

Public Policy Issues Involving Homosexuality:

An Adventist Response | BY MITCHELL A. TYNER

Homosexuality—more particularly, the status of homosexuals and their relationships before the law—has become one of the most confrontational, divisive topics of our time, both politically and theologically. Numerous writers have identified well over one thousand instances where homosexual couples are denied the rights and privileges available to heterosexual couples, and this revelation has led many to advocate the legal recognition of homosexual marriage or the functional equivalent thereof. Their efforts, in turn, have produced the most vociferous backlash from those who argue that to do such a thing will be to remove the moral underpinnings of American society. Other writers have described the nonmarriage-related inequality of homosexuals in current society, involving such issues as the nonprotection of homosexuals as a suspect category, leading to denial of protection in such fundamental rights as employment and housing.

Recently, numerous jurisdictions have moved significantly toward legal equality for homosexuals, including listing sexual orientation as a protected category in local or state human rights statutes and recognizing homosexual marriage or domestic partnerships. The most significant judicial move was the 2004 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lawrence vs. Texas*, which ruled that antisodomy laws could not be applied to homosexuals. In the *Lawrence* ruling, the Court overruled its infamous previous decision in *Bowers vs. Hardwick* and recognized the existence of a right to privacy in sexual matters.

Legally, this movement continues apace, as several states and nations enact protective statutes. It is not the purpose of this discussion to address the current legal and political realities, as others have done so admirably. Others have addressed the questions of how Seventh-day Adventists, both corporately and individually,

should understand the phenomenon of homosexuality in Scripture, the existence and experience of Seventh-day Adventist homosexuals, and the responsibilities of both the Church and its members to them. That leaves a further question: how do we, corporately and individually, relate to the religio-political questions involving homosexuality that are currently producing so much heat and so little light? What are the considerations that should be involved in the formation of an Adventist response to such public issues? This chapter looks at four, the first two scriptural and timeless, the last two more contemporary. The list is not exhaustive; it should include but is not limited to the following:

1. Does the proposed position maximize human freedom?

To be faithful to Scripture, our positions on public policy issues should work to maximize human freedom to the highest appropriate level. Arguably, the most revealing Scripture passage that involves freedom is not the little horn or Revelation 13, but Luke 15, the passage we refer to as the story of the Prodigal Son, although it might better be called the story of the Waiting Father.

A young man, raised on an affluent but remote farm went to his father and said "Dad, I'm bored. I'm tired of living way out here. I want to experience the world for myself; I want to go to the big city; I want to do my own thing. And Dad, I want you to give me an advance on my inheritance to finance the trip."

Nothing in either Jewish or Roman law gave the father any obligation to grant that request, but he did. The son left, wealth in hand, and headed for the bright lights. As long as the money lasted, so did his social status. But soon he found himself in a descending socioeconomic spiral. His money gone, he was forced to earn his livelihood by doing something most hateful to a young Jew: feeding

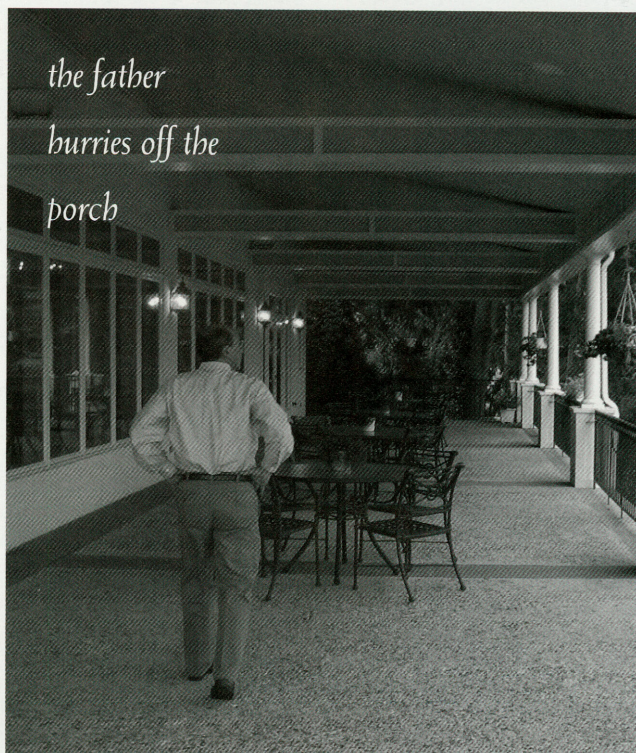
hogs. He awoke one morning in the pigpen, looked around him, and said, "What a miserable state of affairs! What a genuine wreck I have made of my life."

