

ADVENTIST APOSTASY: WHAT LEADERS AND LAYMEN SHOULD DO ABOUT IT

By Paul Penno Jr.
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The first question to ask is whether or not there is “Adventist apostasy.” If not, then I should stop right here. “Baal, Baal, is the choice. The religion of many among us will be the religion of apostate Israel, because they love their own way, and forsake the way of the Lord” (*Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 467, 468).

The term we are discussing does not refer to scattered cases of individual apostasy like Judas Iscariot among the Twelve or Demas who forsook Paul, or Moses Hull, Canright or Conradi. The term “Adventist apostasy” means a corporate disease affecting a sizable element within the church and seriously affecting the health of the whole. It also implies that in some respects the disease is either tolerated or subtly encouraged by responsible leadership on administrative, academic, publishing, or shepherding levels, thus creating a climate for its nurture and even propagation.

Are reports of apostasy only a figment of disloyal critics’ overworked imagination? Certain clear facts are evident. The ‘80s witnessed the defection of at least 200 pastors and church leaders on various levels due to what is loosely termed the “new theology.” This is unprecedented in our denominational history; even Kellogg’s pantheism heresy of the early 1900’s took no similar toll. Most of these individuals have been heavily influenced by

publications like *Good News Unlimited* (Desmond Ford) and *Adventist Currents*. The usual common denominator is repudiation of the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the 1844 Day of Atonement and the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, which more than any other single doctrine made us a people. For years one prominent Reformationist’s voice enjoyed heavy administrative and academic support.

Anti-Ellen White propaganda has also shaken the confidence of many in her integrity as the uniquely inspired messenger we have considered her to be. It is no secret that large numbers of pastors and lay members still within the organization frankly sympathize with various of the views espoused by those who oppose the sanctuary doctrine and Ellen White’s prophetic integrity. It is well-known that a large percentage of our ministry in Australia accept the “Reformationist” view of righteousness by faith; this inevitably affects their views of the sanctuary doctrine so that they maintain a discreet silence regarding it.

A motif research survey of sermons preached in Adventist pulpits would determine how many pastors and leaders are discreetly silent on the sanctuary and other distinctive Seventh-day Adventist truths. Seldom can one be criticized for what he does not say; yet we are told that silence in a time of crisis is the worst “disloyalty”: “The Lord abhors indifference and disloyalty in a time of crisis in His work” (PK 148). “If God abhors one sin above another, of which his people are guilty, it is doing nothing in case of an emergency. Indifference and

neutrality in a religious crisis is regarded of God as . . . the very worst type of hostility against God" (3T 281).

At the other end of the Adventist spectrum are the voices that gain attention by opposing the "new theology" and then proceed to introduce their own new interpretations of the prophecies. The Jesuit-inspired Futurism of Ribera is now knocking loudly on Seventh-day Adventist gates. Our people eagerly listen to these new inventions, unmindful of this counsel: "Very erroneous work . . . will be done by those who seek to find new light in the prophecies, and who begin by turning away from the light that God has already given. . . . The Lord does not lay upon those who have not had an experience in His work the burden of making a new exposition of those prophecies which He has, by His Holy Spirit, moved upon His chosen servants to explain." "Some will take the truth applicable to their time, and place it in the future. Events in the train of prophecy that had their fulfillment away in the past are made future." "Those who set themselves to study out new theories have a mixture of truth and error combined" (2SM 111, 112, 102, 104). Almost never do two of them agree! These innovative efforts create confusion and weaken confidence in the Lord's leading. What can we as individuals do to help?

(1) *Scripture says, "Cry aloud, and spare not. Lift up thy voice like a trumpet."* "Sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst [of Jerusalem]." (Isa 58:1; Eze 9:4). This is not being "negative." If you had a cancer that threatened your

life you would not dismiss your physician's diagnosis as "negative." You would welcome surgery that would save your life. Facing reality honestly in love is never negative; it is the purest positivism

(2) *"Be ye reconciled to God" don't misunderstand Him.* In other words, believe that God knows the situation; He loves His church infinitely more than we can; He is ready to work for reformation as soon as He can find human agents prepared to cooperate intelligently and humbly with Him. He will do what this inspired quotation says: "The Lord will raise up men to bear the message of truth to the world and to His people. If those in responsible positions do not move forward in the opening providences of God, bearing an appropriate message for this time, the words of warning will be given to others who will be faithful to their trust. Even youthful Christians will be chosen to 'cry aloud and spare not'" (*Sabbath School Worker*, April 1892; *Testimonies on Sabbath School Work*, p. 56). In other words, the Lord already works; our task is to discern what He is doing and whom He is using. We dare not err in judgment!

