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Adventist Church

CLOSED
DURING COVID-19
EMERGENCY

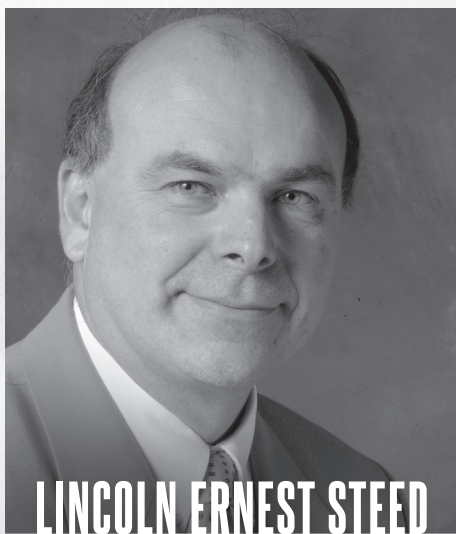
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**RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY
SABBATH
JANUARY 23**

A TESTING TIME

**RELIGIOUS LIBERTY OFFERING
JANUARY 23, 2021**

FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY



LINCOLN ERNEST STEED

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A TESTING TIME

BY LINCOLN STEED

Several of my pumpkin vines looked promising. There were a number of swellings I recognized as the beginnings of a plentiful crop. And the tomato bushes were yellow with a profusion of flowers. The fig trees were already shaking off their dormancy and budding along each branch! My garden would do well! In spite of (or maybe because of) the burning heat, and with diligent watering, I might turn an exceptionally dry summer into an exceptional harvest.

Kneeling over the vegetables, I thought I was alone, until our neighbor spoke to me across our common fence close by my shoulder. “Do you think this COVID-19 is one of the biblical plagues?” she asked. I paused a moment, thinking of the days yet to come before my garden produced its full potential.

“No,” I said. “It does not have the specific characteristics of the plagues described in Revelation. But it certainly is the type of thing Jesus told us would characterize the time shortly before His return.” I was thinking of Luke 21 and Jesus’ reply to a similar question by those troubled more at the end of their nation than excited at the prospect of His returning to usher in an eternal kingdom. He spoke of pestilence and other disasters as a prelude to the real action of faithful witness amid trial.

The neighbor seemed calmed. How would she have reacted if I had said, “Yes, this is one of those plagues”? Would she have changed in some way? Would a change, then, at such a late point, be meaningful? What does it take to impress someone, oneself even, that now is the time for decision? Now is a testing time!

As a fourth-generation Seventh-day Adventist, and someone trained in our system and always close to centers of the church, I know how we have perceived our own movement and its place in end-time events. Over the course of a lifetime I have experienced the ebb and flow of our comprehension of “the faith . . . once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). Sometimes we think ourselves on the brink of final events; other times we seem happier talking of conversion almost by osmosis, with a close of general probation far away, and our individual death the event to reference. In short, we cycle between the energetic response in 1888 to an incipient national Sunday law bill, and the lethargy and self-confidence even of late that followed a U.S. civil administration speaking loudly and proudly of religious freedom. As though the Roman emperor Constantine were the best thing that ever happened to Christianity!

A long-standing theme, but not so frequently repeated of late, is the Elijah message. For the Jews, Elijah was THE GREATEST prophet, which is why many tried to identify Jesus as the Elijah promised in Malachi 4:5: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (RSV).¹ Jesus Himself identified John the Baptist—the reformer—as someone who had come in the spirit and the power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Yes, we Adventists always thought of our mission that way. We are to prepare the way for the soon return of Christ—the Elijah message! If there is any parallel to be found between our times and Elijah’s, it has to be that of knowing the apparent crisis from the real crisis.

Then, as now, it was a testing time.

Elijah's day, as the story begins, was a time of complacency. A time of vineyards and great holdings of wealth. A time of fraternity between Israel and the Sidonians in particular. A time of rather diverse spirituality. A time, I hazard to say, congenial to most of Israel.

Certainly few seemed troubled by the state of affairs. Apparently Elijah was. James identifies him as "a man of like nature with ourselves"—and I think he meant like one of the early Christians, who "prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit" (James 5:17, 18, RSV).

For this, Elijah was accused of being a "troubler of Israel" (1 Kings 18:17, RSV), as King Ahab later put it.

