb emerges as Lord of history.

Whether the occupants at Ranch Apocalypse were indeed kissing cousins cannot be answered once and for all. What can be affirmed is that the cosmic family tree pictured in the final chapters of the Apocalypse shades a great and diverse multitude, and that leaves from its many branches are a balm for the healing of the nations. Ellen White describes the boughs of this tree hanging over the walls of the heavenly city, encompassing the present order. No wooden literalism in this symbolic interpretation. No substitution of present reality for otherworldly escapism. Rather, individuals motivated by this image of the family tree are called to become engaged in their world as agents of healing, justice, and reconciliation.

Let us—who have ears to hear—listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.

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## Our Brothers and Our Sisters ...

by Ron Warren

I have been a Seventh-day Adventist for less than four years. I love the church and am thankful for the difference it has made in my life. Because of my love for the church, the tragic events in Waco, Texas, and the church's response have raised painful questions for me.

In the conversations around Sligo church, my spiritual home, I have sensed a fatalism and resignation, as well as a desire for distance from the entire situation. I find it quite disturbing. More than once I have heard the comment, "It's hard to see how it could've ended another way." I realize my response is quite different. Why wasn't the Seventh-day Adventist Church searching for another way? Most of the people who perished in the compound were former Adventists. Steven Schneider, who was described as David Koresh's top lieutenant, attended Andrews University for several years. Wayne Martin, one of Koresh's most trusted advisors, came from a kind and loving Adventist family and, as a respected lawyer with a degree from Harvard, could only be described as one of our best and brightest. Most of the 24 Britons believed lost were raised as Adventists. A number of them attended Newbold College.

The Adventist Church may have been in a unique position to understand the torn psychology of some of the cult members. Where was the church in the negotiations? Could we not have found the courage to say, "Some of these are ours. What can we do to help?" Instead, the church seems to have sought the safety of a public-relations campaign in the media and in local churches in an effort to have people

believe that this situation had nothing to do with Adventism. Of course this is not true. This is an Adventist tragedy.

Another disturbing comment that I have heard can be paraphrased, "If only those people had read the Bible correctly and understood *the truth*, they would never have fallen in with a cult." Unfortunately, as well-intended as it is, this kind of allegiance to a received *truth* is exactly the appeal David Koresh used with such deadly effectiveness. If some of our people are being conditioned to simply follow *the truth* of Adventism with-

out being given tools for searching out their own truth, is it really surprising that they would simply follow the *truth* presented by a very charismatic personality?

It is time that we, as a church, prayerfully consider what there may be in our teachings and our teaching methods that would allow some of us—including those who have attended some of our finest institutions—to be so tragically misled by the ravings of a madman. It is certainly time, in their time of need, that we stopped distancing ourselves from our brothers and sisters who survived the Waco experience.

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## In a Wild Moment, I Imagine ...

by Ernest Burse

This year the April Fool's issue of our student newspaper, the *Collegian*, included a half-page ad announcing an upcoming Revelation Seminar. The main feature of the event—David Koresh, of course, "who comes to us from beautiful Waco, Texas, where he has been playing guitar, getting married, and stockpiling arms as he prepares for the end of the world." The words aren't funny now. We were told in the media to expect a long siege so the children left inside the compound could be spared. But it's over now and they're dead.

I teach a course on the book of Revelation. I'd like to go on teaching Revelation as if nothing had happened. Wouldn't it be nice if I could just say that Mr. Koresh profoundly misunderstood Revelation, and let it go at that? But the *Colle-*

*gian* ad suggests otherwise. The grapevine whispers that a half-dozen groups with Adventist connections will converge in Colorado to protest the pope during his visit in August. And this time it won't be so easy for me and other Adventists to distance ourselves from the interpretations of Revelation placarded before the world.

What can we salvage from Waco? The answers reveal yet another standoff—this time within Adventism—a standoff between those who see current events confirming Adventist interpretation of Revelation and those who see events like the Waco holocaust as confirming suspicion over the whole apocalyptic enterprise that has defined Adventism. In simple terms, we're in the midst of a standoff between those who attend



Revelation Seminars and those who boycott them.

Were the followers of Koresh, faithful to death, precursors of a blind humanity soon to embrace the antichrist described in Revelation 13? Or were David Koresh and his flock an embodiment of the excesses of their Adventist heritage, too long grazing on the visions of Revelation? I hear both answers even among my students. Whether the Waco episode will promote much real dialogue among Adventists in general remains to be seen.

Most of my students come from a conservative Adventist perspective. Most of them consider Koresh one more sign of the end. Others, a minority to be sure, come to the course carrying questions about the way Adventists have been reading Revelation. Christians—both Protestant and Catholic, Muslims, and even Communists from China—attend our college and take my class on Revelation. Perhaps it is a matter of personality, but I do not consider my first responsibility in teaching this course to deconstruct my students' beliefs about the mark of the beast and the Catholic Church as much as to help them sort out what is spiritually and ethically virile from what they have acquired. I judge my first task to search for the common ground. Where is it? Has Waco widened or narrowed it?

