

## A TROJAN HORSE WITHIN THE CHURCH

A Keynote Sermon by Enoch de Oliveira  
Former Vice President of the General Conference

In one of his famous epics, Homer describes the clever device the Greeks employed to conquer the city of Troy during the Trojan war.

To enable the Greeks to enter the legendary city by stealth, the master carpenter, Epeius, built a huge hollow wooden horse. According to Homer, 100,000 soldiers besieged Troy. The ten-year siege ended when the Greeks concealed some soldiers in the horse and then left it behind as they pretended to withdraw.

Despite the warning of Laocoön, Sinon persuaded the Trojans to move the horse inside the city walls. At night the Greek army returned and the soldiers who had hidden inside the horse opened the city gates to their comrades. In this way Troy was invaded successfully and destroyed.

Although the war between the Greeks and the city of Troy is generally considered a historical fact, the episode dealing with the Trojan horse has been considered a mythological tale. Nonetheless, from this epic we can derive some timely illustrations that are applicable to the situation our church finds itself in today.

For many years the Seventh-day Adventist church succeeded in bravely and tenaciously resisting the fearful assaults of the enemy. The walls of the "holy city" remained impregnable. But in his determination to conquer and destroy God's

church, the prince of this world has undertaken to employ clever and deadly secret weapons.

"There is nothing that the great deceiver fears so much," wrote Ellen G. White, "as that we shall become acquainted with his devices" (*The Great Controversy*, p. 516).

After many attempts to conquer the "city of God" by applying the same kind of deceitful action employed by the Greeks, the great adversary has been able to obtain his ends by surreptitiously introducing the Trojan horse of liberalism within the walls of Zion.

Now that liberalism has become operative within our church, we perceive how vulnerable we can be to the assaults of Satan. As a church we have been inclined to believe that our greatest danger of being defeated by the powers of evil would come from without. While we may be able to perceive clearly from the walls of Zion what Satan is doing to conquer and destroy the church, we do not seem able to do much about standing firmly against the evils that are developing insidiously within our midst. Ellen White warns: "We have more to fear from within than from without" (*Selected Messages*, 1:122).

### Liberals Are Not Bad People

Those who are promoting liberalism in our ranks are not "bad" people. They are committed believers. Many of them exhibit the beauty of Christian virtues in their lives. Most of them love the church. They would like to share the faith and certainties of our forefathers, but in the honesty of their hearts, they do not have them. They are unable to see the uniqueness of our message, the distinctiveness of our identity, the eschatological dimension of our hope, or the urgency of our mission. Representing a wide spectrum of religious thought, they attempt to reinterpret traditional theological Seventh-day Adventist thinking by dressing some of our old doctrines in what appear to them to be new and attractive semantic garments.

Why are these people advocating liberal views among us?

Why are they so enthusiastically playing the role of apostles of change in our theological system?

First of all, it seems to me, they are eager to discard the "cult" label that has been used so widely to characterize Seventh-day Adventism. They long to see our religious movement become a part of what they consider mainstream Christianity. In their endeavor to attain religious "respectability," they suggest the reinterpretation of some historical views of our theology that they believe are Biblically indefensible.

Although accepting some aspects of our distinctiveness, such as the Sabbath and our health principles, they believe that the time has come for a revision in our theological system. In fostering such a revision, some feel uncomfortable with the "remnant" concept as understood by the founders of our message. They believe that all "sectarian mentality" should be rejected as presumptuous and arrogant.

Other liberals, in their endeavor to make our theology more "relevant," question the integrity of the sanctuary doctrine and unite their voices with those of our opponents in this matter. They explain the two-phase ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary as a face-saving device created by Edson, Crosier, and others to bail our pioneers out of the Millerite failure.

There are those who are alarmed about what seems to them to be excessive borrowing by Ellen White of material from a variety of sources. Misguided by distorted ideas about the way inspiration works, they are willing to challenge the validity of her claims, rejecting her prophetic authority.

Some liberals define our eschatology as a by-product of nineteenth-century North American culture and, as such, as deserving of substantial reformulation. They insist that after 145 years of proclamation we can no longer preserve the fervent expectation that permeated the church in its formative years.

Liberal scientists in the church insist that the creation

doctrine should be reevaluated in the context of current scientific information and hypotheses.

