

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 22

DRAMATIC PRODUCTIONS IN S.D.A. INSTITUTIONS

(Statement prepared by Arthur L. White, Secretary, Ellen G. White Publications.)

Request has been received at the White Estate for the materials from the pen of Ellen G. White which may have a bearing on the question of the production of dramatic programs in SDA institutions. The E. G. White counsels touching on this point deal with a number of situations, and in so doing, enumerate principles which it would seem may well serve as guidelines.

A survey of these counsels fails to reveal an across-the-board condemnation of all enacted programs. In other words, Ellen White does not condemn a program just because it may be dramatized. In this respect the counsels touching dramatic productions are much like the counsels relating to sports, and interestingly, the two are treated together in two of the statements of caution. Mrs. White did not condemn the "simple exercise of playing ball," (AH 499) but as she enumerated the principles involved, she pointed out the grave perils which usually accompanied sports activities. Mrs. White did not condemn the simple enacted program put on by the Battle Creek Sabbath School in 1888, but in many statements she clearly points out the many and almost sure perils which accompany "plays" and "theatrical programs."

It would then appear that the questions relating to both sports and dramatic productions in SDA institutions must be settled on the basis of fundamental principles rather than on a simple acceptance or prohibition. This greatly complicates the task and calls for close observation, careful analysis and the determination to be guided by Christian principle. If the young men and women, in their personal experience, can be brought to understand and apply these principles, worthwhile progress will be made in teaching the vital lesson that the life of the Christian is guided not by arbitrary "do's" or "don't's" but by principle.

The Value of Visual Presentation

The visual presentation is known to be an effective means of communication. It was often employed by God Himself in enlightening His prophets. The prophet many times recounts what "he saw" in vision and bore witness as to what passed before him in panoramic view. Ellen White commented on this while in Europe as she was called upon to meet the fanatical position of some that all pictures are prohibited by the second commandment and should be destroyed:

The second commandment prohibits image worship; but God Himself employed pictures and symbols to represent to His prophets lessons which He would have them give to the people, and which could thus be better understood than if given in any other way. He appealed to the understanding through the sense of sight. Prophetic history was presented to Daniel and John in symbols, and these were to be represented plainly upon tables, that he who reads might understand. —*Selected Messages*, Book 2, pp. 319, 320.

The Ellen G. White reference is well illustrated in Ezekiel's experience in which the power of God was dramatized:

At one time the prophet Ezekiel was in vision set down in the midst of a large valley. Before him lay a dismal scene. Throughout its whole extent the valley was covered with the bones of the dead. The question was asked, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ The prophet replied, ‘O \Lord God, Thou knowest.’ What could the might and power of man accomplish with these dead bones? The prophet could see no hope of life being imparted to them. But as he looked, the power of God began to work. The scattered bones were shaken, and began to come together, ‘bone to his bone,’ and were bound together by sinews. They were covered with flesh, and as the Lord breathed upon the bodies thus formed, ‘the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.’” —E. G. White, MS 85, 1903, in *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4, p. 1165.

Effective Also for Evil

But as is so often the case, that which may be effective for good when rightly used can also, if wrongly employed, be effective for evil, even to the point where the rightful use may have to be curtailed. Note in the description of Satan’s work in the world generally that drama is first named as one of the “amusements” which Satan turns “to account in destroying souls”:

Many of the amusements popular in the world today, even with those who claim to be Christians, tend to the same end as did those of the heathen. There are indeed few among them that Satan does not turn to account in destroying souls. Through the drama he has worked for ages to excite passion and glorify vice. The opera, with its fascinating display and bewildering music, the masquerade, the dance, the card table, Satan employs to break down the barriers of principle and open the door to sensual indulgence. In every gathering for pleasure where pride is fostered or appetite indulged, where one is led to forget God and lose sight of eternal interests, there Satan is binding his chains about the soul.” —*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 459 (AH 515). Published in 1890.

A decade earlier in the *Testimonies*, sensational dramas were pointed out as preoccupying the mind of men and women and this hindered the reception of the message of truth:

The world is teeming with errors and fables. Novelties in the form of sensational dramas are continually arising to engross the mind, and absurd theories abound which are destructive to moral and spiritual advancement.” —*Testimonies*, Vol. 4, p. 415, (1880).

