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By Pastor
Joe Reeves

Assistant Director
of Sabbath School &
Personal Ministries,
and Editor of *Inverse*
Bible Study Guide,
General Conference
of Seventh-day
Adventists

TRUTH IN AN AGE OF EXTREMISM

Religious Liberty Sabbath Sermon 2025

Greetings to Seventh-day Adventist churches and members across North America who care about religious liberty.

A funny thing has happened during my lifetime. People have changed their mind about religious liberty. Many who used to think religious liberty was a blasé topic have now become very animated about religious liberty issues.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic civil and religious liberty has become a popular topic of debate in the American church and in the wider culture. A few years ago COVID-19 mandates made many Christians feel squeezed by secularism, especially in places where casinos and taverns were allowed to stay open while churches were ordered to close. Unvaccinated people who were excluded from events or were restricted from travel felt like second-class citizens, but they were not the only ones feeling as though their rights were being ignored. There were others who felt as though they also were treated differently. Victims of racial violence, police brutality, or corruption in the criminal justice system have not always received equal treatment under the law. Today the ideals of

our republic our being are under pressure, to test whether or not we will truly protect the freedom and the dignity of every individual.

After the upheaval of the past few years, many Christians in America resent the establishment more than ever before. Pastors and church members across the United States feel wounded and angry and ready to rise up and take control. During the past couple years we have seen large stadiums in this country filled with crowds who are united in their desire for Christians to take power.

Meanwhile, Seventh-day Adventists are uniquely positioned, not to cave to the demands of radical secularists or to indulge the clamor of Christian nationalists, but to be a voice of truth and reason in an age of extremism. Adventists have a rich heritage and a prophetic understanding that is desperately needed for this time, but it takes clear thinking and strong nerves to stand true for principle while crowds everywhere are becoming increasingly fanatical. Seventh-day Adventist church members are needed today who will not be easily pulled in different directions but will have the clarity and strength to stand firm on Scripture, which is where we are going today.

ECONOMIC CONTROL

Seventh-day Adventists are not the only Christians turning to the book of Revelation to find answers about what's happening in America. It's very popular these days to hear preachers use the book of Revelation to warn people against government tyranny. One of the verses quoted most often is Revelation 13:16, 17. Anybody who has studied the mark of the beast knows this text well: "He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the

name of the beast, or the number of his name.”* Talk about totalitarian control! These verses describe a time during which the government forces people to go along with the mark of the beast agenda. In this prophecy economic pressure is applied in the most extreme sense.

A description of economic tyranny is a message that resonates with millions today, which is why these verses have become exceedingly popular during the past few years! But careful Bible students should beware, because while the last verses of Revelation 13 have recently skyrocketed in popularity, the preceding verses have plummeted in popularity! American preachers rarely quote the context, and there’s a reason for that. The context would be devastating to their listeners. Nobody wants to hear about what the Bible says leads up to the final tyranny in this world. The previous verses give a very unpopular message that is typically ignored by prophecy teachers, and sometimes neglected even by Adventists. Let’s back up a few verses and carefully consider the context.

FIRE FROM HEAVEN

Verses 13 and 14 give us the on-ramp for the mark of the beast action. Adventists have preached a lot of sermons about the mark of the beast, but we sometimes say less about the image to the beast, which is a problem. You cannot properly comprehend the mark of the beast scenario unless you first understand how the image to the beast sets the stage. In these verses the world’s final superpower is seen leading the way in a false religious revival that results in a religious tyranny. Revelation 13:13, 14 says, “He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth

to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived.”

These verses are clear that there are going to be very impressive miracles, healings, and supernatural events leading up to the final deception in this world. The word “sign” is the same word that the writer John used in His Gospel to describe the miracles of Jesus when Jesus healed people and fed the multitudes. But in Revelation 13 it’s the wrong side that is working these miracles. The text says that these deceivers even call down fire from heaven. What does this mean? The last book of the Bible is using a very specific symbol that is not hard to understand in the wider context of Scripture.