According to the February 5, 1990 issue of *Christianity Today*, the obsession for change in Seventh-day Adventist ranks had its beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s, when our students in much larger numbers than before began to attend non-Adventist seminaries and universities seeking advanced degrees. Some of these students, in spite of unfavorable circumstances, were able to preserve their religious experience and came forth strengthened in their convictions. Others, influenced by modern Biblical criticism and liberal theology, reshaped their beliefs.

#### What Is Being Gained by These Attempts at Change?

What are we gaining from the liberal attempts to make our message more "palatable" to the world? When so many seeds of doubt, uncertainty, and strife are sown, what else can be expected? Liberalism is reaping what it has sown. It sowed unbelief and it is harvesting apostasies.

During the early 1980s, an unprecedented number of ministers and lay people left the church in Australia and New Zealand. During the 1970s our church in those two countries lost one believer for every three who came in. In 1981, after a particularly notable attempt to effect a liberal change, the percentage of loss rose to 46 per cent. It peaked at 63 per cent in 1982 and then settled down at approximately 50 percent—a loss of one member for every two believers. (See *Australasian Record*, Oct. 28, 1989.)

We must not remain indifferent to such staggering losses. We must not minimize the tragic consequences of our internal confrontations caused by new theologies. The casualties are thousands of perplexed souls who, spiritually confused, are departing from us, throwing away their confidence in the validity of our message. They have lost the landmarks of our faith and no longer have a clear understanding of what we stand for.

The following set of North American Division statistics reflect the consequences of ongoing theological and other attempts to change our beliefs in the United States and Canada:

Years	Annual Growth Rates
1931-1940	4.4%
1941-1950	3.1%
1951-1960	2.9%
1961-1970	2.8%
1971-1980	3.2%
1981-1988	2.3%

What is the message in these numbers? Oscar Wilde, famous dramatist of the past century, with inimitable irony affirmed that "there are three kinds of lies in the world: common lies, small lies, and statistics." Thus Wilde underlined the fact that statistics may deceive and lead us to wrong conclusions. But even though statistics are susceptible of incorrect interpretation, we dare not minimize their importance in an analysis of the crisis that we face. They can help us understand the gravity of our problems.

It is true that we can be deceived by numbers and conclude that in spite of what seems apparent the North American Division is still growing. But it is not growing. According to reliable sources, 30 to 35 percent of our believers no longer attend church. With this decrease in attendance has come a decrease in offerings. Sharp cutbacks in church budgets have been approved. Enrollment in our schools is declining. Institutions have been closed. We are in the process of trimming down our church's operations and reducing our task forces. The market for our books is shrinking. Denominational periodicals have been merged and yet their circulation has still dropped. We have come to a time of financial restraints, with most conferences cutting back on their ministerial forces. These are inevitable consequences of what has happened in theological areas.

After so many seeds of doubt and uncertainty have been sown within the church by those who are obsessed with the desire to reinterpret our theology, after so many years of theological disputation, what else should we expect? We are witnessing the inevitable harvest of liberalism. When unbelief is sown, the harvest is bound to be apostasy.

After its insidious penetration within the walls of God's city, liberalism in its various shapes and forms has succeeded in opening the gates of the church to the invasion of such other evils as pluralism, secularism, humanism, materialism, futurism, and preterism.

#### Pluralism

To diffuse the polarization we are facing, some articulate scholars suggest the official adoption of theological pluralism, the acceptance of peaceful coexistence of conflicting, even opposing, views among us.

"On fundamental beliefs, unity; on non-essentials, liberty; in everything, love," is the popular dictum that inspires pluralistic scholars in their appeal for flexibility and openness. But who is going to determine what is essential and what is negotiable? Individuals, independent ministries, theological societies, the annual council, or the church as a whole under the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Would we be able to retain our self-understanding as God's last prophetic movement, if we were to fragment our beliefs by including in them divergent schools of thought?

We need theological unity in our preaching and in our publications, but above all, we need unity in the theological departments of our colleges and universities. I submit that no school of theology, under pluralistic influences, shaken by the confrontation of ideas, is able to produce preachers with strong convictions. Without preachers having certainty, there is no power in their preaching.

