

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 12

“What of the Religious Motion Picture Drama?”

*by J. A. Stevens

(*Sunday School Times*, January 28, 1928)

It is heartening in this day of lowering standards to find editorial backbone necessary for giving an unequivocal answer to the above question that heads a fine article in the *Sunday School Times*. So many churches have tried to compete with the theaters by staging spectacular attractions, that it is not altogether surprising to find the theaters simulating the church by an endeavor to put on semisacred plays. A letter to the editor of the *Times* called forth the comment that may be read with profit by every Seventh-day Adventist.

The Letter

“There is a subject that I would be so glad to see treated in the *Times*. I refer to the religious plays that are having such an enormous run. In some of these plays no individual actually impersonates the Christ, but in others the impersonation is carried out to the minutest detail. The ‘_____,’ which has been running for years in the out-of-doors theater in Hollywood, depicts scenes taken from the Gospels, and the man who impersonates Christ spends his time between scenes smoking cigarettes.

“In the new film, ‘_____,’ I understand that Christ’s passion, including the actual crucifixion and the resurrection, is acted out minutely! These plays are sponsored by ministers and Christian workers, and Christians by the thousands go to see them, and come away captivated by them.

“If one protests, one is met with all sorts of arguments about the ‘wonderful good accomplished,’ the ‘beautiful character of the man taking the part of Christ;’ and we are even told, in all seriousness, that he ‘actually lives the part.’ ‘_____ is a very religious man, you know,’ they say, and ‘people who will not go to church will go and see these things, and only think how uplifting it is,’ always winding up with, ‘Well, if you would only go and see it for yourself, you would feel very differently about it.’

“To my way of thinking it is a desecration; it is blasphemy to commercialize the most sacred things. I cannot believe that any good could come of it. I would like to know what the *Times* thinks on this subject.” —*A California reader.*

The Answer

“For half a century the *Sunday School Times* has consistently held the conviction that, as a young converted actor said in his series last year in these columns, ‘a Christian has no place on either side of the footlights.’ The dramatic or theatrical profession, at its best, is demoralizing. At its best it is unworthy of the lifetime study and devotion that it demands from those who would rise to the top of this profession. It is based on artificiality: successfully seeming to be what one is not. While there are a few outstanding exceptions in its ranks, of individual men or women who have not been dragged down by it, its general trail of wreckage in character can be compared to no other reputable profession or life calling. And its accompaniments, in such matters as late hours,

abandonment of ordinary standards of modesty, shameless freedom between the sexes, and other tendencies, tell their own story and bring their inevitable results.

“This is the profession that produces the religious plays of today. The actors and actresses who make up the companies that present these religious plays, are presenting, with equal enthusiasm and facility, other plays that no consistent Christian could consider witnessing. There have undoubtedly been some exceptionally fine religious plays in recent years, both on the stage and on the ‘silver screen,’—in motion pictures,—and the themes of such plays, and even the incidents and details, may be largely free from objection. The fact remains, however, that even in the best of these the motive for the production is commercial and mercenary; the characters of the cast are those of the demoralizing dramatic profession; and the Christian who attends such a play is lending his or her influence to a business that is doing more to injure society and wreck lives than any other reputable business today.

“Christians cannot afford to lend their influence to this. It is true, as the correspondent notes, that we are told impressively of the great good accomplished by religious plays. But has any reader of the *Sunday School Times* ever heard of a soul saved, born again by faith in Christ as Saviour, through a commercial religious play of this sort? The *Times* doubts whether such a result has been brought to pass. Even if it has, it is only an instance of God making the wrath of man to praise Him; and God does not want His children to encourage the wrath of man.”