

NOTEWORTHY



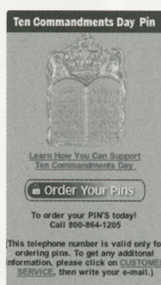
Adventist Media Finds Bizarre Bedfellow for Ten Commandments Day

By Alexander Carpenter

On May 6 and 7, Adventist media—including 3ABN, Hope Channel, and Amazing Facts—teamed up with Ron Wexler and a group of right-wing religious broadcasters such as Pat Robertson to restore the Ten Commandments' role in American public life. More than 3.2 million dollars were spent just by 3ABN and ASI, hundreds of thousands of books were printed, and more than seventeen hours were broadcast during the weekend. What was behind all this and who is Ron Wexler?

In late 2005, Ron Wexler (a developer of Israeli real estate for right-wing Christians) and Pastor Myles Munroe (Bahamas Faith Ministry International—a Pentecostal organization) formed the Ten Commandments Commission. Their stated objective was to elevate the importance of the Ten Commandments by placing monuments, plaques, and symbols throughout North America. Originally, the commission had settled on February 5 as Ten Commandments Day.

Something happened and Munroe was removed from the leadership. Blackie Gonzales (Son Broadcasting, a couple of VHF stations in New Mexico) replaced him as chairman of



the Ten Commandments Commission board of directors. The main focus of the Ten Commandments Day is the promotion of little fake gold pins in the shape of the Decalogue that allow people to show their commitment to God's law. Several videos on the Ten Commandments Web site encourage people to purchase these pins for \$14.99 each, plus \$6.95 shipping.

According to Wexler, an orthodox Jew, as interest grew, the Ten Commandments Day was moved back three months to Sunday, May 7, 2006. Wexler says: "We literally have not been able to keep up with the incredible response we've gotten over the last few weeks for our Ten Commandments Pins."¹

Some folks at Daily Kos think the whole thing is an attempt to make money. As Tatarize points out:

It is worth \$14.95, right? Wait, at the bottom of the page there is a distributor's link for the wholesale price... \$5.50. That's a 270% markup. Then they want \$6.95 for shipping USPS Media Mail which actually costs \$2 for a package that size.²

Didn't Moses smash the Ten Commandments? What was that

over? Oh yeah, religious leaders and people celebrating a golden religious icon.

And some folks in the world of Adventist media jumped on this bandwagon.

Not only have some publicized the proclamation itself, Pacific Press and Signs of the Times; 3ABN, Hope Channel, and Mark Finley have published related books. In addition, Amazing Facts has a Ten Commandments bookmark, and the North American Religious Liberty Association offers a Ten Commandments CD.

During the three-hour special on the denomination's Hope Channel, Pastor Brad Thorp and Gary Gibbs, president and vice-president, hosted Ron Wexler and Blackie Gonzales. During the interview, Wexler shared the usual restorationist shibboleths about how weather and homosexuals are running amuck because the Ten Commandments aren't in certain courthouses. Along these lines, Hope collected thousands of petitions from Adventist churches.

Wexler provides further "reason" to restore the Ten Commandments (and buy his pin).

As the fury of Hurricane Rita is about to hit the shores of Texas just 3 weeks after the disaster left Katrina, people of faith must be wondering...it

was revealed to me that in numerology, the numerical value of the Hebrew letters that make up the name Rita + God is equal to 620. The number of all the Hebrew letters that make up the Ten Commandments is...620! Is there a connection?³

What? Why is the Adventist Church advertising this guy's agenda?

Well, what became of all this? According to the *Washington Post*, many Adventists are wondering, as well. Apparently, there are a lot of books left over.

Meanwhile, conservative Adventists dutifully wonder in a chat room where the "first day" folks were when it was time to spread the word about the Ten Commandments.⁴

Or was it all about making a buck?

According to Alan Reinach, head of the North America Religious Liberty Association-West, it all "turned out to be largely a non-event."⁵

Were we used by Ron Wexler? Who spearheaded the Church's coordinated jump onto this bizarre bandwagon? Was the Ten Commandments Commission just an attempt to make money off of pin sales?

Perhaps this will help: This is what Ron Wexler was doing before he created the Ten Commandments Day. He also heads Heritage Study Incorporated, which is registered as a 501c (3) in Boca Raton, Florida. On December 8, 2005, the Federal Bureau of Investigation filed a criminal complaint in Florida that shows how Wexler teamed up with a husband and wife pyramid scheme that defrauded people of more than six million dollars. Wexler and his partner lost six hundred thousand dollars.