The successful spread of the gospel over the Mediterranean world in the days of the apostles threatened Christian

unity. People of widely divergent backgrounds were baptized, bringing into the church some of the popular religious concepts of the age. Thus, there was a real danger that the teachings of the church would be affected by syncretism. Aware of this danger, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to maintain unity. See Eph 4:4-6.

Addressing "the churches of Galatia," the apostle expressed his regret for the way the Galatians, under pluralistic influences, changed their minds and turned away from the grace of Christ to a "different" gospel (Gal 1:6). Was Paul being narrow-minded in his appeal for unity? After all, those Jewish-Christians certainly preached salvation through Christ. They never denied, as far as we know, that it was necessary to believe in Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. Why then was Paul so vehement in his opposition to this Jewish-Christian preaching? Because the Judaizers insidiously distorted the gospel of Christ, throwing the believers into a state of mental and spiritual confusion. At the real risk of being labeled intransigent, Paul exhorted the Galatians to pay no attention to those messengers who, claiming ecclesiastical authority, were disrupting the peace and unity that had existed among the saints.

#### Let's Learn from Methodist Experience

Methodism in our day is known for its wide latitude of beliefs. Its clergy have freedom to subscribe to different schools of Bible interpretation. Attempts to define basic Methodist doctrine have met much opposition, and Methodist theology has become surprisingly divorced from its own tradition. Persons who want to be accepted as church members are no longer required to endorse any specific creed. To the question, "What do Methodists believe," ministers and laity respond by saying that they believe in Jesus.

Today the Methodist Church is in a steep numerical decline. "In the 1965-1975 period the United Methodist Church lost over one million members," says C. Peter Wagner,

*Leading Your Church to Growth*, p. 32. And who is responsible for this sharp defection? The exodus that the Methodists are facing is not to be blamed on outside forces. The real blame lies within their church. If the Methodist Church were attacked by enemies from outside, if it were suffering persecution as a result of its endeavors to evangelize the world, there would be hope. But the world does not persecute a church that seems to stand for nothing. The Methodist Church is declining as a result of its failure to preserve its own religious heritage.

Can we learn some profitable lessons from its perplexing experience?

#### Preterism, Historical Criticism, and Futurism

A segment of the Seventh-day Adventist scholarly community no longer accepts the principles of prophetic interpretation that made our church what it is.

In the books of Daniel and Revelation, our pioneers found our time and our mission. Applying the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, which had been used by the majority of Christians over the centuries and which earned the subsequent endorsement of Ellen G. White, our forefathers were able to unfold the history of the long conflict between Christ and Satan. They were able to look upon themselves as an integral part of the cosmic program.

Today, however, we sense a gradual rejection of the historicist approach and a growing acceptance of the Counter Reformation schools of prophetic interpretation. Furthermore, historical-criticism does not allow for true long-range prediction. As a result, in some quarters our message has been changed and has lost its distinctiveness and its power.

Moving the fulfillment of the long-term prophecies to the end of the age (the futurist view), or relegating their significance to the distant past (the preterist view), or denying true long-term prophecy (the historical-critical view), makes the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation irrelevant and trans-

forms the Adventist movement into just another denomination without power and special prophetic message.

#### Secularism

Another intruder that is expanding its presence within the walls of God's city is the trend known as "secularism," often defined as the organization of life as if God did not exist. Its growing influence is producing a decline in attendance, reduced commitment to Christian ideals, and an increasing tendency to view the church—any church—as obsolete and irrelevant. Professional growth and prestige, business and profits, economic status and academic attainments are overestimated, while Christian virtues are neglected, or relegated to second place.

According to Norman Blaike, American Christians today can be divided into two groups, the "supernaturalists" and the "secularists." The "supernaturalists," Blaike observes, are generally to the right theologically, while the "secularists" are to the left. The "supernaturalists," he states, prize Christian virtues, such as devotion, piety, and church commitments, while "secularists" admire tolerance, success, efficiency, and academic achievements. (See N. W. H. Blaike, "Altruism in the Professions: The Case of the Clergy," *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 10 [1974]: 87.)

The process of secularization is affecting not only believers but also institutions. According to George Marsden, Duke University historian, the religious character of many erstwhile Christian institutions has been eclipsed with "nobody noticing and nobody seeming to mind" (*Time*, May 22, 1989).