To put this story in Seventh-day Adventist terms, imagine a young man from a farm in eastern Montana who, having gone to New York, awakens in a drug-induced stupor in one of those neighborhoods you don't want to enter at night. He has been making his living dealing drugs. He awakens and thinks, "This is Sabbath morning. Mom and Dad are in church, and look at me. Look how far I've come."

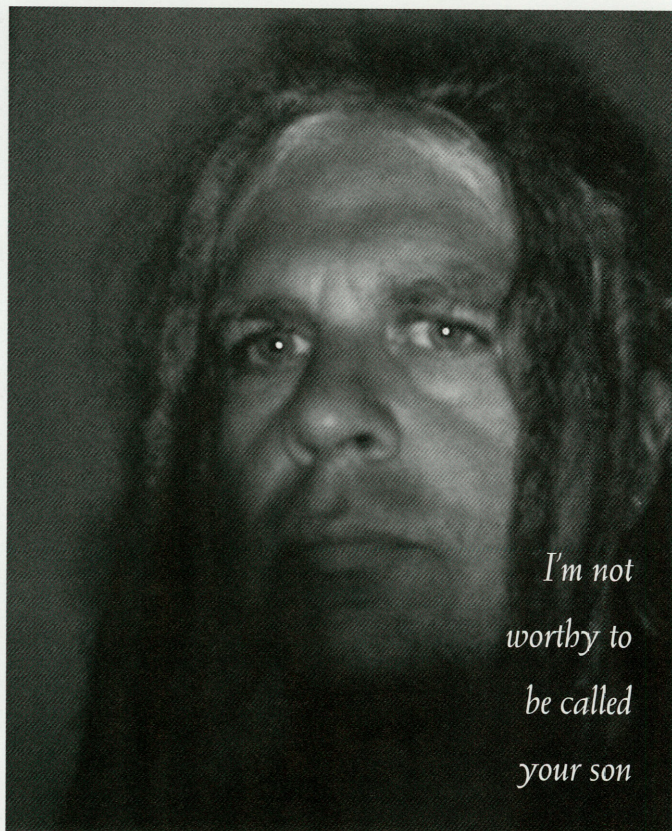
The Bible simply says, "He came to himself." He realized his position. He looked around and said, "I have ruined my life, I have nothing: nowhere to sleep, no means of support, nothing to eat, and I can't go home. I've had my share of the family wealth and I've squandered that. It's gone. Even my dad's hired hands out there on the farm are better off. I ought to go home and just ask Dad to hire me."

He sat there in the mud and composed the speech he would offer his father. He would say, "Father, I have sinned before you and before God. I am no longer worthy to be called your son—just hire me and let me live out in the bunkhouse with the hired hands." With that, he started home.

Imagine the father, sitting on the veranda of one of



*the father
hurries off the
porch*



*I'm not
worthy to
be called
your son*

those old farm houses—the kind with the long porch that runs the width of the house. The family sat there in the evening catching the cool breeze, talking about the weather, the crops, and family news.

The father has been sitting there every afternoon since his son left. He's never given up on his son's return. Then one day, far off down the road, he sees a pathetic figure limping along. He's lame, he's ill-kept, and he's dirty. But the father immediately recognizes him as his son. The father doesn't wait for the son to come to him. Instead, the father hurries off the porch, down the path, through the gate, and down the road to meet his son. As they meet, the son begins his prepared speech of contrition: "Dad, I've blown it, I'm not worthy to be called your son...." and he never gets to finish the speech.

It's as though the father said, "Son, I know, I understand. We'll talk about that another time. For now, all that matters is that you're home. Come inside, we'll celebrate your return!" With that, he covered this filthy figure with his best cloak, put a ring on his finger, and led him to the house, where the celebration began.

The older son heard the sound of the celebration and asked one of the hired hands what was happening. He was told, "Your brother's back and your father's throwing a

party." But the older brother refused to join the celebration.

Eventually, the father came to him and said, "We're celebrating your brother's return—come in and join us!"