Notes and References

1. Project Restore Web site, <www.projectrestore.com/trumpet/tpt2006_03.htm>.

2. Daily Kos, <www.dailykos.com/story/2006/4/21/103432/682>.

3. J. Grant Swank, Jr., "Ten Commandments Commission President Holds Out Hope," <mensnewsdaily.com/blog/swank/2005/09/ten-commandments-commission-president.html>

4. RevivalSermons.org Discussion Forums, <www.revivalsermons.org/forums/index.php?topic=1068.0>

5. Alan Reinach, "Some Thoughts on the First Annual Ten Commandments Day," <www.churchstate.org/article.php?id=153>.

Alexander Carpenter, a graduate student at the General Theological Union in Berkeley, California, is a regular contributor to *Spectrum* magazine. This article originally appeared on *Spectrum's* Web site at www.spectrummagazine.org/weblog/060602blogosphere.html

Hundred-Dollar Assassins

By Basim Fargo, Kjell Aune, and Valerie Fidelia, MEU/TED News

Bagdad, Iraq — "Killings in Iraq are becoming more and more common," according to a report by the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Iraq, Basim Fargo. "A man could hire an assassin for as little as a hundred dollars. Human life is so cheap in Iraq today, but in the eyes of God it is so precious," says Pastor Fargo. He observes, "The indiscriminate killing of people used to be by the tens every day, but now people are killed by the hundreds."

"Many of our members have left the country, but some still come to church every Sabbath to worship the Lord. Our local leaders feel they have a job to do and attend to their

challenging tasks under very difficult conditions. They count on God being with them," says Pastor Fargo.

Valerie Fidelia, women's ministries leader in the Middle East describes the activities of one vital ministry provided by the church in Iraq. "Despite the extremely tense situation in Iraq the women of Baghdad Adventist Church are still active. During the months of April, May and June they report that two people have come back to the Lord through their work. They have also managed to give five Bible studies in spite of the fact that travel throughout the city is very dangerous." A special day of prayer was also held.

"As the news focuses away from Iraq and concentrates more on Lebanon, we ask that you do not forget our courageous sisters in Iraq who do not know when they wake in the morning if they will still be alive by nightfall," urges Mrs Fidelia.

Besides random killings, kidnapping is also a big problem and explosions take place almost everywhere. Electricity is supplied only 2-4 hours daily. Many people are without employment and food for the family is a daily issue. "Material and spiritual support is much needed," says Dr Kjell Aune, president of the Adventist church in the Middle East Region. "Don't forget our members in the war-torn country of Iraq. Pray for their courage, safety and basic needs."

Dr Aune urges people of all faiths to pray for the situation that has currently arisen in Lebanon. "May God intervene and ensure stability in the region, may our members and employees not lose their hope and faith, and may the Church be kept strong and faithful."

The A.T.S. Throws a Great Party

By Robert M. Johnston

The nice tote bag issued to participants in the Second International Bible Conference (July 7–17, 2006) indicated that the gathering was sponsored jointly by the Adventist Theological Society (A.T.S.), the Biblical Research Institute (B.R.I.), and the Horn Archaeological Museum. The staff of the B.R.I. serves as the arm of the A.T.S. which functions as an organ of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Adventist Theological Society members also staff the Horn Museum, so it would not be wrong to consider this conference completely an A.T.S. affair.

The meeting, which cost more than \$250,000, was financed through the A.T.S. with the help of a generous donor and contributions from the General Conference and the North American Division. The B.R.I. staff was responsible for organization and logistics, which they handled very well. The Horn Museum planned the tours that were part of the program. Among other things, the tote bag included an attractively printed Program Book and Tour Book, which contained explanations of the sites of the Seven Churches of Revelation 1–3 and Patmos.

The some 250 participants were not by any means all A.T.S. members, but the group included people sent by their divisions from all over the world, as well as people like me, who happened somehow to find out about the conference and were able to pay their own way to Turkey. Of course, it was intended for the theologians and scholars of the Church, but almost all the top officers of the

General Conference attended. Those of us not of the A.T.S. were given a friendly welcome.

The venue, the Sürmeli resort hotel on the shore of the Aegean Sea, was spectacular. It stands not far from ancient Ephesus, south of the Turkish city of Izmir (ancient Smyrna). Food and service were outstanding. The theme of the conference was ecclesiology, “The Adventist Theologian and the Nature, Mission, and Unity of the Church,” but conference organizers defined the boundaries of the topic very generously.

The conference was carefully structured, but not oppressively so. The two Sabbaths included worship and lectures. Three of the other days were also given over to lectures, as I will explain, and the conference devoted five days to visiting archaeological sites and the Island of Patmos. When we toured, we filled five large buses, each of which had a tour guide. The tours were excellent.

General Conference president Jan Paulsen delivered the first Sabbath sermon and made an unscheduled presentation just prior to his early departure. In the latter session, he appealed for goodwill and dialogue between the two Adventist theological societies. As we have learned to expect, what he said was thoughtful and balanced. Vice President Ted Wilson preached on the second Sabbath, calling on all to stand against the “Mars Hill of secularism, pluralism, higher criticism, fuzzy theology, ambiguity,” and other such annoyances.