In the past two decades we have seen Seventh-day Adventist institutions affected by substantial changes that have not all been on the plus side. Surreptitiously, secularism makes inroads that tend to eclipse the religious character of these institutions. Religious services are still held in their chapels, but they are more a form than a spiritual force.

Theological liberalism makes an immense contribution to this insidious secularism of believers and institutions by its rejection of an authoritative church, an authoritative Bible, and an authoritative body of truth. It is more than willing to accommodate religion to the spirit of the times.

#### Other Evils

Other evils, such as exaggerated academic freedom, the historical-critical approach to Scripture, and theistic evolution (with its very long chronology) are making their contribution to the undermining of confidence in basic beliefs and leading congregations to spiritual disaster.

It is impossible to prevent the teaching of aberrant views within the church, when the concept of academic freedom without sound confessional responsibility is accepted. Defenders of academic freedom in our midst state that we are not a creedal denomination and so every believer should be free to endorse different theological views. But we understand that if an individual is to be a Seventh-day Adventist, he or she should subscribe to our Fundamental Beliefs in their entirety. Otherwise, he or she ceases to be a Seventh-day Adventist.

I still remember the strong opposition manifested by some Adventist scholars when the historical-critical methodology was condemned officially by the General Conference on the basis that this method, by definition, excludes our belief in the transcendence of the Scriptures.

I believe, however, that the church has the unquestionable right to decide which approach should be used by our scholars and preachers. This is our only safeguard to protect our religious heritage, which subscribes to the Reformation principle that the Bible is the infallible Word of God and its own interpreter.

Theistic evolution (or progressive creationism) is a concept accepted by a growing number of scientists in our ranks. It involves the subordination and accommodation of the Scrip-

tures to the Darwinian view of gradual evolution. Those who endorse this school of thought no longer regard key portions of the Bible as reliable sources of historical information. In taking this position they place scientific hypotheses above Scripture, making science a judge of the Word of God.

#### The Fifth Column

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) left a million dead. When the conflict seemed to be reaching its climax, General Emilio Mola commanded 'four columns moving toward the capital of the country. But in addition to his four columns he was counting on a fifth column, one that had entered Madrid behind its defenses, to deliver the city to him when the decisive moment arrived.

Among the lessons that history teaches us, we find the fall of empires and institutions that succumbed to internal forces. The historian Gibbon (1737-1796) ascribes the fall even of Rome to internal, not external, causes. He mentions the fourteenth-century Italian poet, Petrarch, who described the fall of Rome as follows: "Behold the remains of Rome, the shadow of its early greatness! Neither time nor the barbarians can glory in having brought about this stupendous destruction: it was accomplished by its own citizens, the most illustrious of her children."

Many civilizations have been defeated by the internal sabotage of fifth columnists. History warns us what can take place in the church. External opposition is not our worst enemy. Instead, the insidious deteriorating influences introduced by Satan, our great adversary, do the most harm.

What has been the greatest defeat suffered by the Christian church? Was it the loss of life as a result of violence, martyrdom, and torture? No. The church's greatest defeat took place when it accepted the favor of the Roman Empire and lost its purity and fervor. When the church left the catacombs, it adjusted to the splendor of the world. Satan's fifth columnists—his Trojan horse—weakened the church

internally, paving the way for dilution of faith and the establishment of pseudo-Christianity.

#### Conclusion

The picture I have presented of the Seventh-day Adventist church can be considered bleak and dark. But in my closing remarks, I would like to present a brighter side. In spite of the problems we face today, we have many reasons to believe in the triumph of our message as long as we stay faithful to the Bible. A revival will come and our eyes will see powerful miracles of evangelism.

Our message and movement deserve to be characterized by a triumphant spirit. They are not based on "cunningly devised fables" but on the unshakable foundation of "the sure word of prophecy."

"The church may appear as about to fall, but it does not fall. It remains, while the sinners in Zion will be sifted out—the chaff separated from the precious wheat" (*Selected Messages*, 2:380).

The conviction that God guides this movement allows us to declare, without a shadow of doubt, that the fire on Seventh-day Adventist altars will never go out. The determination to win the world to Christ will motivate us in our united evangelistic program. The world will be lighted with the glory of our proclamation of the Advent hope.