The elder brother said, "Look, Dad, I've been with you all these years. I have obeyed your every command. I have done everything you have asked but you never threw a party for me. Now this son of yours comes home after wasting your money and his life and you expect me to celebrate? Why should I?"

Notice that the elder brother was factually correct, which merely shows that one may be quite correct but very wrong as to the correct interpretation and application of those facts. Notice also that the elder brother referred to "your son", not, "my brother."

The father replied, "Your brother was lost, and has been found; he was dead and he is alive to us again. It is proper that we celebrate!"

Who was right in that story, the father or the son? The father, of course. The father represents God, our Father. The son represents us, for each of us has at one time or another wandered away from our spiritual home.

Why did the father let that happen? The father could have prevented it. He didn't have to give his son the money, but he did. It can even be alleged that by funding the journey of the prodigal, the father aided and abetted prodigality. Why? Because the father was more interested in his son than in his money. Because ultimately he was interested in his relationship with his son. Because he wanted a relationship with his son that was possible only when the son was ready to enter into it voluntarily. The father would not force his son to stay at home. He would not be satisfied with coerced obedience.

Isn't that a marvelous parable of our heavenly Father! Our Father put such a high value on his relationship with us that he paid the price of Calvary to avoid coercing us. He could have forced us to stay at home with him, and no one could have faulted him for doing so. But he will not be satisfied with coerced obedience. Yes, he's interested in our conduct. But when we come back to him, he doesn't say, "All right, before you come in the house let's talk about that time in the pigpen. Let's talk about what you did, let's talk about the money you wasted, let's get all of this straightened out." No, he puts his robe of righteousness around us and says, "Come inside. The party is ready to start—in your honor."

Here is a parable that illustrates an important facet of

the great controversy between good and evil, a key historic Adventist teaching. God could have created us in such a manner that we could not have sinned. He didn't, because he wanted a relationship with us based on our choice to establish it. He refused to coerce us. But doing that cost him dearly. It cost him the life of his son at Calvary, paid so that we could relate to him freely. Every man, woman, boy, and girl is free to relate to God freely, according to his or her conscience, not someone else's.

What are we to learn from this story? First, that God put a tremendous value on freedom. He could have prevented Calvary, but didn't, because he would not coerce our obedience. Second, we have no business, like the older brother, being more judgmental with each other than our Father is with us. Third, we have been given an example that speaks to our own attitudes and actions: If God went to that length not to coerce us, then how dare we, his children, coerce each other?

2. Does the suggested position maximize equality?

Again, to be faithful to Scripture, our positions on public policy issues should work to maximize human equality to the highest appropriate level.

Consider the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 10. Jesus was confronted with a questioner—a lawyer, a young scholar of religious law who had heard of Jesus and wanted to put Jesus' teaching on the record. The dialogue went something like this:

Lawyer: "Rabbi, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus: "What do you read in the law?"

Lawyer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus: "You read well. Now go and do that and you will live."

When confronted with an unwanted answer, one may acquire at least a little wiggle room by seeking to define further one or more terms used in the answer. So the lawyer replied, "And just who is my neighbor?"

Knowing that his questioner was not amenable to a direct answer, Jesus chose to answer indirectly, through a story, the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

"A certain man," said Jesus, "went down from Jerusalem to Jericho." Mr. Anonymous chose a narrow, twisting mountain road that descends rapidly from the Judean hills to the Dead Sea Valley. It is a dangerous route today, and

surely was much more so in Roman times. During the course of his journey, Mr. Anonymous was mugged: he was attacked by thieves, assaulted, stripped of everything of value, and left for dead.

Jesus then presented his audience with an interesting procession of observers. First to come on the scene was a priest, clergy, one trained to identify with and alleviate human need. True to his calling, he viewed the wounded man and thought, "This is terrible! This man has been wounded through no fault of his own, yet here he lies." But he quickly caught himself before his empathy got him into trouble. He thought,

The thieves who did this may still be nearby. They could well do the same to me. And after all, my first responsibility is to my family and to my ministry. This man is part of neither. I don't know him and I don't owe him! If I am injured or killed, who will care for them? Surely the proper and prudent thing for me to do is to go on and report this to the authorities. And besides, I'm carrying a month's tithe from all the local congregations down to the National Bank of Jericho for deposit. We can't risk losing that.