(5) *Temper your enthusiasm with appropriate good judgment.* There lurks the constant danger of self-appointed "Elijahs" running when God has not called them. No true worker for the Lord has ever appointed himself like job applicants looking for employment. Those who are concerned for the prosperity of God's work most "move intelligently, and not from impulse. . . . The word of the Lord came to Elijah; he did not seek to be the Lord's

messenger. . . . God always has men to whom he entrusts his message. His Spirit moves upon their hearts, and constrains them to speak. Stimulated by holy zeal [note the expression!], and with the divine [!] impulse strong upon them, they enter upon the performance of their duty" (5T 298, 299).

"How ready is the man to go whom God hath never sent; How timorous, diffident and shy, God's chosen instrument."

We gather with Christ or we scatter abroad. Great harm is done by men and women foolishly rushing in where angels fear to tread. Frances Ridley Havergal saw the point when she prayed in her hymn of consecration to be

"Thy silent, gentle servant, Moved only as by Thee,

[My] members every moment Held subject to Thy call,

Ready to have Thee use them, Or not be used at all."

No one is truly ready to be used until he has knelt and surrendered himself not to be used if the Lord so wills. In no other way can the human "impulse" be distinguished from "the divine impulse." Moses, Elijah, Elisha, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, all shrank from the heavenly honor of being used by God in their various crises. Satan's consummate skill is displayed in goading "reformers" to say true things in a harsh, repulsive way so that all reformation and the Spirit of Prophecy become nauseating to God's true people.

(4) *It is a truism and almost trite to say that love must motivate our efforts to stem the tide of*

apostasy. It must be recognized that true Biblical love cannot motivate us until the corporate nature of the apostasy is recognized. The disease is of the body. No one member can honestly say of another, I am holier than thou. The potential for doubt, unbelief, worldliness, sensuality, falling away, betrayal of sacred trusts, exists in all our sinful human hearts. If we have not been ensnared as others have been, it is only because of the grace of Christ.

By His corporate oneness with us, Christ took upon Himself the sins of the human race. "After Christ had taken the necessary steps in repentance, conversion, and faith, in behalf of the human race, He went to John to be baptized of him in Jordan" (G.C. *Bulletin*, 1901, p. 36). Thus His "sighing and crying for all the abominations" done in "the midst of Jerusalem" was not negative, but positive. For sure, He met terrible apostasy in His day! More than we may have realized, He is our Example. Perhaps the best textbooks for learning how to meet the problems of apostasy are the Gospels, especially the Fourth. Jesus understood and could save sinners like Mary Magdalene and Simon the Pharisee because He "knows the circumstances of every soul" by virtue of His corporate repentance in behalf of them all. No rebuke of apostasy can be effective for good unless there are tears in the voice. And those tears become possible only when we have repented personally of the very sin we would rebuke in another. "But I am not at all guilty," you may say. If you are a member of the human race, you are

potentially guilty, and but for the grace of Christ, you partake of the guilt of all its sins, including the murder of the Son of God. “Let us all remember that we are still in a world where Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and crucified, where the guilt of despising Christ and preferring a robber rather than the spotless Lamb of God still rests. Unless we individually repent toward God because of transgression of His law, and exercise faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, whom the world has rejected, we shall lie under the full condemnation that the action of choosing Barabbas instead of Christ merited. The whole world stands charged today with the deliberate rejection and murder of the Son of God” (TM 38). “Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God. To all, forgiveness is freely offered. ‘Whosoever will’ may have peace with God, and inherit eternal life.” (DA 745). This is corporate guilt, and corporate repentance is appropriate. It is the only path that genuine love can take. Without it, “sighing and crying” falls far short of preparing one to receive the “mark” because it knows no broken-heartedness, no grace of true contrition.