The third E. G. White statement we cite on this point relates to the welfare of the students at Battle Creek College in the early days before dormitories were provided, and the students lived in the homes of families residing nearby. This statement involves the legitimate theater, for it was penned in 1881, long before the motion picture was known. The perils of “theatrical amusements” is clearly depicted and fundamental principles delineated:

Among the most dangerous resorts for pleasure is the theater. Instead of being a school of morality and virtue, as is so often claimed, it is the very hotbed of

immorality. Vicious habits and sinful propensities are strengthened and confirmed by these entertainments. Low songs, lewd gestures, expressions and attitudes, deprave the imagination and debase the morals. Every youth who habitually attends such exhibitions will be corrupted in principle. 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. —*Testimonies*, Vol. 4, pp. 652, 653.

Seventh-day Adventists Wrestle With the Problem

It was as the number of Seventh-day Adventists residing in Battle Creek greatly increased and as our institutional program got well under way that we found ourselves from time to time confronted with the question of dramatic productions.

At the Sanitarium

The Sanitarium with its large number of non-Adventist guests was faced with the problem of their entertainment. The non-Adventist Dansville, New York institution under the management of Dr. Jackson had encouraged “plays” as being beneficial to the patients. (See *Testimonies*, Vol. 3, p. 172.) But Ellen White gave firm counsel that this type of thing should not come into our sanitarium at Battle Creek. This counsel appeared in 1881 in an article entitled “Position and Work of the Sanitarium,” but its warnings are by no means limited to the sanitarium situation:

Those who bear the responsibility at the sanitarium should be exceedingly guarded that the amusements shall not be of a character to lower the standard of Christianity, bringing this institution down upon a level with others and weakening the power of true godliness in the minds of those who are connected with it. Worldly or theatrical entertainments are not essential for the prosperity of the sanitarium or for the health of the patients. The more they have of this kind of amusements, the less will they be pleased unless something of the kind shall be continually carried on. The mind is in a fever of unrest for something new and exciting, the very thing it ought not to have. And if these amusements are once allowed, they are expected again, and the patients lose their relish for any simple arrangement to occupy the time. But repose, rather than excitement, is what many of the patients need.

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. Those who would permit this class of amusements at the sanitarium would better be seeking wisdom from God to lead these poor, hungry, thirsting souls to the Fountain of joy, and peace, and happiness.

The managers of the sanitarium may as well conclude at once that they will never be able to satisfy that class of minds that can find happiness only in something new and exciting. To many persons this has been the intellectual diet during their

lifetime; there are mental as well as physical dyspeptics. —*Testimonies*, Vol. 4, pp. 577-579.

No information is now available as to the precise nature of the “theatrical entertainments” given at the sanitarium and here referred to. The statement must be understood in the context as revealed in the chapter.

SDA Literary Societies

At this very time, 1880-1881, in our attempts to provide cultural programs for our church members, “literary societies” were formed at Battle Creek and at some other points. Dramatic productions soon became a part of the program. The January 4, 1881 issue of the *Review* carried Mrs. White’s report on the problem with which they were soon confronted, and led her to declare:

In every case where a literary society has been established among our people, its influence has proved to be unfavorable to religious life, and has led to backsliding from God. This has been tried at Battle Creek and in other places, and the result has ever been the same.

Then she sets forth the crux of the problem:

The purposes and objects which lead to the formation of literary societies may be good; but unless wisdom from God shall control these organizations, they will become a positive evil. Various entertainments are introduced to make the meetings interesting and attractive for worldlings, and thus the exercises of the so-called literary society too often degenerate into demoralizing theatrical performances, and cheap nonsense. All these gratify the carnal mind, that is at enmity with God; but they do not strengthen the intellect nor confirm the morals. Little by little, the spiritual element is ruled out by the irreligious, and the effort to harmonize principles which are antagonistic in their nature proves a decided failure. When God’s people voluntarily unite with the worldly and unconsecrated, and give them the pre-eminence, they will be led away from Him by the unsanctified influence under which they have placed themselves.

Many literary societies are in reality young theaters on a cheap scale, and they create in the youth a taste for the stage.” —*Review and Herald*, Jan. 4, 1881.

The entire article, now currently available, may be read with profit. See *Ellen G. White Review and Herald Articles*, (Facsimile Reprint) Vol. 1, pp. 224, 225. Significant excerpts appear on pp. 11-13 of this document as Exhibit A.