To understand the meaning of fire falling from heaven, we first think of the prophet Elijah on the top of Mount Carmel. Elijah was locked in a national contest over worship. The whole nation was gathered at the top of Mount Carmel for an epic showdown between competing religions. After a disastrous and embarrassing day of prayer and demonstrations by the prophets of Baal, the prophet Elijah offered a humble prayer and was answered by fire falling from heaven (1 Kings 18:38). The same type of contest over worship will happen again, according to Revelation 13, with one absolutely astonishing difference: in Revelation 13 it’s the wrong side that calls down fire from heaven. This results in a mass religious deception on a scale that far exceeds anything we have ever experienced before.

To better understand this symbol of fire falling from heaven, we also need the New Testament story of Pentecost, when flames of fire descended from heaven appearing on the head of each person in the upper room (Acts 2:3). This fire from heaven symbolized the Holy Spirit. It was a token of Holy Spirit power and revival that came in answer to prayer. In Revelation, though, this fire from heaven is not the genuine thing; it’s the counterfeit. It represents a false outpouring of

the Holy Spirit that comes in answer to compromised prayers. This prophecy is describing a false religious revival that will sweep the nation and lead to the image to the beast.

THE IMAGE TO THE BEAST

Do you want to know why so many prophecy teachers avoid Revelation 13:14, 15? Because these verses make one thing certain: the image to the beast is not formed by atheists. There are miracles. There are prayers. There is religious revival. The image to the beast is not a secular program. The image to the beast is not going to come from global elites who are hostile to Christian values. Just the opposite! It will come from where we least expect it. The image to the beast is made possible by a group of pastors and revivalists in America who are working together with lawmakers to bring America back to God! Out of an effort to restore Christianity in this nation, Revelation 13 clearly describes a religious tyranny that emerges.

This is why it is called the image to the beast. What is an image? A replica or a reflection. What is it a reflection of? The image to the beast is an image of the beast from the sea described in Revelation 13:1-10, symbolizing that religious tyranny of the Dark Ages, when the church controlled the state. Prophecy is clear that the religious tyranny of the Dark Ages will be revived in the last days.

Now, this may be a little hard to believe after Communist dictators have made secular tyranny such a dominant threat to Christians during the past century. Beginning with the French Revolution, much blood has been shed by secular dictators who are hostile to Christianity. Revelation 11 speaks powerfully to the reality of secular persecution against Christians. However, in the full sweep of the past 2,000 years, secular tyranny has killed its thousands while religious tyranny has killed its ten thousands. In the 1700s people

fled to America to escape the religious persecution that had been happening in Europe for more than 1,000 years. While there has been a spike in secular persecution during the past 200 years, Revelation 13 is clear that the final persecution in this world will be another religious persecution in which churches gain the upper hand again and enforce their version of Christianity.

Revelation 17 also affirms shows a religious power that has gained power over the state. In Revelation 17 there's a woman with MYSTERY, BABYLON written on her forehead. This woman is riding the beast, meaning that the religious power holds a position of dominance over state power. Many people today think that the beast is riding the woman, but we can be certain from prophecy that the religious power will come out on top.

ADVENTIST HISTORY

This is nothing new! For 173 years Adventists have not deviated in what we teach about America in prophecy. Beginning in 1851, Adventists have been clear about what we believe will cause the final demise of liberty in America.

On May 19, 1851, the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* published an article about the United States in prophecy. This article was written by 21-year-old J. N. Andrews. It reads: "An image to the beast that received the deadly wound must be made. That beast was, in truth, a church clothed with civil power and authority by which it put to death the saints of God. Revelation 13:5-8; Daniel 7:23-26. An image to the beast then must be another church clothed with civil power and authority to put the saints of God to death. This can be nothing else but the corrupt and fallen Protestant church" (italics supplied).

In 1851, 21-year-old J. N. Andrews saw clearly that according to Bible prophecy the final threat to religious liberty would

come from the Protestant churches of America. That's not to say that the only threat to religious liberty will come from religious leaders. To the contrary, we have experienced religious liberty threats from all sides. But the final threat to religious liberty will come from the churches of America. Ellen White emphasized this point even more strongly 38 years later when she published *The Great Controversy* in 1888. *The Great Controversy* is clear and unwavering both in its explanation of the mark of the beast and the image to the beast.

