

GIL'S VALE



Retired historian **Eric Anderson**, PhD, served as the president of both Southwestern Adventist University and Pacific Union College. He also had a distinguished teaching career of more than 30 years. He served as the editor of the Student Movement from 1969-70.

NTINE

to Progress

John Stuart Mill is credited with saying that conservatives are “the stupid party.” Never mind that he did not say it quite that way, and, in any case, he was talking about Britain’s Tories. The dictum seems to fit many of the events described in Gilbert M. Valentine’s brilliant new book, *Ostriches and Canaries: Coping with Change in Adventism, 1966-1979*.

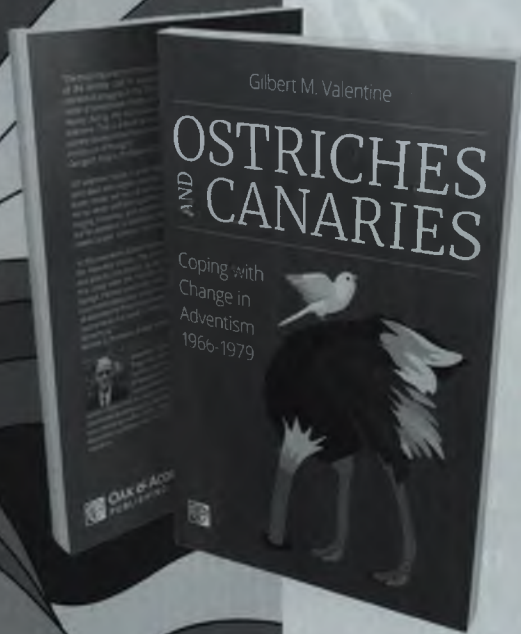
What else can you say when an Adventist educator praises a Christian university's "search for truth" and the leader of the denomination anxiously asks his wise men: "Is this liberalism?" ("Not exactly," most of them respond in essence.) "Simply stupid" was the phrase Siegfried Horn, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary's distinguished archaeologist, used in his diary after a visiting evangelist attacked him for raising questions in class about the specific numbers involved in the Exodus. Stupidity, or at least smug ignorance, explains the necessity of the learned president of Andrews University having to defend himself to an ill-educated church leader for referring in a devotional article to "the author of the book of Hebrews" instead of "the Apostle Paul."

Given the facts of natural history, was it smart to invest spiritual resources in defending the dogma that life on earth is sixty centuries old and not a century more? Though Valentine never does so, it is tempting to describe some of those "coping with change" as just plain dumb.

On the other hand, I remember a statement that Arthur Mann used to make regularly in his lectures at the University of Chicago.

"The conservatives are always right," he would say with a provocative smirk. For example, those reactionaries who warned that flooding the United States with immigrants from places like Ireland or Italy would change the nation's culture were prescient. When they said, "You might even get a Catholic president," they were accurate, Mann noted. Those men (and women) who feared that extending the vote to females would take ladies "off the pedestal" had a point—though we may no longer agree with them about that pedestal. The people who predicted "unintended consequences" for the destruction of vibrant, yet shabby neighborhoods turned out to be clear-sighted about "urban renewal."

A careful reader of Valentine's book is forced, I believe, to consider some of the ways in which Robert Pierson, Willis Hackett, and other leaders of the "stupid party" in the Adventist church were right. If these men were resurrected in 2022 and invited to visit Adventist university campuses or to peruse recent issues of *Spectrum*, wouldn't they say, "We told you so"?



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Professor emeritus of archaeology and history of antiquity, Siegfried Horn taught at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary from 1951-1976.

Elder Pierson might say: “You don’t need a PhD to notice that there is an articulate minority determined to substitute the social gospel for the apocalyptic message of historic Adventism.” Elder Hackett could observe: “It appears to me that some people among us are completely reconciled to the sexual revolution and determined to reject the idea that male and female are rooted in nature or nature’s God.” Either man might notice how seldom Ellen White is invoked on campus and observe: “We feared that was coming.”

But I may be getting ahead of myself here, leaping straight to the ultimate implications of Valentine’s book before some

readers have finished unwrapping that package from Amazon or Oak & Acorn Publishing. As someone who lived through the years 1966 to 1979, I have had a hard time resisting the urge to draw conclusions from the first chapter onward.

I am exhilarated, I admit, by Valentine’s work. Using sources ranging from official correspondence to a confidential diary to candid interviews, he moves beyond rumor and speculation to describe what the key historical actors said and did behind the scenes. This is a “now-it-can-be-told” book with the highest scholarly standards, something like an outstanding military history that clears

away the fog of battle, showing what the rival strategists were planning, despite the incomplete information available to them.

