

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 14

The Religious Drama

Forsaking the First Love

In Three Parts—Part One

(F. M. Wilcox, *Review and Herald*, January 25, 1934)

The apostolic church was established in purity and simplicity. Its membership was made up of men and women who had been directly instructed by the Lord or by His apostles. These teachers held to the truth of God in its simplicity and purity. Their lives were marked by humility, consecration, and sacrifice. But the apostles had scarce retired to their graves before there arose in the church a spirit foreign to the simple faith which characterized the early believers. This is expressed in the letter to the church at Ephesus, as recorded in the second chapter of the Revelation. The Lord commends this church for their labor and patience. They had manifested a heroic faith in espousing an unpopular cause. They were zealous in the promulgation of the gospel. They suffered trial and persecution. But little by little the ardor of their zeal had abated, and the Lord brings against them this charge: "I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." He rebukes their sin, and then points out the remedy: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."

This loss of the first love has been the entering wedge by which Satan through all the centuries has sought to separate the Christian disciple from his Lord. Following this has come formalism, worldliness, a corrupted faith, a loss of distinctive character between those who professed Christ's name and those who knew Him not. The backsliding which crept into the apostolic church grew and increased with the years. It resulted in the fearful apostasy of succeeding centuries.

In these experiences the church of Christ may read lessons for every subsequent period. The church to whom I am speaking need to take these lessons home to their own hearts. There is danger today that we shall lose the earnestness of our Christian experience and our simplicity of faith.

I well recall how this danger was impressed upon my mind by a little incident several years ago. In the city of London I visited a church in which John Wesley had preached the gospel of Christ for his day and generation. It was interesting to climb up into the high pulpit and feel that I stood in the very place where this man of God cried out against the sins of his day, calling men and women to a new experience in Christ Jesus. Near by stood the humble one-and-a-half story home where Wesley had lived. In the chamber the guide pointed out a little room where Wesley had repaired day after day to seek the blessing of God upon his labors.

Divining, perhaps, the thought in my mind, the guide left me, and I knelt down in this little room and prayed that I might be given the spirit of earnestness and consecration which characterized this man of God. Then as I passed on I was led to ask myself this question, "If John Wesley were alive today, would he recognize in the great present-day Methodist Church, with its millions of members, the simple, humble church which he was instrumental in establishing?" I recognize that there are many godly men and women who are members of the Methodist Church today, and these, with me, deplore the loss of simplicity, the departure from the old-time standards, which mark the

lives of many at the present time. And then my thoughts went further. I said, "Will the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with which I am associated, follow in the path of the great denominations around us? Will we lose our simplicity, our humble, childlike faith, our simple Christian experience?"

A Personal Question

I believe with all my heart in the ultimate victory of the movement with which we are connected. I know from the teachings of God's word that there is to be developed in these last days a people who will keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus, a company who will stand on Mount Zion without sin or guile. But while I have faith that the movement itself will triumph and that there will be found when Christ comes a devoted church who will stand clothed in His righteousness, the question becomes more personal, and I am led to ask myself, Will I be among this number?

This is the question which I wish to put to each reader of the REVIEW. Will you be among that number? I thank God for the spirit of simplicity and zeal and earnestness which I see in the lives of the larger part of our membership. As I visited several camp meetings the past season and held meetings in a number of our large churches, I was encouraged by what I saw and heard of the spirit of consecration that possesses the lives of a large number. But I was made sad to learn of the spirit of indifference and worldliness which is taking possession of the hearts of some.

We must confess with sorrow that there are some in the church today who are losing their first love. The call of the world is having an effect in too many lives. We have been faithfully warned by the word of God that this would be so. Again and again the Master, in addressing the church living just before His second coming, admonishes them against the spirit of indifference, of spiritual sloth, against the danger of the cares of this life, against the influence of creature comforts, against saying in their hearts, "My Lord delayeth His coming." (See Mark 13:33-37; Luke 21:34-36; Matt. 24:44-51.) Some things that we see creeping in among us make us realize the need of these admonitions.

