

Appendix 19

Seventh-day Adventists and the Theater

Part III

(F. M. Wilcox, *Review and Herald*, April 1, 1937)

It is not enough to argue that some of the theatrical plays which are being given in our churches and institutions are religious or historical in character, and therefore are educational. Even though this view is advanced by sincere Christian people, it is but the devil's argument, designed to be an entering wedge, with the purpose of ultimately opening a great gulf, making a complete cleavage, between Christ and His professed children.

The Devil's Little Iron Wedge

When I was a boy, I sometimes assisted my father in cutting wood and splitting rails. When a log or a block of wood was particularly hard to split, my father first used a small iron wedge. Driving this into the wood made a small crack, but the crack was large enough to insert a larger wedge, and then a still larger one, by which the log or block was split wide apart. Beware of the devil's little iron wedges. He has many of them, and he is seeking constantly to find some opening or weakness in our character building in which he can insert his wedge as a beginning to a larger and fuller entrance.

Satan uses the less objectionable plays merely as decoys. They serve to whet the appetite, to confuse the mind, to sear the conscience, thus preparing the way for indulgence in the grosser forms of evil. And these less objectionable amusements, instead of satisfying in our youth a desire for relaxation, and thus holding them from the theater and motion pictures, as some argue they will do, create a love of theatricals, and lead the youth to seek satisfaction in the exhilaration of the grosser forms of amusement to be found in the playhouses of the world.

Further Letters From the Field

This danger is recognized by some of our readers who have expressed very decided views relative to this question. We have received a number of letters of this nature. From this larger number we have selected three that we are printing in the REVIEW. There has been no collusion among these various writers. They write from widely separated sections of the country. One letter came from the Atlantic Coast, another from the Pacific Coast, and another from an inland town, one of the centers of our work. One of these letters was printed last week. We present two others at this time:

I am writing to you in order to get your opinion on a subject which has troubled me for a long time. I should like to know whether it is right to show motion pictures in our schools, colleges, and other institutions. Where should the line be drawn between the proper ones and those which are not proper? Is it right to use the proceeds from questionable pictures to build churches or for investment goals?

Pictures which have an educational value are ordinarily considered proper, but is it right to show a historical picture in which the educational feature is covered and destroyed by the scenes of fighting, smoking, gambling, and drinking? Is a picture educational if only a few of the incidents are historical and the main portion is purely fiction? How easy it is for Satan to gain a foothold in such pictures.

Some of our young women recently attended a certain motion picture given

in one of our institutions. In the picture one of the well-known actresses of the world today took the part of a great humanitarian, portraying a life of sacrifice and service. To these young people all this seemed very real and exciting, with its scenes of dancing, love-making, violence, and war. Nerves were tense, and emotions were stirred to a peak. After going to their rooms, these young women could no longer restrain their feelings. A state of near hysteria reigned, and it was long past the midnight hour before they could get their minds calmed down enough so that they could go to sleep. Is this a fitting and proper reaction to an educational program?

I have been asked this question, If the latest moving pictures are shown in our schools, then why is it wrong to go to the theater and see the same thing, including the comedy and news? How shall we explain this to the young people?

Two Meetings—A Contrast

On Sabbath morning announcements are made of two different meetings, one of the midweek prayer meeting and the other of a moving-picture program, with an admission charge. Let us take a look at both of these meetings. On the night the picture is shown, we see the auditorium filled to its capacity long before the time for the program to begin. We see whole families there—children, young people, and older people. All are waiting to see the educational pictures, but instead they are shown the ways of evil and wickedness which are made to appear desirable. It is all interesting and very exciting, but nothing is shown which will help them to live a better Christian life. A few days later we see some of these same children who viewed the picture, playing that they are fighting, smoking, and drinking. The young people find it easier to accept an invitation to see a picture in a real theater. Sin does not look so bad after it is seen in the pictures a time or two. Truly “by beholding we become changed.”