Lyceums and Literary Societies

At a later date, Ellen White dealt with the involvements of acts and plays in SDA lyceums and literary societies. In so doing she repeated some of the counsel of the 1881 *Review* article just noted and then broadened the coverage. She deplored that often individuals of “short religious experience” take the lead. Then “Satan uses men as his agents to suggest, to lead out, to propose different acts and a variety of amusing things which give no strength to the morals or elevation to the mind, but are wholly worldly. Soon the religious element is ruled out, and the irreligious elements

take the lead.” —*E. G. White MS 41*, 1991 (See Exhibit B, p. 14). The result was that there was “brought in low, cheap matters that are not elevating or instructive; but only amuse.” “The mind” was led “away from serious reflection, away from God, away from heaven.”

She admonished:

If your lyceums and literary societies would be made an opportunity for searching the Bible, it would be far more an intellectual society than it can ever become through the attention being turned to theatrical performances. What high and noble truths the mind may fasten upon and explore in God’s Word!...

Those who compose these societies, who profess to love and reverence sacred things, and yet allow the mind to come down to the superficial, to the unreal, to the simple, cheap, fictitious acting, are doing the devil’s work just as surely as they look upon and unite with these scenes.” —*E. G. White MS 41*, 1900.

Turn to Exhibit B, pages 14 and 15 for the full statement, depicting the gradual compromising and vacillating between duty and the world, with the final results.

Counsel Regarding the 1888 Enacted Christmas Program

Early Wednesday morning, December 26, 1888, Ellen G. White wrote concerning a Christmas program at Battle Creek, put on by the Sabbath School children which she had attended the night before. It was a simple dramatized program featuring a lighthouse, children wearing costumes, and there were speeches, poems and songs. Ella M. White, Mrs. White’s six year old granddaughter was in the program, dressed to typify an angel. This communication appears as Exhibit D on pages 19 and 20.

It is significant that the counsel given to the man who organized the program relates to how the features of the program could have been made more effective, but there was no condemnation of the program because of the enacted scenes. Rather she commented, “I was pleased with the lighthouse.... The part acted by the children was good. The reading was appropriate.” —*E. G. White Letter 5*, 1888, (Page 19). At the same time, she made certain observations:

The singing was after the order we would expect it to be in any theatrical performance, but not one word to be distinguished. Certainly the tempest-tossed ship would be wrecked upon the rocks, if there were no more light coming from the lighthouse than was seen in the exercises. I must say I was pained at these things, so out of order with the very work of reformation we were trying to carry forward in the church and with our institutions that I should have felt better if I had not been present. This was an occasion that should have been gotten up not only for the Sabbath school children but words should have been spoken that would have deepened the impression of a necessity of seeking for the favor of that Saviour who hath loved them and gave Himself for them. If the precious hymns had been sung, “Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee,” and “Jesus lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly, while the billows near me roll, while the tempest still is nigh.”... Whose souls were inspired with new and fresh zeal for the Master in those songs sung, whose virtue was in the different performances of the singer?” —*E. G. White Letter 5*, 1888, (Exhibit D, p. 19).

Then followed some very pertinent questions regarding the program:

Will it make those who acted their part in it more spiritually minded? Will it increase their sense of obligation to our heavenly Father who sent His Son into the world at such an infinite sacrifice to save fallen man from utter ruin? Was the mind awakened to grasp God because of His great love wherewith He has loved us? — *Ibid.*, (Exhibit D, p. 20).

If the fact that there was acting in the program was in itself sinful, that certainly would have been made plain. The counsel, rather, related to content, effect on players, etc.

This experience would seem to indicate the proper use of an enacted program dedicated to enlighten men and women concerning the love of God and the way to salvation, by consecrated men and women engaging in the enterprise, motivated by the service of God and not the aggrandizement of self. The *Faith for Today* telecast would seem to fall in this category. Nor would this appear to be in conflict with the counsel that the SDA evangelist should carry forward his work without “theatrical display.” See pages _____, Exhibit E, “The Evangelist and Theatrical Display.”

The Use of Our Talents in Communication

In 1898, Ellen G. White sent to the leaders of the church a manuscript entitled “To Every Man His Work,”* in which she deals with the proper use of the talents entrusted to us. The talent of communication was treated at length and in a very enlightening manner. It was pointed out that this talent might be used to serve self or to serve Christ.