(5) *The real reason why the new theologies have made their inroads must be understood.* No one can “cry aloud” or “sigh and cry” constructively without doing his homework adequately. Certain historical facts constitute the background of the present crisis: (a) “The Lord in His great mercy sent” to us the “beginning” of the latter rain and the loud cry in the 1888 message. He intended this message to deliver the church forever from every

vestige of legalism. (b) The message was never properly received. (c) For decades, multitudes of our members have suffered a famine for the pure truth of the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation. Fear of the time of trouble has haunted our youth; the Adventist message has come across to them as a series of “don’ts,” and many youth and adults have not known the joyous assurance and reconciliation that the “everlasting gospel” should rise. (d) Into this vacuum rushed “Reformationist” concepts of righteousness by faith; they were eagerly welcomed by our administrators, academics, editors, ministers and people who were sincerely ignorant of the true essential elements of the 1888 message; thus they eagerly embraced the counterfeits. (e) No message will successfully oppose this propaganda except that “most precious message” which is of genuine heavenly origin. A return to the old legalism is hopeless. (f) It must be recognized that those who rejected the “beginning” of the latter rain and the loud cry nearly a century ago were “historic Adventists.” For example, Ellen White said that the *Review* editor of that day was the most influential of them all.

Thus, in historical perspective, it becomes apparent that those stalwarts of a century ago really prepared the ground for the apostasy of our day by creating this vacuum; Ellen White actually predicted that their rejection of the 1888 message would produce the “apostasy” that we see today. “Now at the present time God designs a new and fresh impetus shall be given to His work. Satan sees this, and he is determined it shall be hindered. He knows

that if he can deceive the people who claim to believe present truth, [and make them believe that] the work the Lord designs to do for His people is a removing of the old landmarks, something which they should, with most determined zeal, resist, then he exults over the deception he has led them to believe. The work for this time has certainly been a surprising work of various hindrances, owing to the false setting of matters before the minds of many of our people. That which is food to the churches is regarded as dangerous, and should not be given them. And this slight difference of ideas is allowed to unsettle the faith, to cause apostasy, to break up unity, to sow discord, all because they do not know what they are striving about themselves. Brethren, is it not best to be sensible? Heaven is looking upon us all, and what can they think of recent developments? While in this condition of things, building up barriers, we not only deprive ourselves of great light and precious advantages, but just now, when we so much need it, we place ourselves where light cannot be communicated from heaven that we ought to communicate to others."—(CWE 31; Manuscript 13, 1889). It caused the "alpha" which will lead into the "omega". "Be not deceived; many will depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. We have now before us the alpha of this danger. The omega will be of a most startling nature" (1SM 197). Those who make peaceful reformation impossible make violent revolution inevitable. This is not spoken critically; we all need to repent in response to Christ's appeal (Rev. 3:19). The experience and the

insights set forth here are precisely the modern equivalent of Daniel's chapter 9 prayer.

In our history it is now about one century since the Lord sent a message to us that has a strange resemblance to the one of many centuries ago. Two years after the 1888 Minneapolis meeting, Ellen White saw one of the most penetrating and serious of all her visions. She was in communion with God, the room was filled with light, and she saw herself "bearing a message to an assembly that seemed to be the General Conference. I was moved by the Spirit of God to make a most earnest appeal; for I was impressed that great danger was before us at the heart of the work."¹

The danger she saw had its roots in the 1888 failure and the consequences were tied to the unbelief and apostasy of ancient Israel. She warns:

"The prejudices and opinions that prevailed at Minneapolis are not dead by any means; the seeds sown there in some hearts are ready to spring into life and bear a like harvest. The tops have been cut down, but the roots have never been eradicated, and they still bear their unholy fruit to poison the judgment, pervert the perceptions, and blind the understanding of those with whom you connect, in regard to the message and the messengers. . . . Infidelity has been making inroads into our ranks; for it is the fashion to depart from Christ, and give place to skepticism. With many the cry of their heart has been, 'We will not have this man to reign over us.' Baal, Baal, is the choice. The religion of many

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 461.

among us will be the religion of apostate Israel, because they love their own way, and forsake the way of the Lord. The true religion, the only religion of the Bible, that teaches forgiveness only through the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, that advocates righteousness by the faith of the Son of God, has been slighted, spoken against, ridiculed, and rejected. . . . What kind of future is before us if we shall fail to come into the unity of the [1888] faith?"²

After nearly a century we can answer very clearly that the future she saw is the condition in which we now find ourselves. It would be so much more comfortable if the things portrayed in the post-1888 experience of the church could be applied to the world or completely overlooked. But the word of the Lord will not go away. Satan persists in his endeavors to destroy the uniqueness of this people's mission. His deceptive methods are laid bare in these words:

"Everything may move forward amid apparent prosperity; but Satan is wide awake, and is studying and counseling with his evil angels another mode of attack where he can be successful. . . . The great controversy will wax stronger, and stronger and will become more and more determined. Mind will be arrayed against mind, plans against plans, principles of heavenly origin against principles of Satan. Truth in its varied phases will be in conflict with error in its ever-varying, increasing forms, and which, if possible, will deceive the very elect. . . .

