

## Drama and the SDA Church:

### Appendix 15

#### *The Religious Drama*

#### *Shall We Introduce It Into Our Churches and Institutions?*

*In Three Parts—Part Two*

(F. M. Wilcox, *Review and Herald*, February 1, 1934)

I feel that this question is of sufficient importance to warrant further consideration. The influence of historical pageants, religious dramas, theatrical plays, and entertainments of this character, is increasing rapidly. More and more they are being given, not only before the members of various clubs and civic organizations, but in various popular churches. Some of these plays appear quite innocent of themselves, and may be more or less educational in their character. In my judgment, the unfortunate influence attending entertainments of this kind is to break down objection to attendance at the theater and worldly entertainments which are positively inimical to spiritual growth and experience.

Some of these religious dramas are advertised in the newspapers. I have before me as I write a newspaper report of such a play given in one of our large Eastern cities. Heaven was represented by a stage set with beautiful lights, on which sat men and women dressed in white robes with crowns on their heads, representing the angelic host, while lovely soft music filled the air. The apostle Peter was represented as standing at the improvised pearly gate to pass upon the credentials and character of those seeking admission. The candidates for heaven were represented as wending their way in the straight and narrow path to the heavenly city. The devil, represented as dressed in hideous attire, with horns on his head, came out of an improvised den or hell to tempt the pilgrims from the straight and narrow way. He did this by various appeals to their appetite, their pride, and their passions. Some fell under the power of his influence and were lured into his den; others resisted his appeal, and went on to the gate where they were admitted by Peter and with loud acclaim by the angelic host. The newspaper reporter, in describing this play, advises the readers of his paper to see this religious drama, as it would afford them a rare treat.

It is unthinkable, of course, that a play of this character would be brought into any of our churches or institutions, but this affords a fair example of many such plays that are being enacted in some of the churches around us at the present time. And I think it is well for Seventh-day Adventists to face the question as to whether we in our churches and institutions are to follow in the path of these great churches, and provide entertainment of this character for our own young people. May God forbid that "Ichabod" should ever be written over the doors of our sanctuaries, as it has been written over the doors of some of the worldly sanctuaries of today.

#### *Others Deeply Concerned*

But I say there is danger, and I am not alone in sensing this danger. I know from the correspondence which comes to me from the field that there are other conscientious men and women who view some tendencies in our own ranks with much concern. Even since the writing of my article of last week, I have received the following communication, which speaks for itself:

The question has arisen, as it has many times in the past, among various

groups of our young people of which I have chanced to be a member, as to “seeing a show.” We are severely criticized if we even dare go to a down-town show, but the same show that we wished to see is brought to us in our own chapels and sanitarium parlors, labeled “a good picture.” Many of them are educational, but I have witnessed several that are educational in love making, etc., to a degree greater than anything else.

Personally, I do not care for the show presented in any place, but I would like to know how to answer my patients, many of whom have remarked, “I thought you folks didn’t believe in shows,” and my friends see no difference between going to a down-town show or seeing the same thing “sterilized,” as we young folks here dub it, when the discussion arises, as it did today among a group of doctors and nurses. We really see no difference. A show is a show. Labeling it “chocolate sirup” and placing it in a sirup pitcher doesn’t change its ill effects.

This does not refer to pictures of progress in the mission field, travelogues, and such pictures as the “making of insulin,” but does refer to those “harmless” stories in picture form that call forth such remarks as, “Well, the theatrical season is open again,” in referring to certain entertainments in some of our denominational halls.

The writer of this communication says very justly that “a show is a show,” a theatrical performance is a theatrical performance, a drama is a drama, wherever it may be enacted. Moving it from the opera house or theater to an institution does not change its character; indeed, it may make its influence all the more deadly, in that by the sanction it thus receives there will be broken down the objection to theater going—an objection which is still cherished, I believe, by the very large majority of Seventh-day Adventists.

I recognize, however, that there is greater danger in attending some entertainment in a theater or movie than there would be in attending that entertainment in a more wholesome environment. The setting of any scene affects its influence. Associating with the careless, worldly throng who habitually attend the theater or the movie would have an influence on one’s life that would not come from association with those more religiously inclined.

### *Religious Drama*

I have spoken of religious drama. What do I mean by this? Religious drama is defined as follows by the Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. VIII, p. 475, eleventh edition: “Drama (literally ‘action,’ from Gr. •• \_\_, act or do), the term applied to those productions of art which imitate or, to use a more modern term, ‘represent’ action by introducing the personages taking part in them as real, and as employed in the action itself.”

An incident I saw some years ago affords a concrete definition of religious drama. In one scene in a serial play enacted before a popular audience, was a young woman lying on a couch representing Dorcas, who had just died. Around the couch were several girls, representing the companions of Dorcas, bewailing her death. Peter had been sent for to come from Joppa. A young man representing Peter, dressed in grotesque costume, with long white flowing beard, entered the stage. He walked to the bedside, engaged apparently in silent prayer, and then took the supposed Dorcas by the hand and commanded her to arise, which she did, to the applause of the audience.

Surely a terrible travesty upon a sacred scene! Let us hope that such scenes as this will never be enacted in Seventh-day Adventist churches or any of our institutions.

### *Satan Employs the Drama*

Of the influence of drama and of the manner in which the enemy of all righteousness uses it to decoy souls, we have this statement from the messenger of the Lord:

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. — *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 459.

