



Adventists and the Beast, Part 2 of 5

Northwest Church,
World Mission

'Coming Near' to Other Christians

By Alden Thompson

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Our ministers should seek to come near to the ministers of other denominations. Pray for and with these men of other denominations." Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 6:78.

In March the Walla Walla College School of Theology sponsored a seminar in Portland, Ore., on "Adventists and Other Christians." A Sabbath-afternoon panel discussed how Adventists and other Christians might work together without compromising their convictions. Three evangelical Christian ministers were on the panel.

Though I was not part of the panel itself, I was there and wholeheartedly supported the agenda. In my view, the discussion was probing, helpful, painful, thoroughly Christian. Nothing hinted at compromise. Finding common ground, yes. But when we differed, we agreed to disagree as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I thought the session went well. But three incidents remind me that we don't all see alike on such matters. First, some in the audience clearly were uneasy that other Christians could share in such a program in an Adventist church. They feared the dark shadow of "hands across the gulf" (cf. *The Great Controversy* [1911] 588).

The second item was an overseas letter that arrived a few days later on our campus. The Adventist grapevine had taken the story abroad. The letter expressed alarm that we would participate in such an "ecumenical" gathering.

The third item was a paragraph in the GLEANER report of April 5, 1993, (p. 12) on the decision at the Montana Conference constituency meeting to disband the Troy church. According to the GLEANER Troy delegates refused to meet with Morris Brusett, the conference-appointed mediator. Because he had attended "a meeting sponsored by a non-Adventist Christian denomination," they viewed him as "morally disqualified for the office of fact-finding advisor."

We should probe the roots of such "separatist" convictions, especially in the light of Ellen White's counsel: "Our ministers should seek to come near to the ministers of other denominations. Pray for and with these men of other denominations" (*Testimonies* 6:78). A 1912 paragraph is equally pointed:

"Our laborers should be very careful not to give the impression that they are wolves stealing in to get the sheep, but should let the ministers understand their position and the object of their mission—to call the attention of the people to the truths of God's Word. Here is common ground, upon which we can meet people of other denominations; and in becoming acquainted with them we should dwell mostly upon topics in which all feel an interest, and which will not lead directly and pointedly to the subjects of disagreement."¹ (Emphasis supplied.)

The 1912 date marks this last quote as one of Ellen White's mature reflections. But already in 1865 she spoke firmly to an Adventist minister who was going out of his way to "rail out against others who profess to be Christians" (*Testimonies* 3:462).

In the light of current events in our world, the next two paragraphs are revealing:

"Unbelievers have been disgusted; they think that Seventh-day Adventists have been fairly represented by you, and they decide that it is enough and that they want no more of such doctrines. Our faith is unpopular at best and is in wide contrast to the faith and practices of other denominations. In order to reach those who are in the darkness of error and false theories, we must approach them with the utmost caution and with the greatest wisdom, agreeing with them on every point that we can conscientiously."

"All consideration should be shown for those in error and all just credit given them for honesty. We should come as near the people as possible, and then the light and truth which we have may benefit them. But Brother E, like many of our ministers, commences a warfare at once against the errors that others cherish; he thus raises their combativeness and their set wills, and this holds them encased in a armor of selfish prejudice which no amount of evidence can remove" (*Testimonies* 3:462; emphasis mine).

One of my deep concerns for the church I love is our use, abuse, and neglect of the messages God has given us, both in Scripture and in the writings of Ellen White. Misuse leads to both neglect and rejection. In some cases, precious members of God's family turn away from the church, from Christ, from God.

If the "errors of popular theology have driven many a soul to skepticism" (*The Great Controversy* [1911] 525), then what about the flaws in Christian practice? In Ellen White's view, the combative methods of the minister addressed in *Testimonies* 3:462 (cited above) forever put some people beyond the reach of the truth. In short, wrong practices can "outrage" a person's "sense of justice, mercy, and benevolence" (see *The Great Controversy* [1911] 525) just as much as errors in theology.

We must test everything by the "weightier matters" of Matthew 23:23: justice, mercy, and faith. And I think again of Ellen White's remarkable statement that the privileged people of God who don't live up to the light they have "are in greater danger and in greater condemnation before God than those who are in error upon doctrinal points, yet who seek to live to do good to others" (*Testimonies* 9:243).

Admittedly a danger lurks in saying that God simply wants us to do good, for some will think they can ignore the rest of God's Word. Our task, then, is to show that the rest of God's Word helps us do more good and to do it better. Properly understood, every truth, great or small, should deepen love for Him and for other people. All that we do and say interprets to the world around us the two great commands and the great principle of love. Sometimes other Christians do it better than we do. Blessings on them. In the words of *The Great Controversy*, "God accepts their sincerity of purpose and their integrity before him" (p. 449). If He loves them, so can we.

But then the question: What to do with the book *The Great Controversy*? Is it too hard on the beast? Too scary? That's our next topic. ➔