"Unsanctified ministers are arraying themselves against God. They are praising Christ and the god of this world in the same breath. While professedly they receive Christ, they embrace Barabbas, and by their actions say, "Not this man, but Barabbas."... Let the son of deceit and false witness be entertained by a church that has had great light, great evidence, and that church will discard the message the Lord has sent, and receive the most unreasonable assertions and false suppositions and false theories. . . .

"Many will stand in our pulpits with the torch of false prophecy in their hands, kindled from the hellish torch of Satan. . . . The conflict is to wax fiercer and fiercer. Satan will take the field and personate Christ. He will misrepresent, misapply, and pervert everything he possibly can, to deceive, if possible, the very elect."³

This solemn evaluation and prediction of Baal-worship concerns our church, our members, our ministry. Baal-worship did not die at Mt. Carmel. Indeed we may not really understand what the children of Israel were saying when they cried, "O Baal, hear us." In the Hebrew this meant, "O Lord, hear us," for Baal simply means, "lord," or "master," and the name with slight variations is found in numerous ancient languages, from Babylonian to Greek. In particular, Baal was the god of the Canaanites, the apostate children of Ham. The false and rebellious idea of Cain that the fruit of the ground would suffice for a living sacrifice was

² *Ibid.*, pp. 467, 468; cf. *The Great Controversy*, p. 583.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 407, 409-411.

handed down to the Canaanites and Baal was accepted as their chief god who ruled nature; hence they had a religion of pantheism.⁴

The pantheism of the Canaanites was no different than the pantheism which crept into our church almost unnoticed at the turn of the century. Pretentious sophistries, brilliant, sparkling ideas were produced by the great deceiver and passed from mind to mind so that without knowing it the pillars of our faith were being destroyed. We were saved by the insistent warnings of the Lord's messenger at that time. The startling thing is, Ellen White tells us that this was only the "alpha of deadly heresies" and that the "omega" would follow and "be received by those who are not willing to heed the warning God has given." She "trembled for our people." "Living Temple" contains the alpha of these theories. I knew that the omega would follow in a little while; and I trembled for our people."⁵

It took about a century for Israel to reach their unconscious apostate condition of Baal-worship. It will soon be a century since we were deceived by the "alpha of deadly heresies." Clearly then we have the warning that God's people can change leaders and not know it. The peril is magnified when it is understood that the apostasy of the Israelites did not reside only in Ahab and Jezebel, but there were four-hundred and fifty priests of Baal plus another four-hundred prophets of the grove who formed the steering committee for the nation. Elijah

recognized that Baal had usurped the place of Yahweh. When he threw down the challenge, "If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him," (1 Kings 18:19) we have in their answer a vivid video tape of the last church. The Record says, "The people answered him not a word." This means they were not for, they were not against, they were not hot, they were not cold, they were "lukewarm." They did not know their condition. Unconsciously they had changed leaders.

(6) *When you "cry aloud," do your homework first.* Intellectual laziness will play into Satan's hands. The Bible deplores zeal without knowledge. Satan's efforts to lead the church into apostasy are for one purpose: to condition us to accept the mark of the beast. Hence we must prepare to accept the seal of God. But what does that mean? It means "a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so [we] cannot be moved" (4 BC 1161, emphasis supplied). It means "receiving the knowledge and understanding revealed in the Bible" (7BC 970). This means real study: One believer settled into the truth "intellectually and spiritually" cannot be withstood by all the minions of apostasy.

We have noted that Christ met apostasy in His day. One of His most effective methods was the art of asking questions. As a lad of 12, He asked them humbly. In places where it seems that truth is forever on the scaffold and wrong forever on the throne, asking the right questions in the right spirit can often open a window to let the light of heaven shine in.