Concerning the image to the beast, it says, "In order for the United States to form an image of the beast, the religious power must so control the civil government that the authority of the state will also be employed by the church to accomplish her own ends" (p. 443; italics supplied). In this quote, who is controlling whom? It's not the government controlling the religious power. It's the church controlling the government. There's a big difference. The image to the beast will be accomplished when the religious power in America takes control of civil government for the enforcement of a certain religious agenda. That's our future, an America in which Protestant Christianity becomes dominant and overbearing! Can you feel it coming?

Ellen White explained that if you want to track the early progress of the image to the beast, don't just listen to what judges are saying at the Supreme Court, don't just listen to what legislators are saying in Congress, listen to what the pastors are saying from American pulpits! On page 445 she writes, "When the leading churches of the United States, uniting upon such points of doctrine as are held by them in common, shall influence the state to enforce their decrees and to sustain their institutions, then Protestant America will have formed an image of the Roman hierarchy, and the infliction of civil penalties upon dissenters will inevitably result" (italics supplied).

So how do we measure progress on the image to the

beast? Whom do we watch? The leading power brokers in this world? The leading business tycoons? The global elites? According to Ellen White, the best place to track the early progress of the image to the beast is by watching the leading churches of America. In 2025 it's happening. If you tune in to the popular pastors in America today, you will notice that the tone is changing. Today Christian leaders in America are feeling hurt, wounded, and angry about how things have gone in this country. They sense it's time to take a more aggressive approach and get this nation back to God.

Still on page 445, she continues: "The 'image to the beast' represents that form of apostate Protestantism which will be developed when the Protestant churches shall seek the aid of the civil power for the enforcement of their dogmas." The image to the beast prophecy predicts that church dogma will again gain the upper hand over secular dogma.

FROM PERSECUTED TO PERSECUTOR

Revelation 13 reminds us how easy it is for the persecuted to become the persecutor. In Revelation 12 the earth provided a haven for the persecuted church. It says in Revelation 12:16: "But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth." But in Revelation 13 those who fled from persecution became the persecutors. It says in Revelation 13:11, 12: "Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed." Whereas the earth is associated with the persecuted in Revelation 12, the earth is associated with the persecutors in Revelation 13. The persecuted becomes the persecutor.

Church history is full of such examples, beginning with

the persecuted Christians in the fourth century who with the help of Constantine eventually became persecutors. This transition from persecuted to persecutor happened not only to Catholics but also to Protestants. In Germany the Lutherans who fought hard for their own religious liberties were not willing to extend those liberties to Anabaptists. The one thing that both Catholic and Lutheran princes agreed on at the 1529 Diet of Speyer was that Anabaptists could not be tolerated in Germany. Many Anabaptists died at the hands of both Lutherans and Catholics in the following years. In sixteenth-century Germany the persecuted Protestants became the persecuting Protestants.

In Geneva, Switzerland, after John Calvin gained independence from Rome and secured religious liberty for himself and his church, he burned Michael Servetus at the stake for holding dissident beliefs about the Trinity. In Geneva the persecuted again became the persecutor.

And finally in the American colonies, Puritans fled to New World to escape persecution from the king of England and the Church of England. But when arriving in America, Puritans established religious liberty for themselves and nobody else, which is not religious liberty at all. They fined, imprisoned, and executed people who did not conform to Puritan beliefs and practices. In colonial America also, the persecuted also became the persecutor.

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

Roger Williams broke the cycle when he envisioned a new colony that would protect religious liberty for not only Baptists but for all religious minorities, including atheists, Jews, and Muslims. Because of his commitment to the separation of church and state, Rhode Island became a shelter for persecuted people of all persuasions. Today Seventh-day Adventists follow in the tradition of Roger Williams

in advocating a robust separation of church and state. We believe in protecting human dignity and the religious convictions of all, including those who believe very differently than we do.

