



# The Great Billboard Controversy

by Frank A. Knittel

*Giant billboards attacking the Vatican and advertising The Great Controversy are going up in Orlando, Portland, Denver, and Loma Linda.*

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On Friday, November 20th, 42 billboards began to appear across Orlando, Florida, in the most visually desirable locations. With imposing letters, 21 of the signs demanded, "When Church & State Unite, What Do You Lose?" The other 21 asked, "Just How Secure Is Our Constitution?"

Within the week all 42 billboards were up, and discussion about their mysterious origin was already hitting Orlando talk shows. On Monday, November 30, a new wave of 12 billboards was unveiled—14 feet by 48 feet, the largest in the industry. This second battery of super billboards featured a face photograph of the pope with the question, "Why Is the Vatican Trying to Change Our Constitution?"

About a third of these superboards—still up in Orlando—are devoted to an invitation to buy *The Great Controversy* for \$19.95, Visa and MasterCard welcome. Together with this is an 800 number for the book ordering.

David Mould, leader of Laymen

for Religious Liberty, announced to the world in late 1992, that his group was responsible for the initiation of what may become the most controversial "evangelistic" endeavor related to the Seventh-day Adventist Church yet unveiled in North America. "For clarity and presence this board simply can't be beaten," said Mould. "This was our armor-piercing bomb, calculated to tear consumer inertia to pieces."

In addition to the Orlando campaign, Mould's billboards have appeared in Portland, Oregon, and in Lodi, California. Funds are currently being gathered by those who declare that they will soon have 50 of the superboards in place in the Loma Linda area. Mould has also announced that later this year, when the pope visits Colorado, Laymen for Religious Liberty will put on a massive protest demonstration, that will hopefully draw international attention.

Predictably, when the billboards went up in Orlando, they became the talk of town. The telemarketing company in New York taking the

book orders reported that in the first week of billboard advertising sales of *The Great Controversy* were in "the thousands." The marketing company also revealed to Orlando callers the local telephone number of Laymen for Religious Liberty. A member of the group reported that within a few hours after the number was made public they received "several hundred" calls. Orlando talk shows devoted major airtime to discussion of the matter, and area newspapers devoted news coverage and editorial comments to the topic. Many of the callers were not amused. Neither were most Orlando Adventists.

Florida Adventist Hospital, the world's largest Seventh-day Adventist medical facility, was deluged with calls, mainly from people who simply could not put the advertising together with the impeccable reputation of the church-owned hospital. One switchboard operator reported that immediately after the first billboards were erected she had the busiest days of her memory.

Hospital personnel, stunned by the billboards and the resultant publicity, were hard-pressed to respond properly. Unlike at Waco, there was no General Conference team on hand serving as troubleshooters. A hospital spokesman has stated that most Adventist physicians and nurses were embarrassed and in many cases enraged, and the non-Adventist staff members were variously amazed, perplexed, and angered. In some instances, when members of this second group discovered that *The Great Controversy* is one of the leading books of Adventists, their reaction became downright hostile. Adventist staff physicians and residency students reported that for at least two weeks they constantly fielded questions about their beliefs. Comments and questions

still persist.

Understandably, the officers of the Florida Conference were put in a most awkward position. They did not like the tone of the billboards, yet they could not denounce them in terms of the message, for doing so would take a position relative to Ellen White that would induce tremendously negative fallout from many devout Adventists. Yet these church leaders felt some kind of response was both expected and mandatory.

A special issue of the conference newsletter, *Florida Focus*, attempted to put the matter into some kind of perspective. President Obed Graham commented, "I fear that many of our people have gotten the idea that this is the battle that God has called upon us to fight and if we don't take this hard-line attacking approach, then we must not be willing to take a stand in

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support of our faith."

He did emphatically support *The Great Controversy*, declaring, ". . . the book entitled *The Great Controversy* is being distributed by the thousands, and we praise God for that. The Adventist Book Center carries many different editions for this purpose."

The remainder of the *Focus* was a compilation of statements from Ellen White's writings cautioning church members not to present Adventist beliefs in denunciatory and injudicious manners. Finally, *Focus* was accompanied by a letter to Mould from Paul Dixon, pastor at Portland, Maine, who entitled his letter, "BILLBOARDS ABOUT VATICAN 'RAPE' A CITY." In his letter Dixon asserts, "You have taken a right that is personal, beautiful and meaningful, the discovery of truth, and made it disgusting, even repulsive."

Mould's response to the special edition of *Focus* was a publication containing a compilation of passages from Ellen White declaring that we must boldly preach the "truth." Typical of his selections is the one from *The Great Controversy*, p. 566:

"Men are closing their eyes to the real character of Romanism, and the dangers to be apprehended from her supremacy. The people need to be aroused to *resist* [italics, sic] the advances of this most dangerous foe to civil and religious liberty."

And, of course, the statements on the billboards do come directly from *The Great Controversy*.

Mould went on to claim that, "While the Florida Conference religious liberty leader was clearly less than enthusiastic, within days his counterpart at the Southeastern Conference [the Florida conference for black members] had not only

favorably mentioned our campaign in his Wednesday night study of *The Great Controversy*, but had also agreed to have Laymen for Religious Liberty host the religious liberty program at his church, the Mt. Sinai SDA Church, on January 23rd."

