

A Grave with Two Open Ends

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"There are many whose religion consists in criticizing habits of dress and manners. They want to bring every one to their own measure...They have lost the love of God in their hearts; but they think they have a spirit of discernment. They think it is their prerogative to criticize and pronounce judgment...Let us remember how forbearing and patient Jesus was with the erring children of men. We should be in a wretched state if the God of heaven were like one of us and treated us as we are inclined to treat one another." Ellen G. White, The Review and Herald, August 27, 1889, p. 530.

There has always been a tendency for zealous Christians to amend the two great commandments of Matthew 23. This is done by developing a plethora of regulations to "help" God's people demonstrate their devotion. Since compliance with these obligatory guidelines was observable, they have been unwittingly ensconced as a checklist of one's devotion. James Dobson has observed that "nothing short of a Civil War of Values rages today...Two sides with vastly differing and incompatible views are locked in a bitter conflict." Christianity Today, June 1995. A similar conflict rages in Seventh-day Adventist circles, not so much over our values (the pillars of our faith), or even over the principles extracted from these values, as over traditions and methods by which each of these should be transmitted. There is a strong underlying loyalty to the traditions of the church, but as the lifestyles of the congregation diverge, it becomes more and more difficult to hold a single "party line". Apparent disparities of acceptable conduct have become more noticeable. Zealous keepers of the gates are prone to quote inspired writings, sometimes incompletely and often out of context, to reinforce their particular convictions. Instead of bringing about a reformation and drawing the fences more tightly around our cherished beliefs, these actions have tended to erode unity, dividing and labeling members as "Liberal" or "Conservative". It has been said that a "rut is a grave with two open ends" and Satan doesn't really mind which rut we slip into.

Misguided attempts at reform have at times turned schools into a battleground, the last bastion to defend church standards. While the debate between the "rigid, righteous right" and the "loose liberal left" continues, our schools are expected to hold students to standards of conduct that have been discarded by the church constituency at large. Handbooks bristle with rules to preclude every contingency, creating serious challenges for an already strained teaching staff. A system of strict laws actually puts new ideas of lawbreaking in a person's mind. More rules generate more creative excursions around them. Hans Kung has aptly observed that "the finer the net is woven, the more numerous are the holes."

As denominational emissaries, teachers seek to steer student wrath away from the church they love. To diffuse the issue, attempts are made to differentiate between fundamental values and school policy. But to youth, any hint of hypocrisy is obnoxious. Imitating significant adults in their lives, students conduct themselves, use language, and wear apparel that puts them at odds with school policy. Even though students may leave their residence appropriately attired, often a metamorphosis transpires before class time. When appeals to constituent parents fail to yield substantive solutions, teachers are forced to run the gamut between policy and the students, placing themselves in a no-win situation. To act as policy police puts them in an antagonistic stance with students, but to moderate harsh policy puts them in peril with the establishment. The fallout from this tug-of-war can dissipate staff enthusiasm, blunt spiritual influence, cause classroom atmosphere to languish and deteriorate instruction.

It is at the confluence of these forces that committed teachers stand. It is an indefensible position, but it is held at the request and in the strength of the Commander-in Chief. It is their fiery furnace, lion's den and Egyptian prison. It is the pass at Thermopylae to be held against all odds with limited resources and with no reinforcements in sight. Christian educators are commissioned to navigate this maelstrom, providing a safety net for their charges, a net of love. Focus must not be distracted to issues of external compliance at the expense of losing the battle for the heart. Although external transformation mirrors the inner beauty of a heart restored by grace and love of Jesus, true conversion cannot be attained through external correctness. Didn't Jesus indict the Pharisees on this very issue?

We cannot let yet another generation of youth be sacrificed on the altar of partisanship and passionless Christianity. History teaches clearly that when the love relationship with our God grows cold, it is replaced by a concentration on behavior. Recent surveys confirm that our failure is not one of money, message or methods so much as it is a failure to let every word and action reflect God's grace extended to that person. This is far more important than the policy. The mission statement of our church (*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*) acknowledges that "Effective ministry (*and teaching*) becomes possible in an atmosphere of love, acceptance and forgiveness." Let us unceasingly pray, not only for our students, but for ourselves, claiming the promise that if we "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all these things (our students) will be added unto us."

Quote: "*The finer the net is woven, the more numerous are the holes.*" Hans Kung

References:

- White, Ellen, "Believe His Prophets", *The Review and Herald*, August 27, 1889, p.530
- Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Maryland.
- Dobson, James, "Why I Use Fighting Words", *Christianity Today*, June 1995, p. 28.