If we regard the advantages given to us as our own, to be used according to our pleasures, to make a display and create a sensation, the Lord Jesus is put to shame by the characters of His professed followers. —*E. G. White MS 42*, 1898.

Then she asks:

Can you glorify God by being educated to represent characters in plays, and to amuse the audience with fables? Has not the Lord given you intellect to be used to His name’s glory in proclaiming the gospel of Christ? If you desire a public career, there is a work you may do. Help the class you represent in plays. Come to the reality.... The Lord has given evidence of His love for the world. There was no falsity, no acting, in what He did. ...*Ibid.*

One key point, almost hidden, is worth pondering.

All who desire a place of distinction may have opportunity to wear the yoke of Christ. —*Ibid.*

*Used largely in *Review and Herald Supplement*, June 21, 1898, as a reading to be presented in the churches. *Review and Herald Articles*, Vol. 3, pp. 581-583.

She urged that the media of communication be employed to communicate “a knowledge of Christ,” not for the glorification of self. (See pp. 16-18, Exhibit C for fuller statement.)

The training in “pride and a love of display” which leads to self-aggrandizement, may come early, fostered by even the Sabbath School program. Warned Ellen White in 1893:

In the Sabbath school, men and women have been accepted as officers and teachers, who have not been spiritually minded, and had no live interest in the work committed to their care; but matters can be set in order only through the aid of the Holy Spirit. The same evil has existed for years as now exists in our churches. Formality, pride, and love of display have taken the place of true piety and humble godliness. We might see a different order of things should a number consecrate themselves wholly to God, and then devote their talents to the Sabbath school work, ever advancing in knowledge, and educating themselves so that they would be able to instruct others as to the best methods to employ in the work; but it is not for the workers to seek for methods by which they can make a show, consuming time in theatrical performances and musical display, for this benefits no one. It does no good to train the children to make speeches for special occasions. They should be won to Christ, and instead of expending time, money, and effort to make a display, let the whole effort be made to gather sheaves for the harvest. —*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 253.

A second quotation makes the point stand out still more clearly:

Pride, self-esteem, and boldness are marked characteristics of the children of this day, and they are the curse of the age. When I see this un-Christlike, unlovely manifestation on every side, and then see parents and teachers seeking to display the ability and proficiency of their children and scholars, I am pained to the heart; for I know that it is exactly the opposite course from the one that should be pursued. —*Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 46.

Senses Confused by Games and Theatrical Performances

The curtain is drawn aside in 1900 as Ellen White in an article in the *Review and Herald* pictures the manner in which, as our youth are receiving their education, Satan employs an infatuation “in games and theatrical performances” to confuse the senses of “the young” “while light shines all about them.” Here is the solemn picture in its setting:

The public opinion is that manual labor is degrading. But men may play as hard as they like at cricket, or baseball, or in pugilistic games, without being degraded! Satan is delighted when he sees human beings using their physical and mental powers in that which does not educate, which is not useful, which does not help them to be a blessing to those who need their help. While they are becoming experts in games that are not of the least value to themselves or others, Satan is playing the game of life for their souls, taking from them the precious talents God has given them, and placing in their stead his own evil attributes, which not only destroy them, but through their influence destroy those who have any connection with them.

Satan's work is to lead men to ignore God, to so engross and absorb the mind that God will not be in their thoughts. The education they have received has been of a character to confuse the mind, and eclipse the true light. Satan does not wish the people to have a knowledge of God; and if he can set in operation games and theatrical performances that will so confuse the senses of the young that human beings will perish in darkness while light shines all about them, he is well pleased. —*Review and Herald*, March 13, 1900, in "Review Articles," Vol. 4, p. 163.

See *Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students*, pp. 274, 275 for paralleling statement.

Jesus Christ is the example for the Christian in all things. Of Him she wrote:

I have not been able to find one instance where He educated His disciples to engage in amusement of football or pugilistic games, to obtain physical exercise, or in theatrical performances, and yet Christ was our pattern in all things. — *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 229.

A sound guiding principle to keep ever in mind in dealing with questions of the kind we have been studying is stated in *Testimonies*, Vol. 5, p. 360:

Our example and influence must be a power on the side of reform. We must abstain from any practice which will blunt the conscience or encourage temptation. We must open no door that will give Satan access to the mind of one human being formed in the image of God.

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