Having armed himself with good excuses, he passed by the wounded man. But he did not pass by too closely—so close that he would have to look in the man's eyes and sense his pain. Instead, he passed by on the far side, evidence that the pacification of his conscience was not working all that well.

Next came a Levite. Here was another man trained much like the priest. He, too, was taught to be a shepherd of the flock, but he was not serving in a direct pastoral role. Perhaps in modern parlance we could call him a religious bureaucrat, a denominational administrator. The Levite also reacted as trained. He, too, saw the injured man and began to empathize. But his mind wandered a bit: "This is awful! We must regain control of our streets and put these criminals away where they belong!" As he worked himself up on the subject of the shortcomings of the criminal justice system, he also began to sense the priest's predicament: "They could do the same to me." And he also reasoned his way out of that bind: "I'm going down to Jericho to deliver an address on the ethical treatment of strangers. If I stop here, I help only one person. But if I go on, my lecture could be the start of a whole new Good Samaritan Society in Jericho. Surely, the responsible thing is for me to proceed." And so, for the sake of giving a lec-

ture on loving others, he left his neighbor to languish in pain and distress. He followed the priest's detour and passed by on the far side.

And then came a Samaritan. Why did Jesus choose a Samaritan for this role? Perhaps it was because he well knew the reaction of his questioner to such a person. Samaritans were the outcasts of the day. Public opinion was that they were not pure Jews; they came from an inferior stock, inferior social position, an inferior education. They could not be trusted. If we had passed through the streets of Jerusalem, we might have overheard conversations in which it was said, "You can't trust those Samaritans. They'll lie and cheat and steal. They'd rather draw welfare than work for a living. Best to have nothing to do with them for your own safety." If the injured man had known a Samaritan was approaching, he probably would have shuddered in anticipation of further harm.

But the Samaritan stopped, the only one of the three observers to do so. He stopped to give aid to someone who otherwise might have despised him.

The Samaritan's reaction was neither ivory tower theory nor mere emotional response. He methodically poured oil and wine (the only cleansing/disinfecting agents available to him) into the injured man's wounds, bound them, put the man on his pack animal, and took him to the nearest inn. Before leaving, he said to the innkeeper, "Take care of him, and when I return I'll settle the cost with you." The Samaritan disregarded the threats to his own safety that had been correctly noted by the priest and the Levite. He just acted, on behalf of someone very much not like him.

At this point, the dialogue between Jesus and his interrogator resumed.

Jesus: "Now, which of these three do you think acted as a neighbor to the injured man?"

Lawyer: "Obviously, the one who stopped to help."

Jesus: "Exactly. Go and do likewise."

Isn't it interesting what Jesus did *not* say to the lawyer? He did not say to him, "Go and study the scrolls. When you can properly and coherently exegete the prophecies and explain Ezekiel's vision of the wheels within wheels, then come back and we will discuss your future course of action." Jesus spoke nothing of what the questioner should know or believe, only of what he should *do*. He spoke not of orthodoxy, but of orthopraxy. He simply said, "Go and *do* likewise."

Four characteristics of the Samaritan's response bear

emulation. First, it was a *caring* response. The Samaritan obviously cared enough about the injured man's predicament to endanger himself in order to help. The act of not taking the detour mapped out by the preceding observers was motivated by recognition of the value of another



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at that moment*

human in need—in other words, *caring*.

Second, it was an *involved* response. It is all too easy for moderns to trust groups—relief groups, state agencies, religious organizations—to react to human need while we comfortably sit back and make donations of a bit of money and a bit of time. The Samaritan put far more than that into the project.

Third, it was a *committed* response. The Samaritan not only bound the wounds of the victim, he also volunteered to underwrite his care for an indeterminate period. Now that's commitment!

Fourth, it was a *relevant* response. The Samaritan could have continued on his way, and on arrival in Jericho sought to convene a council on the causes and remedies for highway crime. Not a bad thing in itself, but not relevant to the man lying in the road. Rather, the Samaritan got immediately involved, and he did what needed to be done at that moment. He acted relevantly.

Perhaps most importantly for this discussion, all of this was for someone with whom the Samaritan would have been in profound disagreement theologically, politically, and otherwise. There was no pondering of theological convergences, of historic ties, of cultural affinities. There was no consideration of public opinion or of the opinion of other Samaritans, no mapping of potential geopolitical consequences. The Samaritan did not see a Jew (or an Edomite, or a Roman or Greek, or whoever the victim was), he just saw a person in need and recognized that he had the ability to meet the need.

