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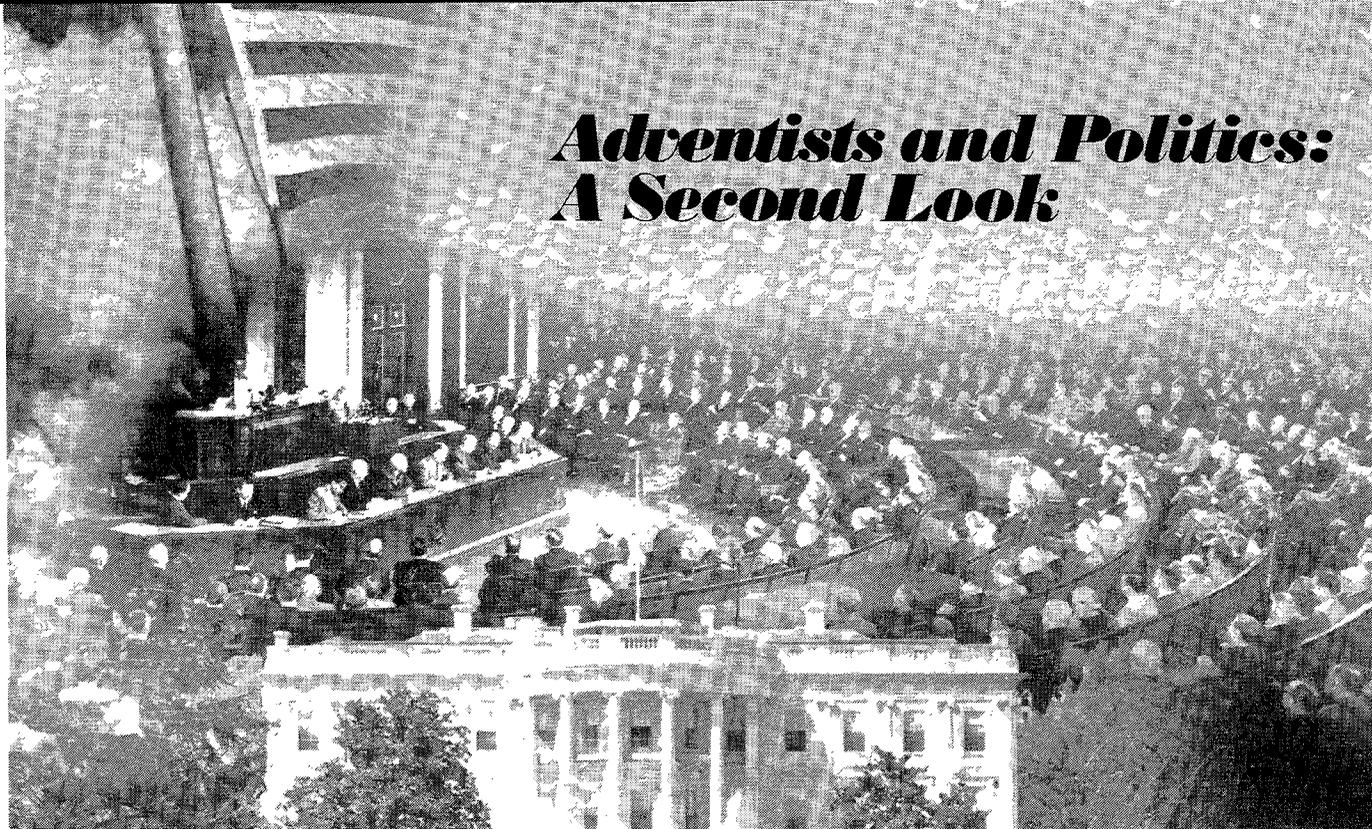
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Adventists and Politics: A Second Look



A. DEVANEY

THE PRESIDENTIAL election has once more made politics a topic of absorbing interest in the United States. It seems appropriate to take another look at Ellen White's statements about political activity among Seventh-day Adventists.

One of these statements, "Special Testimony Relating to Politics," published in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pages 475-484, contains the words, "The Lord would have His people bury political questions. On these themes silence is eloquence."—Page 475.

This particular testimony is found in a compilation on education and begins with the salutation, "To the Teachers and Managers of Our Schools." Internal evidence indicates, however, that it was intended for a wider audience than educators. The sentence just quoted refers to "His people." Other phrases like these occur: "Those who are Christians indeed . . . will not wear political badges, but the badge of Christ" (page 476); "All who bear the message for these last days . . ." (page 482); and "All who have received Christ, ministers and lay members . . ." (page 483).

