

## Manifesto for a Prophetic Adventism | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

**T**wo catastrophes stand between Adventism and its prophetic mission. One is thoughtless embrace of hand-me-down platitudes. The other is critique without passion for renewal.

For members of alert and open mind, hand-me-down Adventism is now, in substantial part, discredited. When the basic question about our existence pits cold happenstance against loving purpose, fixation with the *age* of the earth and *time frame* of creation is preposterous. When the conflict between Islam and the West makes the prospect of terror more worrisome than the prospect of Sunday legislation, the conventional eschatology fails to be compelling. When poverty and environmental breakdown are more of threat than jewelry and dancing, the latter obsessions seem like the equivalent of buggy whips. And when the evidence for Ellen White's human frailty, including her weakness for appropriating the eloquence of others as if it were her own, is overwhelming, denial of this frailty is practically insane.

For as long as all this thoughtlessness goes on, Adventism will continue to flirt with irrelevance.

But it does not have to do so. We can rethink our understanding of Creation and of the Final Victory of Christ. We can rank our moral and spiritual priorities into more faithful accordance with Scripture. We can arrive at a *truthful* appreciation (and criticism) of what Ellen White has done on our behalf.

But we cannot do this without passion for renewal. Free-riders who use the church for weddings and funerals and contribute little time

or treasure to its welfare will not provide new vision. Hangars-on who entertain themselves by their endless recital of arguments, both good and dubious, for Adventism's fallibility will not provide new vision. The ones who will provide new vision are the ones who care.

Some, by the grace of God, do care, and just for that reason there is hope.

The best pastors and the best religion teachers care about new vision. In the best congregations, the best people care about it. Concern for new vision finds its way into the *Adventist Review*. It is central for *Adventist Today*. It drives organizations such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, the Association of Adventist Women, the Adventist Peace Fellowship, and Adventist Women for Peace. It also prompts the event planners who give us, for example, the annual Innovation Conference in Ohio, or the budding Screen Film Festival, or the annual conversations organized by the various Adventist theological societies. Then there are the (visionary) bloggers, more and more of them, some with sites of their own and some joining the give-and-take that others host.

The Adventist Forum, with its magazine, interactive Web site, and annual conferences, belongs to this tiny but emerging groundswell. How can all these people and organizations well up into something big enough, and bold enough, to help renew the heart of Adventism?

First, all of us, and all of our organizations, can begin to share one point of indispensable agreement. It goes back, in its spirit, to the beginnings of Adventist history, and it

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reflects (or so I would argue) the spirit of the New Testament itself. I mean agreement that *thanks to the grace and peace of Christ, we DO intend to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus; we DO intend to help one another flourish; we DO intend to serve and change the world.* Agreement here would put grace first, and it would link our thankful response with action that makes a difference—in our own lives and in the lives of others. This could be a mantra for prophetic Adventism. If we didn't agree on it, at least more or less, we wouldn't matter.

If the tiny but emerging groundswell is to count for anything, the second necessity is that we *work* at achieving new vision. Under the husk of hand-me-down platitudes is the kernel of insight. The pioneers did not know everything, but they did know that Jesus saves and hope invigorates. They did know that Christianity has veered too far from its Jewish underpinnings. They did know that state-hugging piety produces Christendom, the demonic union of church and state. What is more, they did know that where faithfulness and passion come together, a small number—a mere remnant—can make an outsized difference.

Today's devotees of prophetic Adventism can build on the acumen of these pioneers, and not least the acumen of Ellen White, in order to renew the way we see and act. It will take courage; it will take scholarship; it will take imagination and consensus building. But renewal can happen, and out of passion for hope and disdain for cynicism (that supreme weapon of cowardice), it *must* happen.

Finally, if the heart of Adventism is to be renewed, the champions of new vision must find new ways to collaborate, and make new efforts, every day, to find new partners. Prophetic Adventism is the most demanding kind, and also the most satisfying and most consequential. But it is a bare abstraction without the time and treasure—and cooperation—of human beings. It is a bare abstraction, that is, unless it is *embodied*. The Adventist Forum wants to exemplify all of this—by growing member-

ship and Web site interaction, and by looking for mission-advancing partnerships. Forum leaders believe that others of similar mindset—who write and publish and take action, who bear responsibility for organizations and events—want to move forward with similar audacity and similar openness to collaboration.

Perhaps all this is newer, less developed, than it sounds. Still, collaboration *has* begun, and it will continue.

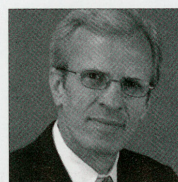
It had better. Rufus Jones, the Quaker pioneer, told his people: “[W]e can be bearers of a torch or we can carefully husband a little flame.” Prophetic Adventism will remain but a little flame—except as we who see the vision link our arms and do all we can to make the circle wider.

So let's shake our fists at the naysayers and dream-slayers, and rise up in one accord to declare, as trumpets do, that we are here. And let's say further, and say unmistakably, that we *will* cause something to happen; we *will* make a difference.

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Allowing for some refinement, that sentence is an echo of what the prophets said. And it's the right spirit, today, for prophetic Adventism.

Robert Frost somewhere remarked that courage and decisiveness are “Better than all the stalemate an's and ifs.” We can wring our hands at the prospect of the two catastrophes that stand between the church and its prophetic mission—or we can muster the guts and energy to dance our way around them.

The dance is better, and the dance is more fun. ■



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