

What's in a Name?

Reflections on the Advertising Campaign
of the Eternal Gospel Church

by Pastor Tom O'Hanley (a pseudonym)

It was one of my church leaders who called to let me know that a group identifying itself as the Eternal Gospel Church of Seventh-day Adventists, of West Palm Beach, Florida, had put a full-page advertisement in our local weekend paper. With garish line drawings and screaming capital letters, the advertisement identified the pope as the Beast of Revelation thirteen and targeted Roman Catholics and non-SDA Protestants as the source of future persecution for keepers of the Saturday Sabbath.

"Did they say anything contrary to Adventist doctrine?" I asked.

"Well," a long pause followed, "it wasn't so much what they said as how they said it."

This was the first of many times I would hear that phrase. In all of my conversations about this advertisement no one dealt face on with the issue of whether what the ad said was true in any significant way.

The boilerplate letter that came from the union office, signed by my conference president and ultimately published in our newspaper, skirted the issue. "The Eternal Gospel Church is not affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church," said the letter. Far from being religious bigots, we real Seventh-day Adventists "cooperate with other religious organizations." Our "Adventist Development and Relief Agency works with the United Nations against world hunger, and Adventist Community Services joins with the Red Cross, the Salvation Army,

EARTH'S FINAL WARNING

CHAOS AWAITS MAJOR CITIES...RESULTING IN THE ENFORCEMENT OF A NATIONAL SUNDAY LAW--LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE DENIED

Apocalypse and National Rise. When the Protestant churches shall unite with the papacy... When the churches shall see its power to enforce the decrees and maintain the sanctities of the Sabbath... Protestant America have formed an alliance in the nations, and there will be a powerful society which will end only in national ruin.

History Will Be Rewritten. Truth and precision will come to all who, in obedience to the Word of God, refuse to worship this false Sabbath. There is the last record of every false religion (27 May 1888). Seventh-day Adventists Bible Commentary, Vol. 7, page 976.

WHO IS THE BEAST, THE DRAGON, AND THE WOMAN?
In prophetic language, the system of a woman represents a church, as we find in Jeremiah 1:12 or Ezekiel 1:24-27. Also in the book of Revelation, a man is described as, in the spirit of a woman, a man and only child of Christ, who "wears the commendation of God and has the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 12:1, 13:17, 14:13). The same book of Revelation describes another "woman" that is not of Christ, it is a vain, arrogant and persecuting church as we will see.

REVELATION CHAPTER I
(1) And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and said unto me, Come hither, and I will show thee the judgment of the great city. (2) The great city, which is called Sodom and Egypt, where their angels do worship devils, and the uncircumcised Jews, and the Gentiles. (3) And I heard the voice of many waters, saying, Woe to them that drink of the waters of the fountain of the polluted waters! (4) And the woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden harp, and sung sweetly, and her garments were adorned with gold and pearls and precious stones.

"They are not in an error to destroy the law, or the prophets. I was not come to destroy, but to fulfill." (Matthew 23:2)

"For surely I say unto you, The heaven and earth shall pass, but my word shall not pass away from the law, till all be fulfilled." (Matthew 23:3)

"The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27)

"And that day was the Preparation day and the Sabbath came on. And the women also, which were with Him from Galilee, followed also, and toiled the preparation, and how His body was laid, and they returned and prepared spices and ointments, and rested the Sabbath day according to the commandments." (Luke 24:1-8)

"And Paul, as his manner was, went in each town, and there he preached in the synagogues, and persuaded the Jews and the Gentiles." (Acts 17:18)

"And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and said unto me, Come hither, and I will show thee the judgment of the great city." (Revelation 18:1)

"And I heard the voice of many waters, saying, Woe to them that drink of the waters of the fountain of the polluted waters!" (Revelation 17:6)

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The woman in the Bible is a symbol of the church, as we find in Revelation 17:1-6. She is described as a woman dressed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and precious stones, and having a golden harp. She is the great city, which is called Sodom and Egypt, where their angels do worship devils, and the uncircumcised Jews, and the Gentiles.

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This full-page ad, placed in USA Today, The Washington Times, and other major newspapers by the Eternal Gospel Church of Seventh-day Adventists, elicited strong reactions from Adventists and Catholics alike. It was the catalyst for legal action the Seventh-day Adventist Church took against the Eternal Gospel Church for the use of "Seventh-day Adventist" in its name.

Catholic Charities and other organizations to provide help in time of disaster. Adventist health-care institutions provide medical services to all people, regardless of religion, race," and so forth.

In other words, we're nice folks who actually help lots of people. But is an accusation about future evil actions of Roman Catholic Church leaders at the heart of our worldview? Do we Seventh-day Adventists actually believe, without having to play word games, that the Saturday Sabbath will be the final and only seal of true Christianity and that those who worship on Sunday—no matter how sincerely—are marked by Satan and will mercilessly persecute us? I prayed that no one would ask me those questions.