I caught myself speaking in class about "Wack-o, Texas." As a self-evident truth we "know" ourselves to be different from the Waco enclave. "How could they be so gullible?" We wonder about the personality flaw that would allow David Koresh to mesmerize otherwise intelligent people. It's more than an Adventist defense mechanism. Christians have long distanced themselves from the Jews calling for Jesus' crucifixion. We have distanced ourselves from the

Nazi guards and executioners in the camps of the Holocaust, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the supporting cast for the executioners were bona fide members of the Christian church. As an Adventist and a Christian, I shall try even harder to raise matters of moral courage and the responsibility to question authority systems, including my own.

In tomorrow morning's Revelation class we'll be discussing the seven seals without the benefit of Koresh's unfinished manuscript. Ought not the book of Revelation be indicted for inflaming a conscientious and unstable reader to imagine himself to be the Messiah filled with the wrath of the Lamb, who leads the powerful of the world to plead for rocks to cover them under the sixth seal?

Revelation does speak the language of violence. But only a skewed reading of Revelation would lead to the arming of the Davidian compound. The eye of

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the reader, prepared for the battle of Armageddon in chapter 16, is deflected at last from its execution, and must be content with a call of God to the birds of carrion in chapter 19 to consume the already slain carcasses.

Even more disappointing, the readers of Revelation are excluded from any wielding of the sword. God and the Lamb slay the wicked. All the others who take to the field in battle are excluded from the Holy City. Even the Holy City under siege is delivered by an act of God, not by any efforts by the besieged on their own behalf. Consistent with the rest of the New Testament, the readers are commanded to leave the matters of revenge and retributive justice in the hands of God and the Lamb. In spite of the vivid language against Babylon and the Beast, the book has no place for sanctified slayers or the stockpiling of weapons.

Koresh armed himself with guns and the Word. The government agencies responsible for protecting the rest of us matched his weapons of destruction. But in a wild moment of my own I imagine someone walking into the compound, armed only with the Word. The visitor expresses yet again the teachings of Jesus that forbade any follower of Jesus from taking up the sword to inflict the judgments of God. Surely one of us Adventists, steeped in the language of apocalyptic, could have tried. How do you reason with a madman writing himself into ancient texts? Weapons and a siege didn't work. Why not with prayer and the Word?

Were we Adventists so anxious to save our reputation from the embarrassment of Koresh that we missed an opportunity to save the lives of the children incinerated in the tragedy of Waco? We'll never know because we didn't try but left it up to Caesar's troops.

That standoff is over, but we could still work on resolving another one. This is an exciting time to be a religion teacher in an Adventist school. I find the range and vigor of views on Revelation expressed in Adventist periodicals refreshing. My student colleagues in this course on Revelation sit down with Mervyn Maxwell and Charles Teel. I invite them to listen to Roland Hegstad and Roy Branson, Dwight Nelson and Otilie Stafford, Jonathan Butler and Roger Coon, just to mention a few voices within Adventism that have gone public on how Revelation ought to be read. That's because a college classroom is a place dedicated to a respectful and critical listening to different voices and to searching for the common ground.

What appears up to now to be lacking in this rich and diverse offering is evidence of dialogue. The present collection of views on Waco in this issue of *Spectrum* point in the right direction. I could wish for more. I wonder, do Roy Branson and Roland Hegstad, two Adventist editors who both take Revelation seriously but read it differently, ever talk about the book of Revelation and Adventist prophetic interpretation? I think it would make good copy. I'd love to read it in the *Adventist Review*.

Where in print can we find a single book intended to provide a representative expression of the diversity of interpretation within Adventism? The recent volumes

published by the Biblical Research Institute on the book of Revelation offer the best collective case for a traditional Adventist interpretation of Revelation. Some of the articles are creative. But there's precious little space given to differing points of view. That apparently was not the purpose of the series. Thoughtful members with questions are tempted to dismiss these volumes out of hand.

On the other hand, a widely circulated letter from a contributor to the Biblical Research Institute's volumes excoriated Charles Teel's article on Revelation published in *Spectrum*—an article I invited my students to read along with the Biblical Research Institute's offerings. I'd like to see effort expended to find common ground. Others would prefer debate—I'd even settle for that. Why not a review of the Biblical Research Institute's volumes on Revelation in *Spectrum*? Years ago the now defunct Southern Publishing Association published a volume on perfection, with contributions by Edward Heppenstall, Herbert Douglass, and others. What Adventist publishing house would be willing to follow suit on the interpretation of Revelation?

This is not only an exciting time, but also a dangerous time to be teaching a course on Revelation in an Adventist college. On several North American Adventist campuses, biblical scholars studiously avoid teaching a course on Revela-

tion. If more of the teaching of Revelation and Adventist apocalyptic interpretation is to be done by those with relevant academic training—and I, for one, believe that is a worthwhile objective—those of us who are called upon to do the teaching need help. What college students and other thoughtful young Adventists need are models of public discourse, where the views of others in the church different from our own are treated with respect and are taken seriously.

How we have dealt with our differences over Revelation is symptomatic of the difficulties we Adventists are having dealing with our differences over a wider front. I hope it's not too late for listening to points of view that seem incongruous or antiquated. Perhaps the barriers to understanding and trust are insurmountable. The standoff between those who attend Revelation Seminars and those who boycott them may be unbridgeable. But the Word promises that "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb . . . The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:6-9, RSV). In a wild moment, I imagine. . . .

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