Religious Plays and Pageants

Some of our brethren and sisters are becoming ensnared with the spirit of worldly pleasure, and it is of this danger that I wish to sound a warning in this article. Of the evils attending the theater and the moving picture show, perhaps I need say little, although some of our membership are attending such gatherings. But there are others, while they would not attend some of these more objectionable forms of pleasure, feel free to attend gatherings of the same sort in character, if not of the same degree of harmfulness. Some who would refuse to go to the drama as enacted in a theater, feel free to go to a drama enacted in some church or hall. If the drama has a historical background or a religious setting, this affords ample excuse for attendance at such an entertainment. And when plays of this character are patronized in outside churches, the logical step is to seek to bring them into our own churches and into our own institutions. This is done on the plea that such historical pageants or religious dramas are educational or teach good moral lessons.

If I were the only one concerned over such entertainments which are urging their way into some of our schools and churches, I would feel to question my own judgment, but I am glad from my correspondence to learn that there are others who sense deeply the influence of these entertainments which are finding place in some of the gatherings of our people.

I was pleased recently, on receiving the minutes of one of our union conventions, to see that the executive committee of the union conference had unanimously passed the following resolution relative to some of these influences of which I have spoken:

WHEREAS, The world is forcing its way into the church in some centers by way of worldly pageant, show, comic lecture, theatrical display, cheap musical entertainment, and costly and extravagant church weddings, thus endangering our young people in the line of demarcation between the church and the world; therefore,

Resolved, That with humiliation of soul and deeply sensing the fact that we are living in the last hour when the devil has come down in great power, we lovingly and urgently raise the note of warning to our people, both young and old, but especially to our church and institutional leaders, pointing out the danger of the hour in all these and other matters of a worldly trend, seeking for a renewal of the straight testimony of the True Witness, hoping that a revival of primitive godliness may result.

I believe that serious consideration should be given to this question, particularly by our church officers and by our conference and institutional leaders. The introduction into our schools and churches of pageants and plays and the dramatization of various incidents, even though they may be historical and educational, has a tendency to break down in the minds of many the objection to theater going. Of this danger we have been definitely warned by the instruction that has come to us.

“Worldly or Theatrical Entertainments”

Some years ago the messenger of the Lord gave very definite counsel to the managers of our sanitariums against providing entertainment of this character of the guests of the institution. I believe it is well for us to read this counsel in this connection. I quote from Volume IV, pages 577-579, of “Testimonies for the Church”:

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.

When there has been a departure from the right path, it is difficult to return. Barriers have been removed, safeguards broken down. One step in the wrong direction prepares the way for another.

Recognizing the Social Instinct

I do not believe that we can hope to hold the young people of this denomination by providing for them entertainments which simulate closely the pleasures of the world. On the other hand, I believe it is not only proper, but a duty we owe to our boys and girls, to provide them, in our homes, in our churches, and in our institutions, social gatherings, entertainment which will be both instructive and enjoyable. The preparation of such programs will require thought and study, but they will be well worth the effort expended to make them helpful and uplifting.

I feel that there has been a serious lack in our church through the years in not giving more attention to the social instinct of the youth. Because the church has failed to meet this demand, our boys and girls have sought pleasure and recreation in worldly associations.

The Joy of Christian Service

But there is a still higher consideration which must always be kept in mind. We must lead our youth to find their highest pleasure in service for their heavenly King. The greatest joy of the Christian is found in his communion with his Lord, communion in prayer, in Bible study, and in labor for others. And if our youth could be brought in their Christian experience to the place where they would know this joy, this above everything else would hold them in the days of stress and storm before us.

But before we can lead them into this joy, we ourselves must know it in our own lives. As never before in the history of this movement we should seek for a fulfillment of the prophetic word found in the fourth chapter of Malachi. The divine promise is that God will turn the hearts of the fathers toward the children, and the hearts of the children toward the fathers. Note the order—the hearts of the fathers turn first, and the response is found in the hearts of the children.

I feel that we need to take a deeper and more concrete interest in the youth of the denomination, in affording them encouragement in every laudable ambition, in assisting them as far as lies within our power in the attainment of these ambitions, in leading them to sense the responsibility that rests upon them as the younger members of the Lord's family, to bring to a glorious completion the work which must of necessity, if time shall continue even a few more years, rest more and more upon their shoulders. As they are led to sense this responsibility, they will find joy in service, and they will prove true, I believe, to the ideals of this message and to every right standard.



Every consecration made in the darkness is reaching out toward the light, and in the end must come out into the light, strong in the strength which it won in its life and struggle in the dark.—*Phillips Brooks*.