



## Screwtape's Nightmare

*Mind if I shout?* | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Before the Holy Spirit drew me back into Hope, I thought we'd slipped into a rut too deep to escape. Trevan Osborn's report of his summer evangelism experience, recorded on the *Spectrum Blog* and then in the previous issue of this magazine, read like a Screwtape success story.

I can just imagine C. S. Lewis's Evil Angel confiding to Wormwood, his nephew: "There is no need to make our enemies, the Adventists, recant their faith. Just make sure they're afraid of their minds—afraid to think because thinking is too hard and too hazardous. Dupe them into believing their Adventism, like some widget from the factory, is finished, and their beliefs, down to the last detail, just fine the way they are, permanent as steel. Then create a climate of inquisitorial orthodoxy—overseers monitoring what people think so no one will stray from convention, and everyone else cowed into cynicism or feckless routine...or both."

In my mind's eye, Screwtape titters at his own ingenuity.

What did Trevan Osborn say? The evangelistic experience was part of his ministerial training, he explained, and took place in and around a YMCA gym in the Hunter's Point area of San Francisco, where residents deal regularly with drugs, violence, and poverty, not to mention relationships gone bad.

The evangelist used a series of canned "PowerPoint sermons," and began by addressing what Osborn called "tough topics," topics, that is, that even Adventist young people "don't care" about, let alone teenagers "just hanging out in the streets." The first night, for example, he

advised some one hundred listeners about what happens at world's end to the wicked and the righteous, and spent "extended time...debunking the rapture theory." Sermons on the "twenty-three hundred days" and the "Mark of the Beast" followed. Nor did the evangelist fail to address "speaking in tongues."

Osborn, who has become a pastor in Virginia, said the focus on how the world will end, and why other denominations can't be right, left him wishing instead for attention to the question "How does true life begin?" It was beyond wrongheaded to preach the gospel and "not even attempt to address any of the issues the community is facing."

Earlier, in late May, another Adventist pastor, Ryan Bell, had remarked on the *Spectrum Blog* that evangelistic campaigns typically peddle a truth both "static" and "de-contextualized." Osborn's diary described a perfect example of this.

We all know that a profound fear of the new—especially anything new and fresh in Adventist teaching—has clouded Adventist consciousness for years. No one has to name the villains or victims whose stories have seeded the fear; the knowledge is commonplace. We know, too, that this dark climate now approaches Screwtape's "ideal," and leaves all too many damaged in both self-confidence and productivity. Thankfully, some, including the best of church administrators, rise above the fear, and try new thoughts and new approaches. But many either dance around the danger they perceive, or give in to it. Some—not many, I think—become fear mongers themselves.

Does this not explain, at least in part, why

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evangelism—telling the good news, widening the circle of compassion—has come to such a doubtful state? How can we expect proclamation that is both faithful to the gospel and relevant to ever-changing circumstance unless the Adventist culture emboldens us to think, and permits us, along the way, to make mistakes? Evil Angels do not quake before a mindless foe, and when creativity and risk-taking meet with disapproval, we make ourselves, quite simply, into pushovers.

My point is not thoughtless blessing of novelty. For one thing, we may learn from the preachers of conventional evangelism as well as ask our questions. For another, new attempts at fresh interpretation will fall short, and require themselves a critical second look. But if, as two young pastors have suggested, many who make a public witness to our faith—including some who teach ministers-in-training—are simply stuck in conventionality, it is time to call a rut a rut, and get out of it.

The prophets and preachers of the Bible illustrate the remarkable variety—of approach and also of thought—that God seems to welcome and to work with. Peter and Paul disagreed about important matters, yet both brought converts to the church. God's thoughts were higher than theirs; each saw through a glass darkly. So it was no wonder they fell short of full agreement. Still, despite their flawed unity, God blessed what they did (Isa. 55: 8, 9; 1 Cor. 13:9; and 2 Pet. 3:18).

But it's not just imperfect understanding, and blessing in spite of it, that the Bible sets before us; it's also the possibility of new understanding. Through the prophet, God told the Hebrew exiles that the desert between them and home could be crossed, just as once the Jordan River had been crossed. It was a "new" thought, in that time and place not easy to grasp, but God wanted them to grasp it. Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would guide them toward the whole truth they were not yet ready to "bear"; God knew they would one day be able to bear it, and expected their knowledge to grow (Isa. 43:19; John 16:12, 13).

All this underlies Ellen White's none-too-familiar dictum in volume five of her testimonies that fear of "new questions" and "difference of opinion" is a recipe for spiritual decline (706–7). The plain fact is that it's always time to face down fear, and always time to embrace growth in Christian understanding. Growth is both necessary and possible, and Christian growth—growth that is open and

infectious and widely celebrated—is one of Screwtape's nightmares.

Here and there teachers, pastors, and evangelists are looking to transcend mere conventionality. I have a professor friend who is exploring fresh approaches to Revelation as a means of outreach. I know a pastor who has several times conducted an entire evangelistic campaign in a key that would, I feel sure, inspire both Trevan Osborn and Ryan Bell.

Most of us miss out on these experiments. But it wouldn't have to be that way. There could be more experiments. There could be wider encouragement of creativity and risk taking. And one day we could be thankful, not just for the few, but for the more than a few, who gladly bear a torch down unfamiliar paths.

Shakespeare has a general say: "Defer no time; delays have dangerous ends." Anyone who knows how hard it is to find, let alone keep, creative Adventist leaders—whether evangelists, or pastors and lay leaders for churches, or administrators for our institutions—knows this urgency, knows it in mind and heart and gut.

Openness to the Spirit—there is a rallying cry for everyone, church leaders most of all. Even more important, of course, is actual engagement in the conversation that lets the Spirit make its impact. Not the cry, after all, but the rising of the wild duck is what makes the flock take flight.<sup>1</sup> ■

## Notes and References

1. Michael Oakeshott somewhere says (roughly) this.



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