Valentine carefully describes the context for the Pierson era, with its characteristic commitment to the authority and accuracy of Ellen White’s writings. Almost as soon as the Adventist prophet was buried in 1915, he notes, Adventist leaders were struggling to define the appropriate use of the Spirit of Prophecy. The scholarly W. W. Prescott told the prophet’s son: “We are drifting toward a crisis which will come sooner or later.” Attempts to present a more accurate picture of White’s work, recognizing context and imperfections, repeatedly failed—beginning with the 1919 Bible Conference and continuing in periodic purges of religion teachers in denominational colleges. Adventist scholars found it difficult to explain that Ellen White was not inerrant or verbally inspired, especially in a climate in which the infallibility of the Bible was regularly affirmed.

Still, there was a time in which Adventists seemed poised to reach a new consensus.

In the decade and a half before the election of Robert Pierson,



Richard Hammill, president of Andrews University (1963-1976), met informally with President Gerald Ford. Robert H. Pierson, president of the General Conference, is center. The college presidents and other church leaders were in Washington, D.C., for the Annual Council of the General Conference. The meeting with President Ford was arranged under the auspices of the American Council of Education on October 13, 1975.

Seventh-day Adventists repeatedly sought to explain themselves to other conservative Christians, especially during the presidency of Reuben Figuhr (1954-1966). The denomination created a committee on “Biblical Study and Research” (1952), held a Church-wide Bible Conference, and issued Francis Nichol’s comprehensive response to non-Adventist (or ex-Adventist) critics of Ellen White (1951). Thirty-six Adventist

scholars created a seven-volume *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (1953-57) and a well-received *Bible Dictionary* (1960), all respectful of Ellen White, but not as an authority equal to the Bible. *Questions on Doctrine* (1957), which grew out of carefully constructed conversations with wary evangelicals, restated Adventist doctrines in language calculated to make sense to conservative Christians and to

demonstrate a solely biblical basis for Adventist teachings. All these apologetic enterprises were made possible by the accreditation of Adventist colleges in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s (which entailed more teachers with graduate training), the founding and expansion of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, and a generation of outward-looking Adventist writers, best exemplified, perhaps,

by Arthur S. Maxwell and his 10-volume, lavishly illustrated children's book, *The Bible Story* (1953-57), which sold far beyond Adventist circles.

In the Pierson years, by contrast, the focus was inward-looking. Under his leadership, Adventists were more committed to avoiding error than winning the understanding or approval of other Christians, even "fundamentalists." The creativity of the 1950s was replaced by a period of consolidation and centralization. As Valentine shows in fascinating detail, Pierson was concerned that Adventist teachers and writers—sometimes simply "the intellectuals"—were smuggling false ideas into their proclamation of the Adventist message. He and his closest colleagues were determined to appoint reliable men to positions of influence. Building on long years of experience in the mission field, his priority was evangelism, not nurture or education.

Pierson believed that "a wave of liberalism was sweeping over the church," writes Valentine. A few months after taking office, he received a confidential letter from Arthur White, grandson of the prophet and executive secretary of the White Estate: "We are all concerned relative to the influence of Andrews University, and particularly the Seminary," White wrote. "There is a liberal element at work which we should

recognize as we steer the course for the future."

Over the next dozen years, Pierson and his advisors were able to reshape the Seminary, as several controversial teachers were forced out and others accepted non-teaching assignments. They also made sure that trustworthy academics were given increased authority in running the Seminary and identifying "heretics." In addition, Pierson and Gordon Hyde reorganized the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute (as the committee was now called), changing the balance of administrators and academics, and ensuring that scholars would have less voice in articulating denominational teachings. A comparable GC-funded group studying issues of creation and evolution (the Geoscience Research Institute) was transformed under Pierson's direction into an organization tasked with defending the denomination's understanding of creation, with new personnel and a sharply restricted research role.

In these and other matters, ranging from a disputed manuscript by medical school professor Jack Provonsha, to the drafting of creedal statements, to official responses to historical work on Ellen White, the denominational leadership was haunted by the idea that they were surrounded by people who were untrustworthy, deceptive, or, at the very least, utterly disingenuous. They were quick to use metaphors like "Trojan horse" or "fifth column" to describe certain Adventist academics. As Pierson explained to one division president considering hiring a certain Seminary

professor: "Remember, sometimes these intellectuals may reply in an affirmative way to your question, and they will mean something quite different from what

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you have in mind." As a specific example, Pierson added, "You can ask some of these men if they believe in Sister White, and they answer very convincingly 'yes.' But when you really question them thoroughly and carefully you will discover that their idea of inspiration is something very different than you may have thought."