How does this story inform our response to such questions as equal rights for homosexuals—or anyone else? It says that our response must be caring, involved, committed, and relevant. It must not be deterred by the approbation of many for the object of our care, or by the potential threat to our own standing. We must be prepared to evenhandedly aid those for whom we can be of service, regardless of their agreement—or lack thereof—with our beliefs and interpretations. How could such considerations ever lead us to deny equal rights to homosexuals, or anyone else?

In the current context, a consideration of the interrelationship of freedom and equality is necessary, for equal rights not infrequently act as a restraint on freedom. We do not exercise our freedom in a vacuum, but in the context of social relationships. As the apostle Paul said, "None of us lives to himself." Paul also observed, "All things are lawful to me, but all things are not expedient." A responsible exercise of our freedom always considers the effect of our actions on the rights and needs of others.

Since the late 1990s, there has been, within the church-state community, a running discussion concerning whether or not sincere religious belief should constitute a valid defense to a charge of violating the equality rights of others. The question arose in this fashion. In 1990, in the case of *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon vs. Smith*, the U.S. Supreme Court severely cut back the reach of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment

to the U.S. Constitution. One result was the formation of a broad coalition that sought legislation to moderate the damage done to religious freedom. This brought about the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in 1993. The Court responded a few years later, in *Boerne vs. Flores*, by ruling RFRA inapplicable to the states. The coalition then prepared a bill known as the Religious Liberty Protection Act (RLPA). RLPA never got off the ground. It foundered on the question of religious belief as a defense. One side said, "If religious belief is not included in the bill as a legitimate defense, we will leave the coalition."

The other side said, "If religious belief is recognized as a defense, we will leave the coalition." The coalition then foundered.

What was this discussion really about? Homosexuality. The question was whether a sincerely held religious belief that one should not employ or rent to homosexuals should be a valid defense to a charge of violating protected rights. Difference of opinion on that question is so deeply held that it has prevented the religious community from achieving broad-based protection for free exercise of religion since that time.

How do we answer that question? Should our religious beliefs allow us to discriminate? When we put the question in the context of race, the answer is clear for most people: Just because a person sincerely believes that he or she should not hire or rent to a person of color should not relieve him or her of the duty of nondiscrimination. In this instance, the equality rights of one person trump the religiously motivated practice of the other. Few will argue against that position—until they recognize that it cannot be distinguished on any principled basis from the question of equality rights of homosexuals. It simply comes down to the fact that one is generally accepted in our society and the other is not—yet. Surely our response to such questions should maximize both freedom and equality, properly balancing the two, rather than merely reflecting popular opinion.

3. Is the proposed position informed by our history?

To be responsible, our positions on public policy issues should take cognizance of the applicable lessons found in our own history. We have experience with the negative results of efforts by well-meaning people to enact their views and religious convictions into law. Consider the effects of the national Sunday law drive of the late-nine-

teenth century.

In 1888, Senator H. W. Blair of New Hampshire sponsored a Senate bill (N. 2983) to promote Sunday observance as a day of worship. Blair's bill (and a similar one in 1889) was defeated, at least in part due to the five hundred thousand signatures secured against it by the then-tiny Seventh-day Adventist Church, spurred on by the enthusiasm of A. T. Jones, among others. The national bill was stopped, but the effort to enforce Sunday observance was not. Rather, the scene of activity shifted to the states.

During 1895 and 1896, at least seventy-five Seventh-day Adventists were prosecuted in the United States and Canada under state or provincial Sunday laws. Some were fined; a few were acquitted or were lucky enough to have their cases dismissed. But 28 served jail terms, aggregating 1,144 days: almost 3½ years in total.¹ Such prosecution was not happenstance or just a small part of a broader picture of thousands of Americans arrested for a wide variety of Sunday activities. To the contrary, it was a matter of selective enforcement. Those prosecuted were targeted not just for their conduct, but for the reason behind it.