I didn't completely hide my feelings. I was angry and embarrassed. Angry at being blindsided by a group that used my church's name but did not live and work in my community. Embarrassed because of how

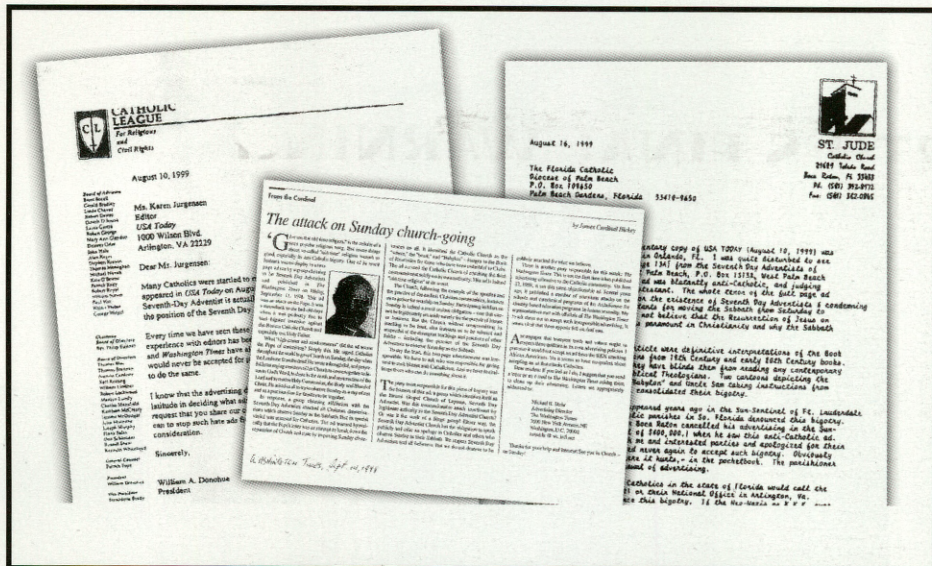
that group made its statement and what it said. When the religion editor of the paper called me, I told him, "What this group says is not what Seventh-day Adventists believe."

That was, of course, not entirely the truth, as one traditional church member pointed out to me in an angry letter. "Exactly what did that ad say that wasn't in *The Great Controversy*?" she asked.

What, indeed? There was nothing in the ad that I hadn't heard at the evangelistic meetings of my childhood.

The Difficulty of Adventist Eschatology

I am forced to admit that in my heart I no longer find myself enthusiastic about the traditional Seventh-day



Material: John Nicolici

Those who reacted to the ad included Cardinal James Hickey, who called on the Seventh-day Adventist Church to offer an apology to Catholics and other Sunday-keepers (*Washington Times*, Sept. 14, 1998). The president of the Catholic league for Religious and Civil Rights wrote to newspapers to protest what he called “anti-Catholic” ads (letter dated Aug. 10, 1999). The General Conference demanded that the Eternal Gospel Church discontinue using the designation “Seventh-day Adventist” and threatened legal action.



Photo: John Nicolici

From left: Robert Nixon, Walter Carson, and Vincent Ramik. Ramik along with Jeffrey Tew represented the Seventh-day Adventist Church in court. Nixon and Carson, General Counsel of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, were in attendance on behalf of the plaintiff.

Adventist eschatology with which I grew up. I find it neither spiritually useful to me nor of much pastoral utility. Please note that I am not saying Seventh-day Adventist eschatology is “untrue,” nor that it will prove to be an accurate description of the future (though it has not, in my view, described very much

the point, however: Whatever the character of developing nineteenth-century Adventism, there is in fact a standard Seventh-day Adventist theology and eschatology that has been accepted as orthodox throughout most of the twentieth century.

More to the point, our official eschatology has

that has happened in the past 150 years.)

There are spiritual principles in our eschatology that I find helpful. I do want Jesus to come, and I hope he comes soon. Along with *The Great Controversy*, I recognize the danger when religion and government cross wires. Though I have not experienced it myself, the threat of religious persecution is something against which we should always be on guard. I am proud of my church for taking a lead in defending religious liberty. Were the pope to exercise a liberty threatening influence in world government, I would be very concerned. Yet I am very much aware that official Adventist eschatology, which proceeds from our acceptance of the Spirit of Prophecy, is far, far more specific. My personal version is a much-too-weak brew by official standards. It would not stand the scrutiny of a church inquisition that asked me, “Do you, or do you not, believe that Ellen G. White’s eschatology in the *Great Controversy* is a precise description of what will happen at the end of time?”

