

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 16

The Religious Drama

Shall We Introduce It Into Our Churches and Institutions?

In Three Parts—Part Three

(F. M. Wilcox, *Review and Herald*, February 8, 1934)

There comes another letter from the field, and unfortunately this describes a theatrical in one of our own academies. I refer to the incident, not by way of censure or criticism, but merely to point the moral which should be drawn.

The performance represented the peoples of other nations in costume. France was depicted by a love-making scene in song and acting. The young lady came on the stage, which was set as a garden. While loitering about, the young man came and in song inquired of her why all his attentions were spurned, and she answered in song. Finally, he asked her if she would say no if he asked her to marry him. She answered, No, in song to this. Then the betrothal took place, and they went off the stage hand in hand. This produced hand clapping of approval, and a twice repeated encore. Some thought it was the best part of the performance, and it was, technically. I was amazed at the acting ability of the young man and woman. They performed like trained actors. You could scarcely see any better acting in a theater, I imagine, though it has been long years since I saw any real acting.

Japan was represented by Japanese dancing girls in silk pajamas. They came out on the stage doing a drill with Japanese parasols, then placed the parasols on the floor and danced a Japanese folk dance (I suppose) around them in their silk pajamas, with the spotlight playing on them.

The girls used rouge and lipstick very freely. I presume they felt they must represent the people of these various countries, but I could not quite see the point. Of course it had the effect to cause them to look lightly on the use of these things. It is not permitted in school, but of course they can't be blamed much for concluding that is simply a rule of a denominational school, which means nothing. I have met some of the girls coming away from school smeared with rouge and lipstick aplenty.

It was all very theatrical from beginning to end. There was the stage, the certain, the change of scenery, the footlights, and even the spotlights. As I sat and looked on, I was carried back to the days when I was obsessed with the theater.

Christ Our Example

What serious, sober-minded believer can feel that plays of this character should have a part in the programs of a Seventh-day Adventist school? Would Christ, think you, grace such an assembly with His presence? Nay, verily, unless He came by His representative, the Holy Spirit, to convict of sin, and to point the way of truth and holiness. "He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked." 1 John 2:6.

I do not consider that this scene in any measure represents the character of the entertainments which are being provided in the great majority of our academies. This, so far as I know, is a rare

exception to the wholesome diversions that are afforded the students in our schools generally.

I have no doubt that the students who engaged in this play are earnest young men and women, and I can well believe that the teachers who permitted a play of this character to be given in one of our schools are faithful, earnest Christians. They unconsciously permitted themselves to be drawn into this net. They simply failed to recognize the influence that attends theatrical performances of this character. I cite the incident, as I have said, to give point to my warning, and to demonstrate that my fears are not wholly groundless, but that danger in the field of entertainment does confront us at the present time.

Ancient and Modern Dramatization

The general influence attending the drama has been regarded as pernicious through the centuries. Henry W. Stough, in his book, "Across the Dead Line of Amusements," makes this statement of facts which are vouched for by other writers:

Dramatic acting has existed from time immemorial, but even the ancient writers of moral truth, both Greek and Roman, frowned upon the theater and almost universally condemned it. Plutarch, Xenophon, Plato, Socrates, Solon, Seneca, Tacitus, Ovid, and many others have raised one common voice against it as hostile to morals. "An English writer in the time of Charles the First," says Dr. Thomas Brainerd, "made a catalogue of authorities against the stage, which contains almost every name of eminence in the heathen and Christian world." Plato once said, "Plays raise the passions and pervert the use of them, and of a consequence are dangerous to morality." Aristotle said, "The seeing of plays and comedies should be forbidden to young people until age and discipline have made them proof against debauchery." Tacitus said, "The German women were guarded against danger and preserved their purity by having no playhouses among them."

And this testimony is borne of the religious plays which were later introduced into the church. This same writer says:

The mystery and miracle plays were introduced during the Middle Ages and were acted very widely. The art of printing being not yet known, it was thought the people could be taught spiritual truths from the stage. However, the results were never satisfactory, and finally were deteriorating. Lecky says that after the thirteenth century they became one of the most powerful agents in bring the church, and, indeed, religion, into disrepute. Reformers then tried to correct abuses. "Two hundred clergymen," says Mrs. Mowatt, the actress, "wrote for the stage, but all in vain!"

The demoralizing influence of the theater has received as severe condemnation in our own day and generation. Many religious teachers have cried out against its abuses. Earnest efforts have been put forth to purify the stage. Boards of censors have been appointed to pass upon exhibitions given in theaters and moving picture shows. But many of these representations today carry with them the crime or sex appeal, and other influences of evil.

A Disreputable Family

Religious drama of today is a distant relative of a disreputable historical family. This member

has grown in later years into greater respectability and may appear quite innocent and harmless of itself, but it serves as an effective decoy to lead its admirers to a love of its more evil and dissolute family relations, and thus many are led to enter upon the dangerous paths of those grosser forms of pleasure and dissipation which are most pernicious in their influence. It operates in the same manner as the glass of wine or beer at the social board. An appetite is created which entices the one who is ensnared into the path leading to the drunkard's grave.

Of these influences of theatrical amusements, the messenger of the Lord says: "As soon as these entertainments are introduced, the objections to theater going are removed from many minds, and the plea that moral and high-toned scenes are to be acted at the theater, breaks down the last barrier." Let us guard ourselves against taking the first step in the path that leads away from Christ.

There is no influence in our land more powerful to poison the imagination, to destroy religious impressions, and to blunt the relish for the tranquil pleasures and sober realities of life, than theatrical amusements. The love for these scenes increases with every indulgence, as the desire for intoxicating drink strengthens with its use. The only safe course is to shun the theater, the circus, and every other questionable place of amusement." —*Counsels to Teachers*, pp. 334, 335.

It is unfortunate indeed for us to bring into our own churches and institutions plays or dramas of any character which would simulate in any degree agencies or methods that have been used through the centuries by the enemy of all righteousness for the promotion of his evil work. I recognize that some of the religious plays today have little if any suggestion of evil, and these forms of entertainment employed in our own churches or institutions may of themselves alone be comparatively harmless; but the danger is that they constitute the first step in a path which ultimately leads downward toward the world and away from God. They constitute a departure from the spirit of simplicity which has characterized this movement through the years.

God would have us jealous to safeguard the church against the first insidious approach of evil. This, we believe, is the course the Master would take if He lived on this earth today, in His relation to the world of sport and entertainment. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." 1 John 2:15.

"Thy Children Shall Be Taught of God"

We can never save our youth and children by arranging programs in our institutions or churches which make constant appeal to their love of entertainment. Indeed, where this appeal is continually made to their natures, they will lose interest in the solemn, sober realities of Christian service. They will tire of the meeting for prayer, of the preaching of the gospel, of the study of the Sabbath school lesson.

We do well to consider this principle in the commendable efforts we put forth for the salvation of our youth and children in every department of the church. We must recognize that character transformation can be wrought only by the Lord Jesus Christ, the preaching of the gospel of salvation, the study of the word of God, prayer and consecrated effort. It is perfectly proper to give an interesting and attractive setting to every service of the church, but the Seventh-day Adventist Church can never be saved by ritualism or literary programs. These under some circumstances may be helps, but they are lame helps at best.