Perhaps the most significant of these cases was that of R. M. King of Obion County, Tennessee.² King had farmed in the community for twenty years and was held in high esteem by his neighbors, although they disagreed with the practice he followed as a Seventh-day Adventist of tilling his fields on Sunday. His neighbors tried to persuade King not to work on Sunday, but he resisted. Finally, "they insisted that he must keep Sunday and not teach their children by his example that the seventh day is the Sabbath and if he did not comply with their wishes he would be prosecuted." King was subsequently arrested for working in his fields on Sunday, June 23, 1889. On July 6, Obion County Justice J. A. Barker found King guilty as charged and fined him a total of \$12.85. Since King refused to stop Sunday work, his neighbors had him indicted by a grand jury for virtually the same offense.

Judge Swiggart and a jury heard the matter in Troy, Tennessee, on March 6, 1890, Attorney General Bond appearing for the state and Colonel T. E. Richardson for King. The charge was that King's repeated Sunday breaking constituted a public nuisance—a charge that opened the way to a harsher penalty than did mere violation of the Sunday law. The jury heard five witnesses for the prosecution and one for the defense. It deliberated only half an hour before returning a guilty verdict and assessing a fine

of seventy-five dollars. The judge denied a motion for a new trial and warned that King and his ilk must obey the law or leave the country.

Colonel Richardson appealed on King's behalf to the state supreme court, which in 1891 merely affirmed the trial court without opinion. Then Richardson, joined by Donald M. Dickinson, U.S. postmaster general from 1888 to 1889, appealed to the United States Circuit Court for the Western District of Tennessee.³ Their theory on appeal was a new one: Since no previous case recognized habitual Sunday breaking as a public nuisance and no state

Nevertheless, the state court decision was sustained.

Was it proper to define such conduct as a public nuisance? It was, said Hammond, if a state court said so. A federal court would not second-guess a state court on the meaning of that state's law. Hence, no deprivation of due process existed. King also lost on his First Amendment claims, said Hammond, because that amendment did not apply to the states. According to the decision, "the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States has not abrogated the Sunday laws of the states, and established religious freedom therein. The states may

...arrested for working in his fields on Sunday...



statute described it as such, to convict King for such activity constituted denial of the due process and equal protection of law as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Significantly, they also argued that he had been denied the religious freedom guaranteed him by the First Amendment religion clauses.

On August 1, 1891, Judge Hammond rendered his decision. He acknowledged:

By a sort of factitious advantage, the observers of Sunday have secured the aid of the civil law, and adhere to that advantage with great tenacity, and in spite of the clamor for religious freedom and the progress that has been made in the absolute separation of church and state, and in spite of the strong and merciless attack that has always been ready, in the field of controversial theology, to be made, as it has been made here, upon the claim for divine authority for the change from the seventh to the first day of the week.⁴

establish a church or creed..."⁵

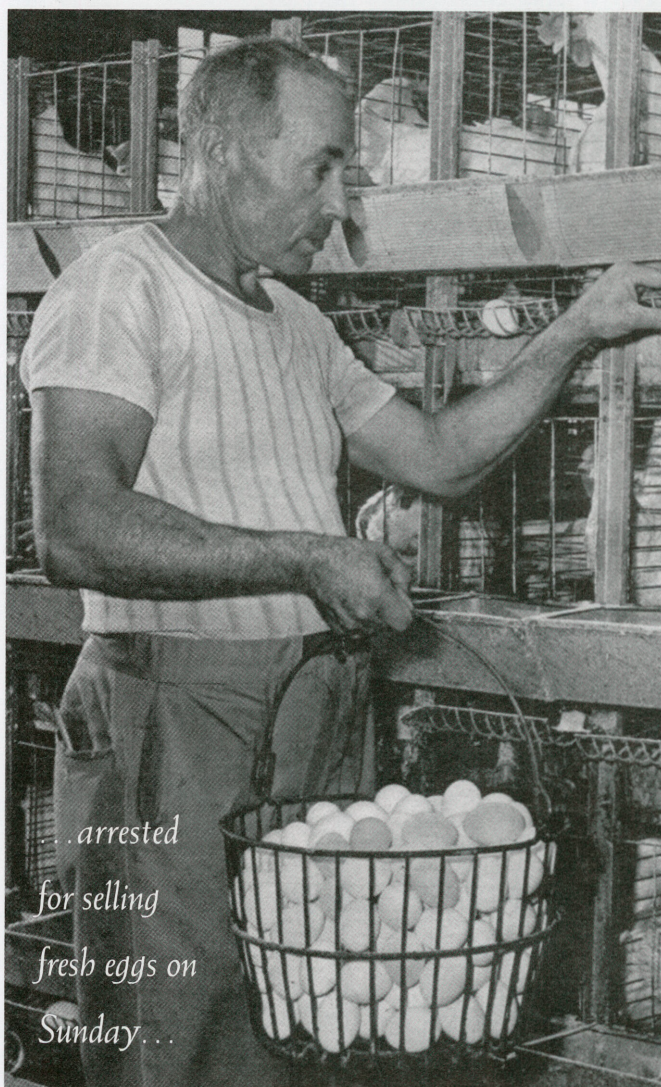
Upon that point, King's lawyers appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court in the fall of 1891, asking the Court to clarify whether the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment made First Amendment guarantees binding upon the state. It was a strategy used successfully by Jehovah's Witnesses in 1940.⁶ If the Supreme Court had adopted that theory in 1891, the course of Sunday legislation, and indeed all religion clause jurisprudence, would have been different. But the Court did not have the opportunity to rule on the question: R. M. King died on November 12, 1891, before his case came before the Court.