If Pierson had the opportunity to eavesdrop on the private conversations of Richard Hammill, president of Andrews

University, or read the carefully guarded private diary of Siegfried Horn, Seminary dean, he would have found confirmation for his suspicions. "I am too old to fight for a liberalization of Adventist doctrines," Horn confided in 1970, "but the process of liberalization will go on. It cannot be stopped." He commented several times on the value of keeping quiet on controversial matters: "It is too bad he could not keep his mouth shut," he said of a former student, "but had to speak his (liberal) mind even when his opinion was not asked." On another occasion he commented that "much of our prophetic interpretation is quite untenable" though he would not even "breathe" the thought "for fear someone will hear it."

Hammill was an even more unlikely defender of inflexible "historic Adventism." As a student at Walla Walla College, he had been close to Frederick Schilling, the chairman of the theology department who was forced to resign in 1938 for alleged heresy. (Within a week, Schilling had accepted a position as the pastor of a nearby Episcopal church.) He was a good friend of Earle Hilgert, distinguished New Testament scholar, who resigned as Andrews University vice president of academic administration in 1970, accepting a position at McCormick Theological Seminary, and eventually becoming a Presbyterian clergyman. In

retirement, Hammill admitted to holding a range of positions inconsistent with Pierson's views. He found the denomination's interpretation of the sanctuary to be weak and confessed that his version of creationism assumed God's repeated creative acts "over long ages." (A long, long way from Ussher's chronology as a test of loyalty!)

Valentine chooses his words carefully, but he speaks of issues that "posed a dilemma for [Hammill's] personal integrity" and notes that some people thought his role in preparing creedal statements was hypocritical. He notes mildly: "It is a worrying characteristic" that "only in retirement" can Adventist scholars and administrators "safely dissent" from "inadequate formulas." He might have been harsher. A few readers might even accept a slightly revised title to the book: *Ostriches, Canaries, and Chameleons*.

In any case, the Pierson years were as important for the battles that did not take place as for the controversies that did happen. Time and again, one well-informed group declined to be candid, failed to argue for change, refused to try to persuade their critics. They preferred covert resistance to honorable confrontation, a predilection that continued after Pierson had been replaced by Neal Wilson.

Hammill might remind us, of

course, that he was dealing with a leader who could not understand the most cautious dissent. When one colleague urged Pierson to "face up to problems and to explore alternative points of view in a fair and open manner," applying the golden rule by listening "with respect to 'the other side,'" his response was revealing. He said some truths were already "settled." He was "not at all certain" there was an "other side" on these issues.

I closed Valentine's book deeply impressed. This remarkably productive scholar, who has repeatedly written books that break new ground, has done it again. Every future historian of modern Adventism will recognize the importance of the Pierson administration, and no one will write about these years without first consulting Valentine. Still, as I put my battered, marked-up copy of *Ostriches and Canaries* back on the shelf, I have a modest proposal.

I am ready to demand a five-year moratorium on the word "fundamentalist." (Mind you, I might be willing to allow limited exemptions for *bona fide* scholars writing on such topics as the Scopes Trial or the life of Aimee Semple McPherson.)

Valentine, it should be noted, seeks to be precise. He goes to great lengths to define terms, charting a spectrum of positions from a small group



of “ultra-fundamentalists” to open devotees of “higher criticism.” He also separates his terminology from present-day politics, recognizing that an Adventist “liberal” could well be a political “conservative.”

I have three problems with the word “fundamentalist,” even when used with care. First, who now identifies as a fundamentalist? The word had a very clear meaning to Adventists in the 1920s, but do the members of the Adventist Theological Society march under that banner today? Does Ted Wilson send out rallying cries to “fundamentalists of the world”? Or has “fundamentalist” become in this century a question-begging label like “isolationist” or “science denier,” more likely to close discussion than to stimulate it?

If, as a matter of courtesy, we accept the names that people call themselves, what name do “fundamentalists” use to describe their comrades and their agenda? Are they “traditional Adventists” or “Preservation Theology, Incorporated”? Are they “pragmatic Adventists” struggling against “ideologues”? Do they see their opponents as “radicals” or “modernists” or “mainstream Protestants” or simply unbelievers?

Second, the word “fundamentalist” is often imprecise, drawing into its net almost every fish in the Adventist pond. Historians have learned a great deal, for example, about the 1919 Bible Conference and its aftermath. But the difference between A. G. Daniells and his most vehement critics was not a difference between liberal and conservative Protestants. Theologically speaking, Daniells was deeply conservative, with no sympathy for higher criticism, theistic evolution, or naturalistic explanations of the Resurrection and lesser miracles.