Today the doctrine of separation of church and state is fiercely debated. I felt this tension keenly a couple years ago when I was a pastor in Spokane, Washington. At that time I was invited to represent Seventh-day Adventists on an interfaith religious liberty panel that was organized by the Church of Latter-day Saints. At this religious liberty event I sat between a Roman Catholic priest and a Buddhist guru, people with very different beliefs from my own. I was also joined at the table by a nondenominational pastor and a conference president from the Mormon Church. The panel was moderated by a pastor from the Salvation Army. I considered it a privilege to have that opportunity to share a few Seventh-day Adventist perspectives with this diverse audience. At one point during the panel discussion I shared how Seventh-day Adventists have a strong history of advocating for the separation of church and state, an ethic brought to America by Baptist pastor and founder of Rhode Island Roger Williams. When I spoke about the separation of church and state, the moderator of the panel immediately questioned me, saying, “When you say separation of church and state, you mean the state staying out of the church, not the church staying out of the state, right?”

When the Salvation Army pastor asked me this question, I think he spoke for millions of Americans who believe that the separation of church and state is a one-way street. They believe the government should stay out of church, but the church should not stay out of government. This is where the real rub is today, isn't it! This is where Adventists better know our position! When you study the history of Rome, there were times that the emperor controlled the pope, and there were times that the pope controlled the emperor. Both were a problem! Adventists believe that the separation of church and

state goes both directions. We are against both the church controlling the state and the state controlling the church.

Our understanding of Revelation 11, the French Revolution, and the examples of Communist dictatorships around the world makes it impossible for us to be apathetic toward any state that seeks to control the church. Our understanding of Revelation 13, the history of fourth-century Catholics in Rome, the examples of Lutherans in Germany, Calvinists in Geneva, and Puritans in America makes it impossible to be neutral toward churches that use the state to enforce their agenda. Today Seventh-day Adventists belong to a diminishing class of Christians who believe that the separation of church and state is a two-way street, where both church and state hold mutual respect for each other and where neither is used required to implement the agenda of the other.

EVERYTHING AT STAKE

God has given us Bible prophecy so that we can be awake and watchful before the second coming of Jesus. For Adventists to neglect Revelation 13 and the image to the beast prophecy would be just as catastrophic as it was for Jewish leaders to neglect Isaiah 53 and Daniel 9 at the time of Christ. When religious teachers neglected certain messianic prophecies 2,000 years ago, it led them to reject the Messiah. If Bible students today neglect Revelation 13 and the image to the beast prophecy, there's no doubt we will be swept in by the deception and left unprepared for the future.

Today there is a strong temptation for Adventist Christians to compromise our principles for the sake of politics. Today many Christians are intoxicated by the politics of Babylon. And while we reject the doctrines of Babylon, let's not get drunk on the politics of Babylon. Yes, it's easy to sip a little of the wine of Babylon once in a while, until

we start feeling relaxed with it. There's no doubt that the image to the beast will be a very attractive moral project in the beginning. It will be something that will unite Christians everywhere. And yet it will end terribly. God has called Seventh-day Adventists to the stage for such a time as this. We have the prophecies of Revelation to help us navigate the complexities of our world today. Let us not now neglect our rich religious liberty heritage, but step forward with more courage than ever! This is no time for Adventists to change our interpretation of prophecy. Adventists need our prophetic heritage today more than ever.

APPEAL

Will you join me in seeking the Lord through deeper prayer, more diligent study? Do you sense a need for God to guide us and strengthen us for the complex challenges that we face today? May God do something very special in each of us, to soften our hearts and open our eyes. May we not get pulled in various directions, but stand firm right where God has called us to be.

Maybe God is calling you to strengthen the relationships that you have in your community or build some new friendships. Now is the time to make friends before we need friends! Maybe God is calling you to host an event to raise awareness about religious liberty or Bible prophecy. Maybe He is calling you to share Liberty magazine, *The Great Controversy*, or some literature on this important topic. Whatever God is calling you to do, don't wait. This is 2025. This is a year for action.

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