The 1890s may have been the high-water mark in the prosecution of Sabbatarians, but the flood did not recede immediately. As the tide of fundamentalism rolled toward its crest about the time of the famous Scopes trial, it carried with it a continuing volume of such prosecutions.⁷

Well into the twentieth century, as America experienced increasing industrialization and urbanization, with the concomitant rise of secularism and liberal thought, the pattern continued—and not just in the rural South. In 1923, three Seventh-day Adventists were arrested in Massachusetts and fined for painting the interior of a house on Sunday in order to get it ready for occupancy the next day. In 1932, a deputy sheriff of Washington County, Virginia, arrested two Seventh-day Adventists for Sunday work: one, a crippled mother who walked on crutches, for washing clothes on her own premises, and, the other, a man who donated and hauled a load of wood to a church to heat it for religious services.

As late as 1938, a Massachusetts storekeeper was arrested for selling fresh eggs on Sunday, at a time when it was legal to buy cooked eggs, beer, and liquor, and to attend sports events and movies on the same day.⁸

Beginning in 1940, a line of U.S. Supreme Court cases



...arrested
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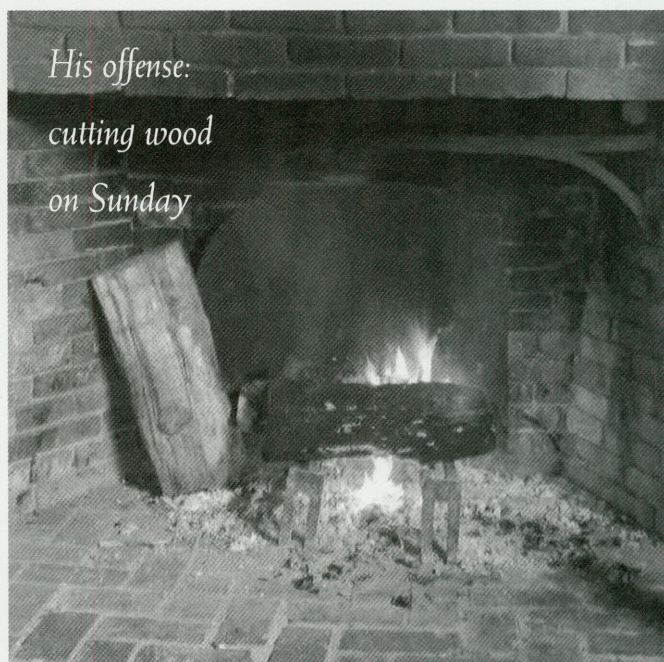
established that the First Amendment, including the religion clauses, had indeed been made applicable to state and local governments via the Fourteenth Amendment, thus opening the door to Sunday law challenges based on those clauses, and in 1961 those challenges found their way to the Court. The questions raised in *R. M. King's* case in 1891 would finally be answered by the high court seventy years later. It's just as well that King didn't live to hear the answer: Sunday laws were upheld as no longer religious in nature. That claim would have been impossible to make with a straight face in 1891.