Some have argued that historical Adventist theology was sufficiently fluid to preclude us being locked into only one understanding.¹ That argument misses

been without major variation since the final revision of *The Great Controversy*. Yet the old eschatology is seldom heard in progressive pulpits nowadays. Even our evangelists (note Dwight Nelson's highly successful Last Millennium seminar in 1998) finesse these ideas to the point that veteran *Great Controversy* students could hardly recognize them. As a result, some younger church members have said to me (not unlike what I said to my local newspaper) "Those are old ideas that aren't held by our church any longer."

I have asked those who argue this point with me simply to go back and read *The Great Controversy*. They are often shocked to discover that all of the themes they thought archaic whims of long-ago evangelists (Sunday laws, the exclusive salvation of Sabbath-keepers, the silent close of probation, persecution of Seventh-day Adventists at the hands of Roman Catholics and allied Protestants, and the alliance of other Christians with spiritualism) are there in perfect detail; not a jot or tittle has ever been renounced by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

One negative effect of *The Great Controversy's* eschatology can be heard in conversations with church members who lived through the era when the traditional perspective was frequently voiced. Many Seventh-day Adventists born and raised in the Church tell stories about the utter terror they felt as children when they heard about the time of trouble, the Mark of the Beast, and the close of probation. When they speak candidly, many admit that these fears have haunted them throughout their lives. Although these themes still seem to have a certain perverse appeal to a few who seem to thrill in response to such narratives, others have left the Church because they couldn't live with the fear. (Such fear may also explain why some members so quickly seem to forget such eschatological themes when pastors stop mentioning them.)

More importantly, it has been over 150 years since we began to tell people that Jesus was coming soon ("soon" meaning as soon as next year, or at least in the next decade) and encouraging them to live in constant anticipation. Yet it has become increasingly harder to maintain the urgency as the decades have



Robert Pershes (left) defended the Eternal Gospel Church on behalf of Pastor Raphael Perez (right).

Photo: John Nicolici

passed. As blue laws have fallen by the wayside and legal protection for religious beliefs has actually improved in the United States, we have had to work harder and harder to find potential new threats. A Roman Catholic president, the Ecumenical Movement, the Religious Right, New Age religions, evangelical Protestant-Roman Catholic détente—each has had its day in the sun as the latest prophecy-fulfilling threat. We have now left the twentieth century and even the seventh millennialists have passed their most significant psychological marker.

Early in my ministry I took an evangelism training course in which the teacher said that Adventist eschatology was important because it constituted our most compelling evangelistic argument. In the traditional evangelistic scheme, he pointed out, the Church's eschatology is a powerful incentive for non-SDAs to accept our message. Inasmuch as eschatology forms the matrix for all our teachings, it defines Seventh-day Adventists' Christianity, sets it apart from others, and gives us a reason to call others out of their churches to join ours.

Yet my own attempts to prove this true have been disappointing. Many of those I have brought into the Church by means of the traditional eschatology-heavy catechism simply have not adjusted well to church life. In my evangelistic efforts, I would raise their enthusiasm for the impending crisis and cultivate paranoia toward other Christians. However, these new Adventists have often lost interest after finding out that most folks in the everyday life of the Seventh-day Adventist Church do not live in a con-



On April 27, 2000, a Florida court ruled in favor of the plaintiff, ordering the Eternal Gospel Church to refrain from using the designation "Seventh-day Adventist," the acronym "SDA," or any similar words. The case was appealed by the Eternal Gospel Church and finally settled in court-ordered mediation.

Photo: John Nicolici

relevant points come to my mind in relation to these questions.

First, I find myself doubtful of the claim from at least some of those who objected to the ad that they were merely concerned about how its message was presented. The reaction was deep embarrassment—embarrassment that far exceeded that required for a simple case of inadequate tact. Although few could see their way clear to say, "I simply don't believe that any longer," the reaction from many was visceral. Only one person out of hundreds of Adventists who read my words in the local paper

stant state of crisis, that Adventists invest money in churches and schools, and that we continue to put our time into ongoing church programming and long-term relationships as though we plan to be here for another century.

How They Said It

The problem was not that the Eternal Gospel Church's ad did not speak for Seventh-day Adventists. What the ad presented, amateurish as it was, was reasonably close to orthodox Seventh-day Adventist eschatology. However, the message in the advertisement didn't speak for me—or apparently for many of my friends and church members.

Noting this, I occasionally (I confess, out of sheer orneriness and some curiosity) pressed the point. "But isn't this exactly what *The Great Controversy* says? Isn't this what our evangelists have always taught us?"

"It isn't what the ad said," I would hear again, "it's how the Eternal Gospel Church said it."