Enlarging on the dynamic of the moment, Ellen White wrote: "Elijah's faithful soul was grieved. . . .When he called to mind the great things that God had wrought for them, he was overwhelmed with grief and amazement. . . . He went before the Lord, and, with his soul wrung with anguish, pleaded for Him to save His people if it must be by judgments."²

And so the drought. But the real crisis was a famine of a different kind. As Amos later wrote: "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord God, 'when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord'" (Amos 8:11, RSV).

Our COVID-19 social reorganization has changed many things. Life is very likely never to go back to the way it was. Some of the adaptations are rational responses to societal threat;

others have some perhaps unintended consequences. Around the middle of last year Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention, gave a long interview on PBS. I was struck by two related points he made. First, he acknowledged a rapid and continuing drop-off in church attendance in recent years. Second, he agreed that with COVID-19 a critical mass of Christian believers just seemed to melt away in the crisis. He had no explanation.

When Elijah showed himself to Ahab after three years of drought, faith in Israel was at a low ebb. The prophets of Baal and Ashtoreth were numerous and well accepted at court. Worship of the one true God was not acceptable unless combined with the worship of elemental spirits and harvest fertility rites. There had been persecution. Many had been killed. Most had compromised. But as Obadiah, head of the king's household, told Elijah at their first meeting, he had sheltered 100 prophets of God in caves to save their lives. All was not lost, even though most had fallen away.

But on Mount Carmel it is hard to see signs of faithfulness. Elijah throws out a challenge to the people. "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" he asks (1 Kings 18:21, RSV). Not a word of answer is given. In reading Ellen White's comments on this, I am taken by her description of a dark cloud of unbelief that had settled over the people. What a figure to use! A little later, after God's fiery sign and Elijah's prayers, a little dark cloud foreshadows a great rain. And much later, nearer our time, the Elijah call is to precede another little dark cloud that rapidly lightens into earth-filling glory. My take on the spiritual darkness, then as now, is that it makes it nearly impossible even to comprehend the possibility of coming glory.

And regarding their silence, again Ellen White speaks to our

time when she writes that “to do nothing in a time of crisis, God regards as rebellion.” Heavy thought!

Many times I have listened to the stirring music of Felix Mendelssohn’s oratorio *Elijah*. What particularly stands out musically and textually is the scene on Mount Carmel during which Elijah faces off a hostile crowd of false prophets, the frown of the ruling elite, and the sullen silence of the people. The false prophets have paraded and cavorted in vain. The rulers seem still under their influence, however, when Elijah steps forward to pray for fire, then later for rain. “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back” (1 Kings 18:36, 37, RSV).

The result was fire. Then more prayer and rain. Power was given to Elijah to run in the rain in front of the Ahab’s chariot all the way from the brook Kishon to the palace at Jezreel, a distance of at least 17 and perhaps as much as 30 miles.

Then a massive threat revealed itself to Elijah. he was evidently told that Queen Jezebel was determined to have his life for her prophets. And so the runner sets off again. As 1 Kings 19:4 puts it: “He himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die.” There were enough real threats to justify his fear. There were clear physical and emotional reasons that he might have reacted this way. He had forgotten God’s leading in the past. He thought himself alone. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon put it in perspective this way: “When we read the Scriptures in our youth, we are often astonished at the peculiar

conditions in which we find even good men. It is difficult for us to understand why . . . such a man as Elijah could be so dreadfully downcast. As we get older, and become more experienced, as trials multiply around us, and our inner life enters into a sterner conflict, as the babe grows to manhood and therefore is entrusted with heavier tasks, we can better understand why God allowed His ancient servants to be put into such stressful positions, for we find ourselves in similar places, and we are relieved by discovering that we are walking along a path which others have traversed before us.”⁴

I wonder if these days of COVID have not brought us to a similar point. To us, God might also ask, “What are you doing here?”

Our days of COVID-19 might well be the beginning of crowding alarms and threats that will merge into what we still think of as the end-times or the time of trouble. Are we content to shelter in place, mask securely on, social distance carefully kept, dabbling in social media, as the world swirls and moves about us?