The point? That Adventist activism of an earlier day averted two bills in Congress, and came very close to producing a fundamental change in the law, one that the Court might have reached a half-century earlier but for the death of R. M. King. Not until 1963, in the case of *Sherbert vs. Verner*, did the Court accord religious belief and practice the protection it deserves. And Adele Sherbert was also a Seventh-day Adventist! Our own history should teach us what we can accomplish in the area of human rights when we put sufficient resources into the effort.

Another case in point was that of Day Conklin of Big Creek, Forsyth County, Georgia, who in March 1889 was arrested, tried before a jury, and fined twenty-five dollars and costs, amounting in all to eighty-three dollars. His offense: cutting wood near his front door on Sunday, November 18, 1888. Attorney William F. Findley later gave the following recollection of the case:

One of these Seventh-day Adventists was tried over here in Forsyth County, and I think there never was a more unrighteous conviction. There was a man named Day Conklin, who was moving on Friday. He got his goods wet on Friday, and it turned off cold. On Saturday he went out and cut enough wood to keep his family from freezing. On Sunday, he still hadn't his things dry, and it was still as cold as it had been on Saturday. He still cut enough wood to keep his family warm, and they convicted him for doing this. I say that is an outrage, an unrighteous conviction, for he was doing the best he could. One of the jurymen told me that they did not convict him for what he had done, but for what he said he had a right to do. He said he had a right to work on Sunday.⁹

Notice, "we convicted him because he said he had a right." In reality, Conklin was convicted because he claimed that his religious practice was of equal dignity and



deserved the same respect and protection as that of the majority. His real crime was to claim equality.

Today, much of the resentment of homosexual claims for equal rights at bottom is resentment of a claim of equality. "They have the temerity to claim that they are our equals." In the homosexual marriage debate, many are willing to approve some arrangement that affords homosexuals all or most of the rights pertaining to marriage, as long as it is called something else—as long as there is not a claim of equality! That is sadly reminiscent of the fate of Day Conklin.

Our own history teaches us that when even sincere, well-meaning people seek to use the law to enforce their views of morality on others who do not share those views, bad things happen to good people. That lesson, coupled with an awareness of the potency of our advocacy, rightly motivated and focused, should place us in the front lines of those who defend equality rights today.

4. Is the proposed position in the best interest of the Church?

Certainly the best interest of the Church is a valid consideration. None will wish to jeopardize the Church by advocating, in its name, a particular position. Some will argue that the best interest of the Church is served by keeping a low profile on social and political issues. They will cite Ellen White's advice that the Church in the South should remain segregated, at least for the time, and that we should not publicly oppose Bible reading in the public schools. Those statements must be read and understood in

the context of a time in which the Church was fragile and vulnerable. Public opinion was such that advocacy on those issues would have cut off almost all avenues of witness.

Is that true today? Would advocacy on behalf of equality rights for homosexuals negate the ability of the Church to witness to society? In contrast, will continued silence on the issue negate our ability to communicate with thinking people who espouse a principled view of the matter? Our society is no longer monolithic on these issues; we do not face a situation analogous to the times in which Ellen White wrote.

More fundamentally, how can it ever be in the Church's interest to act other than in accordance with scriptural counsel and instruction? The Bible clearly tells us that God puts a tremendous value on human freedom. Our divinely given example is one who rendered aid where it was needed, not as a "respector of persons." Our own history shows the dangers that follow the legislation and imposition of religious beliefs and religiously based moral convictions on those who do not share them. To act on these principles is in the best interest of the Church. Indeed, to fail to do so would be an indictment of the Church, an irresponsible neglect of its best interest. ■

Notes and References

1. Quoted in William Addison Blakely, *American State Papers*, 4th rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: *Review and Herald*, 1949), 514.
2. *In Re King*, 46 P. 905 (U.S. Cir. Ct., West Tenn., Aug. 1, 1891).
3. Now known as the United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee.
4. *In Re King*, quoted in Blakely, *American State Papers*.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Cantwell vs. Connecticut*, 310 US 296 (U.S. Supreme Court, 1940).
7. *Scopes vs. Tennessee*, 289 SW 363 (Tenn. Sup. Ct. 1927).
8. Blakely, *American State Papers*, 508.
9. *Ibid.*, 488–91.

Mitchell A. Tyner, minister and lawyer, recently retired as associate general counsel for the General Conference and North American Division, with responsibility for church-state and religious discrimination matters. This material is from the forthcoming book *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives*.