It is this statement of the situation, as it arose in response to the ad, that deserves some rethinking. If the ideas in *The Great Controversy* are deeply meaningful to us, why do we hesitate to express them? If they are true, why are we embarrassed when they are said aloud? And if we feel they are neither true nor meaningful, are we not compelled to rethink them? Two

objected when I completely disassociated the denomination from the advertisement.

Second, I believe we should ask ourselves whether our eschatology is still in harmony with the gospel message. One of my colleagues told the paper's religion reporter, "The things in this advertisement are advanced Adventist theology (what you would get into in a college course) not what people need to know for everyday Christian living." He went on to reiterate that we Adventists are actually quite nice people, that we love everyone, follow the Bible, and preach the gospel. But his remarks left me wondering if we are fair to conceal such a potent secret. Should the meat of the word, the advanced theology, be so fundamentally at odds with what we say to folks at first?

While I was once doing premarital counseling with a couple, a potential groom privately admitted to me that he had several significant secrets that he hadn't told his bride-to-be. "Why should I tell her these difficult and potentially damaging things up front?" he asked. "By the time she finds out, we'll be married, she'll be more deeply in love with me and more able to understand me." I found his logic flawed. He was presenting himself as something he was not. The way he presented himself in courtship was deeply at odds with what his wife would later discover about him as a husband, and I refused to assist him in keeping his secrets.

Ultimately, those who join the Seventh-day

Adventist Church will need to discover that the very eschatology that now seems to embarrass some of us is in fact a foundational narrative of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although they hear grace preached from our pulpits, ultimately they must learn that we possess a set of darker, more sinister beliefs.

The Nutty Relatives

Another attempt we all (locally, and with the denomination's administrative bodies) made to minimize damage from the ad was to say that the Eternal Gospel Church of Seventh-day Adventists was merely a fanatic offshoot. This is true, as far as it goes. The Eternal Gospel Church is not an official congregation of the denomination, and I suspect (though I don't know) that there are other characteristics that distinguish it apart from its illegal use of the Seventh-day Adventist copyrighted name and a penchant for blunt advertising.

A few years ago, while I was participating in a ministerial support group with pastors of many denominations, the crisis in the Waco compound came to a head. As I arrived at my group one day, several clergy asked me, "These Waco folks are Seventh-day Adventists, aren't they?"

"Of course not," I protested. "They are an independent group, not connected to us." The clergy dropped the subject, fortunately, and I didn't have to tell them that Koresh and his people were students of Ellen G. White, just as I was, that they had been Seventh-day Adventists, and that some still were.

By the convenient subterfuge of pointing out that they didn't have an official connection to our church, I managed to put the other questions aside. The General Conference, I soon discovered, assumed a similar "We don't know them" attitude. We got away with it that time. And I suspect I got away with it in my city, too, in the latest flap with the Eternal Gospel Church.

So why not leave things as they are? In order not to cause controversy, let these hard teachings remain the official eschatology of the Church, and let those who will, teach them, while pastors and congregations like mine will simply leave them to languish, and skirt the issue in public. One reason not to follow this course is that sooner or later we will be found out. We will be forced out of the closet by folks like the Eternal Gospel Church of Seventh-day Adventists.

More important, though, if we don't confront

our embarrassing secrets, we leave a fundamental unsoundness in our church personality. Though we don't say it, and in fact might even publicly deny it (as I did), we know that a deep suspicion of virtually all other Christians lies at the heart of who we are. One never works out those demons by keeping them secret, by pretending that they never were us. In fact, they were, and in many parts of the Church, still are, us, just as David Koresh and his followers were. There is little to be gained by pretending that the nutty relatives aren't really our relatives, nor for that matter that now-unpopular ideas never were ours, when we know they were, and in fact continue to be a significant segment of the Church.

Perhaps the Eternal Gospel Church of Seventh-day Adventists is actually doing us something of a favor by forcing us to remember and to rethink ourselves. I believe in the large principles of *The Great Controversy*: that Jesus may soon come, and in the meantime we must be alert to threats to liberty and stand firm for our faith in Christ. But given the widespread embarrassment that results in North America when the specific narrative is voiced aloud, perhaps someone needs to decide when we have reached the point where we can say, "Blaming Roman Catholics as potential persecutors, frightening our children with stories of the time of trouble and the close of probation, accusing other Christians of complicity with Satan because of their day of worship—these things represent a religious reality of a century ago. They no longer represent who we are, or what we live our Christian lives in expectation of."

When will someone in authority—someone among those church leaders and scholars who roll their eyes when we converse about the Eternal Gospel Church of Seventh-day Adventists—show that kind of courage?²

Notes and References

1. See, for example, George R. Knight, "The Church and Change," *Adventist Review*, Dec. 30, 1999, 22-25. All of Knight's examples of the church's flexibility happened before 1900.

2. A recent court decision has prohibited the Eternal Gospel Church from continuing to use the Seventh-day Adventist Church's name.