Who is David Mould, and who are the Laymen for Religious Liberty? Mould originally came from one of the Caribbean islands, and a few years ago developed a prison ministry under the title of "Jesus Behind Bars." For a time, he received moral and financial support from the General Conference, but according to General Conference sources, the relationship soured, and corporate church funds to support Mould's prison program are no longer provided. Mould also founded the Laymen for Religious Liberty organization. It has no generic connection with or financial support from the corporate church.

Mould has recently been joined by Webster Barnaby, also from a Caribbean island, and a former member of The Church of the God of Prophecy. Barnaby was drawn to Mould through the Orlando billboard campaign and according to Mould "kept his first Sabbath on January 2nd." The two, working together as leaders of Laymen for Religious Liberty, are regular members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and very firmly support its beliefs.

The activities of Laymen for Religious Liberty have driven the church into a most awkward position at a most crucial crossroad, coming as it does on the heels of Waco. Because of what has been written by Ellen White, Adventists have been conditioned to believe that the Sabbath is the first and foremost truth of the Scriptures because it will be the

last great test before the end of the present world. Moreover, that test will be precipitated by actions of the combined powers of apostate Protestantism, spiritualism, and the Papacy. Obviously, then, if that is the truth, we must not hesitate to preach it. We must not hide our beliefs under a bushel basket. Consequently, our public evangelism crusades have been traditionally built around the beasts in Daniel and Revelation, as have our popular Revelation Seminars. The full-page newspaper spreads that Mould sponsors in Orlando, together with his public promise of future activity, is certainly a way to come out from under the bushel.

The Laymen for Religious Liberty assert that we cannot denounce what they are doing while at the same time supporting our belief in what has been tradition-

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ally declared a pivotal teaching of our church. And if that belief is truly to be preached throughout the world, we cannot condemn the startling events in Florida. We cannot distance ourselves from something we emphatically declare is a vital truth for the last days. Nor can we water down a crucial message in order to save embarrassment.

## What Are the Church's Options?

First, we could give Laymen for Religious Liberty massive financial support so that it can blanket North America with Orlando-type superboards. Such a move, we could say, would do much to hasten the coming of the Lord.

The General Conference is in a difficult position to criticize taking such an option. The church world headquarters is energetically promoting a volume every bit as reactionary as Mould's billboards: Clifford Goldstein's recent book, *Day of the Dragon*. It has been glowingly advertised as a critical message for our times by the Adventist Book Centers, and is a hot item in its current camp meeting sales. Our church leaders are hardly in a position to denounce Mould while promoting his modern "loud cry" from our own press. In fact, at this juncture, we are tacitly saying what Mould says, but apparently hoping it will not draw attention from the world about us.

A second option is to do nothing to discourage Laymen for Religious Liberty—but to provide them no material means to assist their cause. The Laymen for Religious Liberty thus will continue as an entity independent of corporate church structure or control, but one at least tacitly approved by the church. Without the church's fi-

nancial support, the wish goes, at least the billboard project will fail.

A third option is to take a serious look at the entire issue of Ellen White's inspiration. As a church we have never yet formed a definitive position relative to revelation found in her writings as differentiated from her devotional messages. This third option, of course, would require massive re-education of church leadership, church ministry, and laity.

A first step in following this third option would be to admit openly that nowhere in *The Great Controversy* does the author ever declare that all in that book is revelational. A second step would have to be open admission that except for the Sabbath issues, most of the ideas in the book represent attitudes commonly held by Protestant churches of the 19th century. Even that oft-quoted passage on page 588—that in the time of the end apostate Protestantism would grasp the hand of spiritualism and the two of them would reach across the abyss and join with the Papacy in the persecution of God's people—was first penned by someone else.

The third step—and the most

problematic—would be to openly acknowledge that the Scriptures—not the writings of Ellen White—are the source of doctrine for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A critical mass of Adventists—including ministers and other church leaders—agree that Ellen White is fallible, but there has been a reluctance to express this conviction openly.

This third option would force us to say that *The Great Controversy*, including specific teaching relative to last-day events, represents the conviction of its author, who might have written otherwise today. Such a position would seriously trouble those who have been conditioned to believe that while Ellen White's writings may be a lesser light than the Bible, they are *all* still sacred in a revelational way.

While many rank-and-file Adventists would be troubled by the suggestion to downplay *The Great Controversy* in evangelism, it is the most honest approach we can take. By doing so, we can honestly refute the Orlando billboard proclamations and declare faithfully that our message to the world is based

upon the Bible and Bible only, that its thesis is Jesus Christ and him crucified. Our central message for these last days need not be defamation of or propagation against the Papacy, any more than it should be a message to Protestant non-Adventists that their churches have apostatized and therefore are hell-bent.

Clearly, the billboard issue must be addressed—and quickly. It must be recognized that Mould has followers and supporters to sponsor his lavish advertising. He claims that if his plans for the future materialize, he has assurance of even greater continuing support. The officers of our corporate church must come to terms with the problem of dealing with an in-church group which proposes no “new light,” but wants to preach the old light more energetically than is deemed productive. If his plans for the future are at all realistic, polarization within North American Adventism is inevitable.

But surely collective reasoning within our church can avert chaos at a time when Americans are already wondering, in the wake of the Waco disaster, about the spiritual integrity of Seventh-day Adventists.