This “new normal,” inaugurated by a global pandemic, has some very pertinent aspects to it for Adventists. We were long ago warned that funds we might have given to the work will in a day of financial crisis prove worthless. A kind government has opened its storehouses to give COVID relief to all; it’s even offered monies to churches. But these are virtual funds at best, in an economy way beyond the debasing of currency that brought down the coin-clipping Romans. Massive unemployment and dislocation always lead to social unrest and war: a difficult context for evangelization.

There is a health-care imperative behind stern measures; but whole populations under lockdown or severe social distancing

mandate is the stuff of depersonalization, and creates the isolation and sense of powerlessness necessary for less-than-democratic models. While the infection mechanism is still not clearly known, even as I speak an unfortunate attitude has emerged as a result of church assembly infections: it is the idea that religion is dangerous to public health and by meeting together, even in a parking lot, people of faith are actually ready to harm their neighbors. Strangely, that guilt has not so easily transferred to block parties or political rallies or grocery shopping or mass public demonstrations.

Meanwhile we have witnessed an unprecedented political expression of a religious agenda in the United States. We Adventists should have been immune to its strange fire appeal, but many of us are as gladdened by it as the people of Elijah's time by the state-sponsored displays of Baal. This is clearly a harbinger of religious legislation and a compulsion to Sunday worship.

Years ago a seasoned religious liberty leader came to me and, with a straight face and forgetfulness of *The Great Controversy*, told me that we were now in a new paradigm: the scenario outlined in that book was how God intended it to be, he told me. But with the delay, he said, there is a changed dynamic: we are now to be allied with Rome in the battle against secularism! But of course he was mistaken; and in the space of a few years *The Great Controversy* scenario is manifestly revealing itself before our eyes.

Rome is resurgent and is the dominant world religious power. The current pope has visited this once-Protestant stronghold and lectured our legislators to general acclaim. The once firmly Protestant leadership here are enamored with Rome and are more concerned with fighting secularism and gaining political power in order to bring this nation back

to its presumed Christian nation structure. Among many other issues, Rome has settled on saving the planet from environmental destruction. We Adventists might find that something we can agree on, of course. After all, the first angel of Revelation 14 gives a call to honor the God of Creation. The document spelling out the papal environmental agenda is above all premised on the model of the seventh-day Sabbath as the way back to God's original plan for His creation. Again we Adventists might be warmed by that Sabbath imperative, given in a document that states it as a matter of planetary survival.

But *The Great Controversy* had it right. The papal document, after so plainly asserting a seventh-day Sabbath dynamic, then applies it to “the Eucharistic Sunday.” Previous papal documents lie behind the ecological initiative and give it a clear doctrinal and political perspective. The 1998 document *Dies Domini* says plainly that while the early Christians had no direct word on changing the day from the Saturday Sabbath to Sunday; they “felt that they had the authority” to do so. And the 2009 document *Caritas in Veritate*, in dealing with a plethora of world problems, most particularly a global financial crisis, lays it out very clearly in calling for a world authority with the power to act and to enforce. One secular magazine, in giving a good review to the document, worried that the problem was that in accepting it, the pope came with it. They might as well read Revelation and *The Great Controversy* for the backstory to that!

Meanwhile a critical mass of politically active American Protestants *are* clamoring for laws that will take us back to an imagined American religious dreamtime. You and I have been told that, taking a leaf from the methods of the medieval church, this group will eventually raise a clamor for legislators to pass a national Sunday bill, to avert God's displeasure.

Meanwhile COVID-19 emergencies diminish religion to a nonessential service, even as fires rage unchecked in the west, storms in the east, and national financial ruin a gathering cloud behind millions of unemployed. Supply the latest in a growing list of natural calamities, as you wish. Going by the book indeed!

You are no doubt used to religious liberty updates that cite this court case and that piece of legislation, and these can be markers of freedom progress or regression. At present there is much talk of religious liberty, usually religious entitlement for one particular religious viewpoint, but little real positive action. At best there is a legislative and judicial holding pattern, even as the civil liberties and constitutional rights for citizens and rulers alike are in serious flux.

Years ago, at an afternoon religious liberty Q and A, an older gentleman put up his hand. "Tell us," he said, "when we should be afraid." It's a question the watching crowd on Mount Carmel might have asked of Elijah before the fire came down from heaven. But not a good question for an Adventist to ask. This is not a time for fear, but for excitement and increased action for the Lord. I used to give regular religious liberty updates to my late father, perhaps hoping to get some startled reaction from him. His answer was always the same: "Isn't it exciting; the Lord is about to come."