I believe that the principle involved in religious drama, pageants, etc., should be studied as relates even to the influence of these things on our children of church school age. I well remember, several years ago, seeing a historical pageant acted out by the children of one of our church schools where I was a visitor. The play pertained to early colonial days. Some of the boys were dressed in Indian costume, others represented the early colonists, and carried guns and swords to ward off hostile Indians. Girls were dressed in attire similar to that worn by colonial women. The scene was well enacted. In a way it was impressive. To some, perhaps, it was educational in a measure. And yet as I sat and witnessed this, I could not help but wonder what education these boys and girls were having in their future relation to the larger world of popular amusement, and if it would create in any of their young minds a love for the stage and break down objections to theater going.

### *Cultivation of Pride*

This whole question is one worthy of very careful study. Somehow I cannot repress the feeling that there is danger in our laudable desire to furnish entertainment to our boys and girls, that we will cultivate in them pride and love of applause, that we will develop in them a precociousness and forwardness and boldness beyond their age. This warning has been given us in very definite language by the special instruction which has come to us through the years. I quote from an article from Mrs. E. G. White in the *Sabbath School Worker* for April 1889:

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 at the heart; for I know that it is exactly the opposite course from the one that should be pursued.

And the messenger of the Lord even suggests this danger in its relation to our Sabbath schools:

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.

Our success cannot be made to depend upon methods, however good, or upon machinery, however efficient, but upon Christ and the power of Heaven. “Not by might, nor by power, but by

My Spirit,” declares the Lord, His work is to be accomplished. To this we are incited in the following statement:

What an amount of worry would be saved if men would only trust in God. The bread of life is to be given to needy souls. And what a work is often made of the matter. There are long councils for devising plans, inventing new methods. There is a constant effort to get up entertainments to draw people to the church or the Sabbath school. Like the disciples, the workers raise the question, Shall we go to the villages and buy? What is the work to be done? Come unto Jesus. Humble faith and prayer will accomplish very much more than your long councils. Listen to the Saviour’s invitation. Put your neck under His yoke. Accept His burdens. Receive that which He bestows. He says, “My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” —*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 345.

I do not understand that these statements condemn simple exercises which may be held in the Sabbath school or in our church schools. I see no harm in our church school children being encouraged to give recitations and short dialogues, teaching simple moral lessons, so long as these exercises are not given in a theatrical setting, including costumes, etc. Exercises of this character, however, built about a complicated plot leading to a climax, carry with them a sustained and unnatural excitement, and seem to me to be quite unfortunate and produce too much the spirit of the theater. Those exercises which depend upon lights or the use of a curtain on the stage and other artificial means to produce an effect, take away from the simplicity that should characterize the exercises given in any of our church services.

In all of our plans and methods, and in our practical Christian experience, we should never seek to see how near we can come to the world’s standards and escape condemnation by others or by our own conscience. Rather, we should keep so far away from the spirit of worldly entertainment that there will be no question regarding the methods we pursue. If at any time the question of some certain method balances in our mind, let us decide the question negatively. That which we never do, in things of this character, brings no regret in after days.

I feel that it is inconsistent for our colleges and academies to teach the art of self-expression, and that this instruction should not be construed as advising against this. Many of our boys and girls are preparing to do public work. They need to be trained to speak from the public platform, to feel at ease in the presence of an audience, and I know of no way that this instruction can be given except by such methods as our schools are employing at the present time. But I believe that our school instructors should see that this experience is gained in such ways as shall not minister to the pride or the glorification of the students taking part.

In sounding this warning, I have in mind no church or institution. We have been warned against worldly entertainments in the quotations I have given in this article, and the warnings would not have been sounded had the danger not existed. You who read these words know to what extent this danger confronts your own church, your own institution.

### ***Losing the First Love***

I have great confidence in the loyalty of Seventh-day Adventists. They have shown their love for the right in their lives of sacrifice, as they have turned away from inducements of this world and rallied around the standard of an unpopular cause. I believe that God recognizes their toil, their sacrifice, even as He recognized it in the early apostolic church. But as that church stood in danger of departing from God in the loss of their first love, so we are in danger today. It is against the

insidious approach of evil that we must guard ourselves. Satan's temptation does not come to us first in violation of the Sabbath, in theft, or robbery; it comes in the subtle snares that he lays for our feet. It is the simple glass of wine at the social board that starts the young man down the drunkard's path; it is the impure thought cherished which leads to the violation of every moral standard; cherished covetousness leads to theft.

But let me say, as I said last week, while we seek to save our youth and children from the dangerous amusements of the world, let us be careful that we do not ignore our duty in providing for them wholesome social enjoyment. This may be done in such ways as will not simulate the worldly amusements around us, with such objectives as will lead them nearer to Christ and instill in their hearts a love of truth and purity and nobility. This is not alone our duty, but our blessed privilege, as we seek to become coworkers with the Master in the salvation of our boys and girls.

I have no apology to offer for again reverting to this subject, because I feel that there is much involved in it. I know that the very large majority of our churches and institutions are entirely free from these influences and dangers of which I have spoken, but I know that there are some of our people who, while they do not attend the theater and moving picture show, at the same time are free to attend religious dramas and plays in public halls and in churches of other denominations. And the danger is that the fine sense of discrimination of some will be lost, and that they will be led farther and farther away until they become patrons of other seriously objectionable forms of entertainment; and perhaps even more serious, the example of these believers will influence others and break down in their minds all objection to theater going. And the next step will be to bring entertainments of this character into our own churches and institutions.