(To be fair to Valentine, he warns us right at the beginning that Pierson was more likely



to see “liberalism” manifesting itself in “General Conference women wearing wedding rings,” bearded students, or teachers extending the 6,000-year history of the earth than in crypto-Unitarian theologians believing, as an old joke asserted, in “one God—at most.”)

In the later 20th century, most of the people studied so carefully by Valentine, would look like fundamentalists of some sort to the denizens of Union Theological Seminary or admirers of Paul Tillich. Despite crucial differences, Reuben Figuhr and Robert Pierson were both missionary-minded millennialists. The people who helped Figuhr explain Adventism to the wider Christian world, men such as Francis Nichol and Ray Cottrell and LeRoy Froom, were as “liberal” as the editors and readers of *Christianity Today*—which is to say, not “liberal” at all. At the same time, the leaders who joined Pierson’s

inward-looking campaign of defense probably knew better than to claim that Scripture was dictated by God. They were certainly less worried about the good opinion of evangelicals than Figuhr and his associates.

My moratorium might force historians to use better words. Or to change the metaphor, we might find some tool more accurate than a blunderbuss. To cite an example from my own specialty, historians have learned that we cannot adequately explain the Lincoln-Douglas debates by simply announcing: “they were both racists.” Indeed, promiscuous invocation of “racism” leaves us in the dark about the deep differences between Lincoln and Douglas. We may miss Lincoln’s central argument about the moral evil of slavery—and its threat to the American experiment. After we have dismissed Lincoln as a “racist,” we have run out

of useful words to describe Douglas’s shocking argument that the United States could, in fact, remain forever half slave and half free. We are likely to overlook his assertion that the Declaration of Independence made no claims about the God-given rights of “all men.” In much the same way, “fundamentalist” usually explains too much or too little.

Finally, the word “fundamentalist” can distract us from more important issues. The people who identify themselves as opponents of fundamentalism—say, stereotypical readers of *Spectrum*—can become so absorbed in combating this peril that they forget the weakness of the other side of the controversy.

H. Richard Niebuhr, no fundamentalist by any definition, long ago saw the shallowness of liberal Protestantism and the social gospel, and his deflating description is still accurate: “A

God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

Seventh-day Adventist intellectuals would do well to spend more time engaging thinkers who are neither liberals nor fundamentalists by the battle lines of 1930. Anglican N. T. Wright shows us that the historical-critical method does not necessarily undermine faith. Orthodox David Bentley Hart can critique postmodernists and refute New Atheists with insights that are neither Catholic nor Protestant, modernist nor reactionary. Conservative Presbyterian Tim Keller, to name one more example, is an effective apologist for traditional Christianity by engaging contemporary doubts, using far more effective language than either Adventist evangelists or the spokesmen of mainstream Protestantism.

If they are to thrive, “Progressive Adventists,” despite their distaste for the “stupid party,” may themselves have to wrestle with matters of loyalty and creeds. Moving beyond affirming change and openness, they will have to define the boundaries of their reform agenda, skillfully identifying ideas that must be preserved at all costs, as well as dogmas that demand reinterpretation or even rejection. George Knight is right when he warns that Adventism without apocalypticism is an animal unable to reproduce itself. Present-day critics of Adventist narrowness must find traditions they can wholeheartedly affirm, much as the Branson-era Association of Adventist Forums creatively affirmed the Sabbath. (Indeed, the Sabbath as a living ritual and reality is weakening even among many non-liberal Adventists.)

Ostriches and Canaries is felicitously written, richly documented, and thought-provoking. My criticisms are quibbles, not revelations of major flaws or improbable judgments. Here and there, Valentine’s prose gives off a faint whiff of an Adventist version of the “Whig interpretation of history”—the confident assumption that history is steadily evolving toward our current assumptions and values. As Valentine writes in his introduction, “Time has not stood still, and the church must make its way into the future” endowed with a “progressive, forward-looking vision.” Theological “development,” he comments elsewhere, is “inevitable and could be a blessing.” The existence of a group of “Progressive Adventists,” Valentine concludes, suggests that Adventism may “both cherish its past and adapt to a more complex world.”

But it is not clear, more than a century after the 1919 Bible Conference, that the kind of changes which Valentine sees as inevitable are, in fact, likely to transform Adventism any time soon. Outside of enclaves in California, Australia, and Western Europe, where do ordinary believers support the changes sought by “progressive” Adventists? Or, to rephrase the question, is the next president of the General Conference likely to have a view of Ellen White’s work and authority as nuanced as that of A. G. Daniells a century ago? And even if

a person with Daniells-like insight were to be elected, is it likely that he would risk valuable political capital to promote his understanding to the general Adventist public? In short, as much as the denomination has changed since 1978, Valentine’s ostriches still outnumber his canaries (and his chameleons).



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