⁴ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, p. 99.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies*, Series B, No. 2, pp. 50, 53.

(7) *Proclaiming true justification by faith has always been the Lord's method of meeting apostasy.* That is how Paul met the Galatian apostasy. Jeremiah presented "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" to ancient Judah. Isaiah was the gospel prophet. We misunderstand Elijah's ministry unless we see that he proclaimed a reconciling message to Israel that "turned their heart back again" and healed alienation (1 Kings 17:37; Mal 4:5, 6). The Lord's methods of healing are not blood, thunder, lightning and earthquakes that shatter the rocks. To "cry aloud" effectively is through that "still, small voice" of pure gospel truth. Understand and proclaim God's pure good news!

It is not surprising that we face a crisis of apostasy. "God will arouse His people; if other means fail, heresies will come in among them, which will sift them." (5T 707). The "five" faithful "virgins" have been "asleep" for decades; for them to be awakened and forced to study is a blessing. When God's threshing is finished, no one will be "sifted" out except the chaff which is so light that it will be blown away by the wind.

"Who shall be able to stand?" God save us from Peter's vain pride on the eve of his trial; "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

Truth will triumph over apostasy. Do not under any circumstances or for any reason break your fellowship with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Hang in there! There's nowhere else to go.

Inspired counsel identifies this apostasy as virtual Baal worship, the substitution of a false Christ for the true. It is ancient Israel's history all over again.

The problem is heart alienation from the true Christ. "There has been a departure from God among us, and the zealous work of repentance and return to our first love essential to restoration to God and regeneration of heart has not yet been done. Infidelity has been making its inroads into our ranks; for it is the fashion to depart from Christ, and give place to skepticism. With many the cry of the heart has been, 'We will not have this man to reign over us.' Baal, Baal, is the choice. The religion of many among us will be the religion of apostate Israel, because they love their own way, and forsake the way of the Lord. The true religion, the only religion of the Bible, that teaches forgiveness only through the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, that advocates righteousness by the faith of the Son of God, has been slighted, spoken against, ridiculed, and rejected. It has been denounced as leading to enthusiasm and fanaticism. But it is the life of Jesus Christ in the soul, it is the active principle of love imparted by the Holy Spirit, that alone will make the soul fruitful unto good works. The love of Christ is the force and power of every message for God that ever fell from human lips. What kind of a future is before us if we shall fail to come into the unity of the faith?" (TM 467, 468). But God has a solution: He will send "Elijah." "Prophecy must be fulfilled. The Lord says: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.' Somebody is to come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and when he appears, men may say: 'You are too earnest, you do not interpret

the Scriptures in the proper way. Let me tell you how to teach your message.'

"There are many who cannot distinguish between the work of God and that of man. I shall tell the truth as God gives it to me, and I say now, If you continue to find fault, to have a spirit of variance, you will never know the truth. Jesus said to His disciples, 'I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.' They were not in a condition to appreciate sacred and eternal things; but Jesus promised to send the Comforter, who would teach them all things, and bring all things to their remembrance, whatsoever He had said unto them." (TM 475). This time there is an element of complete success that has never operated in Israel's previous history: we live in the antitypical Day of Atonement (reconciliation with Him!), the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. Please remember: Elijah was successful, and if he had not lost his nerve and run when Jezebel threatened him, his victory would have been even more spectacular. Do not run from Jezebel today; face her.

The victory in overcoming apostasy must be the work of the Lord. But in a very real sense it must also be the work of God's true people. The woman in white must "make herself ready" to be the bride of Christ, to stand by His side not as a mere child, the flower girl at the wedding, but as a mature woman who can truly share His overcoming. The plan of salvation requires this. If we are content with anything less, we shall have to go to our graves and

leave the glorious victory to a future generation. Believe this "good news":

"Amid the confusing cries . . . will be borne a special testimony, a special message of truth appropriate for this time, . . . to be received, believed, and acted upon. . . . The eternal truth of the Word will stand forth free from all seductive errors and spiritualistic interpretations, free from all fancifully drawn, alluring pictures. Falsehoods will be urged upon the attention of God's people, but the truth is to stand clothed in its beautiful, pure garments, . . . uncontaminated by the fallacies by which Satan seeks to deceive, if possible, the very elect." (7BC 984).

Who is "Elijah"? Probably many people, all over the world, a movement. God give you grace to be a part of it!