So in this testing time, this COVID quiet before the real contagion, we must reaffirm our "blessed hope." Religious liberty is not dry theory, but the dynamic of pushing back against the darkness to spread more gospel light while we can.

A bare century before the American Revolutionary War, England experienced a full-blown civil war. Before the war was over, it became a religious struggle, and a Puritan

minority seized power in a brief republican experiment. The man still held second only to Shakespeare in the English language—John Milton—was in the midst of that struggle. A signatory to the death decree for King Charles I, he barely escaped execution when the monarchy was returned to power. In his old age, totally blind, he dictated a magisterial work called *Paradise Lost*. Its purpose, he stated in the preface, was to “justify the ways of God to men.” In book 12 he has the angel in Eden outlining to the fallen couple God’s plan to defeat evil and reinstate humanity. It is the great controversy theme. Note, in this excerpt, the role of religious liberty, and the biblical insight he gave on unfolding events.

But say, [asks Adam] if our deliverer up to Heav’n
Must reascend, what will betide the few
His faithful, left among th’ unfaithful herd,
The enemies of truth; who then shall guide
His people, who defend? will they not deal
Worse with his followers than with him they dealt?

Be sure they will, said th’ Angel; but from Heav’n
Hee to his own a Comforter will send,
The promise of the Father, who shall dwell
His Spirit within them, and the Law of Faith
Working through love, upon thir hearts shall write,
To guide them in all truth, and also arm
With spiritual Armor, able to resist
Satan’s assaults, and quench his fiery darts,
What Man can do against them, not afraid,
Though to the death, against such cruelties
With inward consolations recompenc’t,
And oft supported so as shall amaze
Thir proudest persecuters: for the Spirit
Pour’d first on his Apostles, whom he sends
To evangelize the Nations, then on all

Baptiz'd, shall them with wondrous gifts endue
 To speak all Tongues, and do all Miracles,
 As did thir Lord before them. Thus they win
 Great numbers of each Nation to receive
 With joy the tidings brought from Heav'n: at length
 Thir Ministry perform'd, and race well run,
 Thir doctrine and thir story written left,
 They die; but in thir room, as they forewarn,
 Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous Wolves,
 Who all the sacred mysteries of Heav'n
 To thir own vile advantages shall turn
 Of lucre and ambition, and the truth
 With superstitions and traditions taint,
 Left only in those written Records pure,
 Though not but by the Spirit understood.
 Then shall they seek to avail themselves of names,
 Places and titles, and with these to join
 Secular power, though feigning still to act
 By spiritual, to themselves appropriating
 The Spirit of God, promis'd alike and giv'n
 To all Believers; and from that pretense,
 Spiritual Laws by carnal power shall force
 On every conscience; Laws which none shall find
 Left them inroll'd, or what the Spirit within
 Shall on the heart engrave. What will they then
 But force the Spirit of Grace itself, and bind
 His consort Liberty; what, but unbuild
 His living Temples, built by Faith to stand,
 Thir own Faith not another's: for on Earth
 Who against Faith and Conscience can be heard
 Infallible? yet many will presume:
 Whence heavy persecution shall arise
 On all who in the worship persevere
 Of Spirit and Truth; the rest, far greater part,
 Will deem in outward Rites and specious forms

Religion satisfi'd; Truth shall retire
Bestuck with sland'rous darts, and works of Faith
Rarely be found: so shall the World go on,
To good malignant, to bad men benign,
Under her own weight groaning till the day
Appear of respiration to the just,
And vengeance to the wicked, at return
Of him so lately promis'd to thy aid
The Woman's seed, obscurely then foretold,
Now amplier known thy Saviour and thy Lord,
Last in the Clouds from Heav'n to be reveal'd
In glory of the Father, to dissolve
Satan with his perverted World, then raise
From the conflagrant mass, purg'd and refin'd,
New Heav'ns, new Earth, Ages of endless date
Founded in righteousness and peace and love
To bring forth fruits of Joy and eternal Bliss.

Time! Test over!

REFERENCES

- 1 Bible texts credited to RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), vol. 3, p. 263.
- 3 Charles Spurgeon, "Elijah Fainting," July 1, 1880.





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