But now the scene changes. It is prayer meeting night, and we see the old faithful members coming into this same auditorium. There are just a few of them; they are quiet and sober. Mothers and fathers have come to pray for God’s blessings, to plead for the souls of their children, asking God to be merciful and to show them the better way and to lead them back to the family altar. They pray to be kept faithful to Jesus and to remember His admonition, “Come out of her, My people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”

What a contrast between the two meetings! Which one is more pleasing in the sight of the Lord? Which one will help us more to be separate from the world?

I am thankful that there are still some of our young people who have enough will power to stand for the right, who have never attended any of these theatrical motion pictures shown in our institutions.

This letter, it seems to me, requires no answer through the columns of the REVIEW. The writer has set forth very clearly the evil attending exhibitions of this character in our own institutions. And he very justly draws a comparison between the attendance at such theatrical performances on the part of many of our people and the attendance at prayer meeting on the part of the few.

One of Our Ministers Writes

The second letter is from one of our ministers—not one who, on account of advancing years, is out of touch with present-day conditions or out of sympathy with the hopes and aspirations and

reasonings of the youth of this denomination. He is still young in years and young in heart, but he expresses his very deep concern over some influences which he sees operating in the church. His letter describes a dramatized play which he witnessed, one Saturday evening, in one of our college chapels, and the reactions of his own mind.

The whole scene was a theatrical dramatization, and the emotions alternated between weeping and laughter. Love scenes, with hugging and kissing, were prominent throughout. Much of the picture was educational and interesting, but to my mind it was worldly, and entirely foreign to our viewpoint and educational standards, as I have understood them.

We left the place with the solemnizing effects of the Sabbath service pretty well destroyed. A worldly spirit pervaded the entire showing, and lingered in our hearts as we departed. It did not seem that we had been in a house where prayer was wont to be made.

Now I do not want to place myself where I can do our young people no good, by being too extreme, but it really does seem to me that such motion pictures are to a worldly spirit what light wines and beer are to those struggling with the liquor habit. I think we should see, not how near we can come to the world, but how far we can shun amusements which are essentially worldly and degrading, and which lead the thoughts far from God.

Sowing for Worldliness

It appears to me as if Satan, in these motion pictures, is inviting us to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He shuts our eyes to the evil for the sake of the knowledge, some of which may be good in itself, but which, associated with the objectionable, becomes a decoy for evil. To me it appears that we are breaking down the line of demarcation before our young people, as well as before our older people, and are sowing for a harvest of worldliness. Churches that have tried to cope with worldly influences by making these entertainments church affairs, have lost their youth to right principles, and have at last had to let the young people go to all kinds of worldly amusements. We know the results. The same policy followed in our churches will produce the same results, will it not?

I think we could show pictures of our mission work, of the advancement of God's cause, of different countries and conditions, which would make our young people missions-minded and do real good. But when we show such pictures as I have described, we are whetting the appetite for all kinds of worldly amusements.

Why Print These Letters?

Why do I print in this column these letters from our readers? For several reasons: First, to show the dangers which confront us at the present time, the inroads which the spirit of worldliness is making in the church; second, to present the salient reasons these writers offer for sounding warnings against these evils, reasons why our institutions should exclude from their program, entertainments of this character. We give these letters because they represent the earnest convictions of the large majority of our people against theatrical entertainments.

When we point out sin in the church, none should understand that we believe that the church as a whole has departed from God and has gone after the world. Elijah lamented that he was the only one in all Israel who was true to God. But the Lord assured him that there were still seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal or kissed his image. And I am confident that there are many thousands in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the large majority in fact, who are true and loyal to

the principles of this message.

Do you inquire, Is it wrong to see any moving picture? Is a picture sinful simply because it moves? Are there not proper pictures which may be thrown upon the screen and witnessed by the rank and file of our readers? Indeed there are. I have taken pleasure through the years in seeing a number of such presentations, pictures which I considered wholesome and uplifting and educational in their influence. Regarding this phase of the question and the manner in which we may discriminate between the good and the evil, I shall speak more definitely next week.