



Instead of Deadly Commonplaces | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Here are three deadly commonplaces:

- Proper Christian religion is private; it has nothing to do with public, or political, issues. In your role *as a believer*, you have nothing to say concerning the aims and conduct of the state.
- The Bible is, for all practical purposes, inerrant. Put your finger on a passage and you put your finger on God's will.
- Apocalyptic prophecy foretells the chronology of the end-time, and if you pay attention to it you can know what is going to happen next.

In a letter sent on August 4, 1914, the president of the East German Union Conference assured the German authorities that Adventists were bound "together in defense of the 'Fatherland,' and under these circumstances we will bear arms on Saturday (Sabbath)." Members would honor the emperor, following the command set down for them in 1 Peter 2:13–17.

About the same time the church's leadership in Hamburg sent a letter to German congregations saying that "we should do our military duties with joy." They said the story of Jericho's fall in Joshua 6 showed that "the children of God have made use of military weapons and that they also performed military duties on the Sabbath."

The Adventist faith would be no stumbling block to the nation's imperial ambitions, and this was explained with the support of Scripture. But here apocalyptic prophecy did not come into play: church members "knew" that the crucial eschatological events had to do with

Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, so apocalyptic writings bore no practical relevance to goings-on in Germany.

On May 12–15, 2014 at Friedensau Adventist University in Germany, more than one hundred participants from twenty-six countries came together for a conference on "The Impact of World War I on Seventh-day Adventists." About fifteen of them represented the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement that arose when German leaders broke with the pioneer position of refusal to bear arms in war. German churches had swiftly disfellowshipped members who did not want to go along with the will of the state, and from those so treated came the first leaders of the Reform Movement.

Some twenty formal presentations offered compelling perspective on the context and significance of what happened during World War I. Participants heard about the whole history of Adventism's relationship to war, going back to the conflict between the North and South in America, when Adventists declared themselves opposed to killing, and up to the present day, when members regularly train as combatants. Presenters discussed the prevailing last-day-events theory at the time of World War I, which said that the transfer of the Ottoman Empire's capital from Constantinople to Jerusalem would portend Armageddon and signal the Second Coming. They told stories about Adventist attitudes to military service in specific nations. One paper traced the story of Adventist complicity with totalitarian regimes to the present day. Another described the frustration church leaders felt when, as the war

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began, they realized the ailing Ellen White could no longer offer counsel that would help settle disagreements.

There was theological commentary as well as historical description. Noting that the then-dominant eschatological theory had turned out to be wrong, one presenter argued against “idle” or “sensationalized” speculations about the future; the story of Jonah, he said, is ample evidence that predictive prophecy is “conditional” and has “pastoral,” not merely informational, intent. Another reflected on tensions that emerge when differences of opinion and practice come into play, and said questions of diversity and concord cry out for deeper theological reflection. Still another inquired into the matter of individual and denominational character; the fact that many Adventists seemed unprepared for war-related challenges suggests, he said, that the stories we tell ourselves need to be re-examined. The final paper of the conference looked ahead, saying that Seventh-day Adventists must reconsider their hermeneutics, or theory of biblical interpretation, and shift from an overly “propositional” understanding of doctrine to one that is more focused on the “practical,” on the actual living-out, that is, of the Christian faith.

Presenters told stories not only of moral drift but also of moral persistence. A formal apology to the Reform Movement, just issued by the two German unions and read loud at the conference, generated moments of joyful reconciliation. All this, together with an overall longing for what the final presenter called “the radical option for peace and reconciliation,” helped make the conference invigorating as well as sobering. New thinking really could restore old virtue, and help also to improve upon it.

New thinking will require, certainly, recognition that even if the church does not conspire to control politics—does not seek worldly power—it still constitutes an alternative approach to shared life, or to what it means to be a God-honoring society. The church is a challenge to state power, and overlooking this makes it a tool of state power, sometimes a tool

of dictators. It is delusional to think proper religion is wholly private and thus wholly indifferent to politics.

New thinking will require reading the Bible not as a collection of infallible propositions but as a story tending toward a grand ideal. When the current president of the Reformed Movement’s General Conference spoke on Wednesday night, his “theme text” was John 18:36, where Jesus tells Pilate that if his “kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews.” But his kingdom, Jesus said, is not from this world. German leaders in 1914 thought the Jericho story made the case for bearing arms even on Sabbath. One leader quoted from 1 Peter, satisfied that a short passage including the words “Fear God. Honor the emperor,” was adequate support for what he was saying. But if he had read further—read a longer part of the book or considered it in light of the whole Gospel—he would have realized that Jesus suffered injustice without using weapons and left us (so says 1 Peter itself, also in chapter 2) “an example” so that we “should follow in his steps.” For in the Bible taken whole, Christ is the grand ideal, the decisive key to Christian faithfulness.

New thinking will require, too, that apocalyptic books and passages be read for their immediate moral relevance. These writings are not meant to satisfy the informational yearnings of timetable speculators. Prophecy is conditional, history is surprising, and Turkey was a moral distraction. The real business of apocalyptic imagination is new vision and new hope, the making of communities that hold their ground against evil and stand tall for what is good. It is not the dictators and warmongers who are worthy, but the lamb now seated at God’s right hand. ■

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