Each morning, Mark Finley presented a devotional, each based on the messages to the Seven Churches. These were genuinely helpful. Finley came across to me as one evangelist who really likes to learn and knows how to use what he learns.

I perceived that the heart of the lecture component of the conference was intended to be the plenary sessions. Besides the two Sabbath speakers, the plenary session speakers were (in order) Angel Rodríguez, Jiri Moskala, Roberto Badenas, Ekkehard Müller, Gordon Christo, Kwabena Donkor, Richard Davidson, Edward Zinke, Gerhard Pfandl, and Larry Lichtenwalter. The speakers were carefully chosen and their papers thoroughly vetted.

I would have to describe the majority of these presentations as reactionary, defensive, rigid, and quite predictable, in both tone and substance. Presenters apparently devoted a disproportionate amount of the time and effort into getting them into Power Point, for the presentations showed a disinclination to explore the topics broadly and deeply or to acknowledge difficulties in the positions they affirmed. Some time was allowed for questions and comments at the end, but time constraints limited these to sound bites. I felt it would have been more helpful to have a format that ensured sustained dialogue, especially between scholars who express contrasting views.

The breakout sessions contrasted sharply. There, presenters read papers for twenty to twenty-five minutes and then fielded responses from the audience. One had to choose among five simultaneous papers at a time, from a total of seventy-five. Anyone who had submitted an abstract was put on the schedule, including even me. These papers were not vetted ahead of time, and judging from the abstracts and the presentations I heard, there had been no attempt at censorship, and contrasting views were represented.

Some of the papers were adven-

turous or even revolutionary. A few plowed new ground and even pointed toward a theological paradigm shift. I wished I could have heard more. The only woman who presented alone was Cyndi Tutsch, from the White Estate, but there was a presentation by the husband and wife team of Jonathan and Kathleen Kuntaraf.

On the last Sabbath afternoon, all attendees gathered to hear and vote for a "Consensus Statement." A committee was handpicked earlier to draw up this document, which was basically a brief summation of plenary session presentations. There was really no reason why it could not have been prepared before the conference began. The whole group of participants discussed the document part-by-part and indicated its approval with a show of hands.

If only a minority disapproved of the wording of a section it was deemed to represent a consensus! Finally, the group voted on the whole. I realize that getting a consensus from such a large group would have been a minor miracle, but why was it so important that it be called a "consensus"? It is true that in the end no one voted against the statement, but the degree of manipulation and intimidation used to achieve this result left a bad taste in many mouths.

One of the stated purposes of the conference was the promotion of unity among Adventist theologians. Perhaps the thing that most contributed to such a result was the fellowship. Eating, traveling, and networking with fellow Adventists of differing flavors was a happy experience. We discovered that the Others who think differently are not necessarily evil and that we have a lot in common after all.

It was in this informal way that

some sustained dialogue occurred, to the frustration of dining room personnel patiently waiting to clear the tables. Politeness forbade much frank grappling with the issues that hovered in the backs of our minds, but this conference was a beginning. In the future, I hope there will be similar occasions in which the Adventist theological community will be more broadly represented and the formal dialogue freer and more sustained. It will please the Lord.

The conference was a great party, and I thank the A.T.S. for letting me go and even present a paper. I am glad I went.

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Loma Linda Researchers Help Save Endangered Turtles

By Patricia Thio

Source: *Adventist News Network*

Larry and Carol Stevenson may not have planned to become advocates for endangered sea turtles. But, in 2004, they realized many endangered sea turtles were being harvested for consumption from the waters around Roatan in the Bay Islands of Honduras. So they struck a bargain with local fishermen to "reclaim" as many turtles as they could and return them to the inshore waters of the island.

The deal was not without cost though, and the family now spends significant funds on the purchase of turtles, a steady supply of food for the animals, and valuable work time in maintaining a protected area for the turtles to be temporarily housed.

With the help of their daughter, Ashley, and son-in-law, Barry Kennewell, they own and operate the Reef House Resort on Roatan. Their desire to give back, both to the local community and to the



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Stephen Dunbar, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Earth and Biological Sciences, marks a green turtle for later identification in Roatan.

marine environment from which they make their living makes them different from other resort owners.

It was more than accidental that the Stevensons offered to provide dive support to Stephen G. Dunbar, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the department of earth and biological sciences at Loma Linda University (LLU), and his graduate students, April Sjoboen and Viren Perumal, in October 2005. At that time, Dr. Dunbar and his students were in Honduras conducting rapid assessments of Roatan's marine life for a project funded by USAID.

"Hurricane Wilma had whipped up the waters around most of the island, but Larry Stevenson kept saying, 'It's calm over where we are—why don't you come dive with us?'" Dr. Dunbar recalls.

During that trip, Mr. Stevenson asked Dr. Dunbar if he would be interested in doing some work with

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