The evidence appears to be that this special testimony was not intended for ministers and teachers alone, or for the church "as a whole," but for every consecrated church member. The teachers and administrators to whom it was ad-

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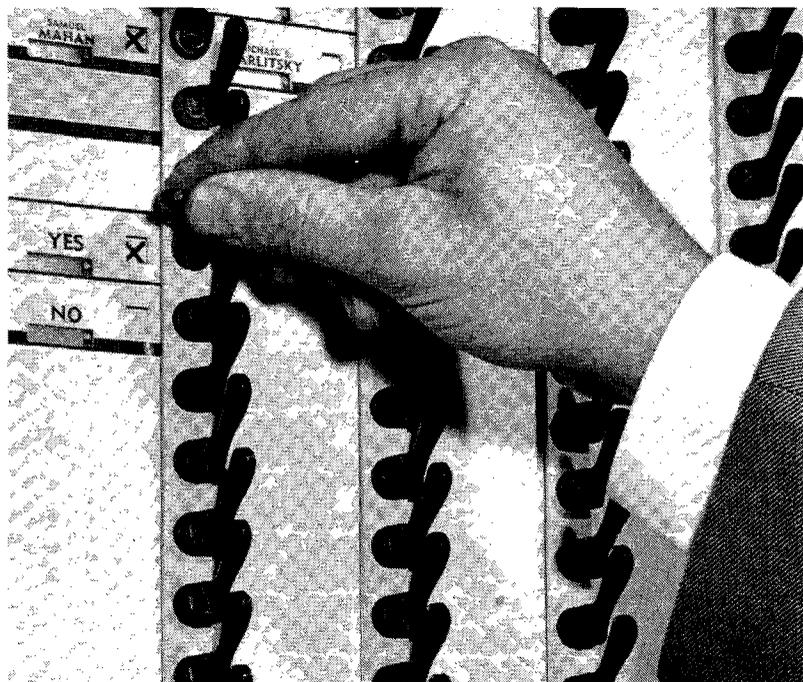
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dressed were to pass the word along to all Seventh-day Adventists.

What reasons are given? Basically, the article emphasizes that God wants Adventists to eschew politics in order to spare themselves avoidable controversy and improper worldly alliances and to keep themselves free to proclaim the third angel's message.

Was this type of counsel applicable only to a temporary situation or is it to be taken as representing enduring principle?

Numerous expressions in the document have at least the semblance of permanence. For example: "God calls to His people, saying, 'Come out from among them, and be ye separate.' He asks that the love which He has shown for them may be reciprocated and revealed by willing obedience to His commandments. His children are to separate themselves from politics, from any alliance with unbelievers."—*Ibid.*, p. 483. Again: "The Lord speaks of those who claim to believe the truth for this time, yet see nothing inconsistent in their taking part in politics, mingling with the contending elements of these last days, as the circumcised who mingle with the uncircumcised, and He declares that He will destroy both classes together without distinction. They are doing a work that God has not set them to do."—*Ibid.*, p. 482. And again: "His people are to possess the



elements of reconciliation. Is it their work to make enemies in the political world?—No, no. . . . They are to carry the burden of a special work, a special message. . . . God does not call upon us to enlarge our influence by mingling with society, by linking up with men on political questions, but by standing as individual parts of His great whole, with Christ as our head.”—*Ibid.*, p. 479.

The testimony under consideration was written in 1899. *The Desire of Ages* was published in 1898, one year earlier. A famous passage therein (page 509) seems to lay down “enduring principle” in the area of politics:

“The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses—extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart.

“Not by the decisions of courts or councils or legislative assemblies, not by the patronage of worldly great men, is the kingdom of Christ established,

but by the implanting of Christ’s nature in humanity through the work of the Holy Spirit.”

In 1899, the same year in which the *Fundamentals* testimony appeared, a testimony to the Battle Creek church exclaimed, “Christianity—how many there are who do not know what it is! It is not something put on the outside. It is a life inwrought with the life of Jesus. It means that we are wearing the robe of Christ’s righteousness. In regard to the world, Christians will say, We will not dabble in politics. They will say decidedly, We are pilgrims and strangers; our citizenship is above.”—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 131.

Historical perspective may help. When Mrs. White was writing the materials quoted here the industrial revolution was giving birth to America’s urban explosion. Monopolistic enterprises sought cheap labor by luring unskilled workers to the United States with promises of high-paying jobs. The Poles, Italians, Czechoslovakians, and others who responded found higher wages all right, but they also found startlingly higher living costs and almost unbelievable working conditions. Even children were compelled by economic necessity to work twelve-hour days, seven days a week in dangerous factories. If a worker missed a day for any reason he was liable to be fired.

Injustice bred violence, as in the bloody 1886 Haymarket Riot in Chicago, the Homestead strike of 1892 (marked by a pitched battle), the Pullman strike of 1894 (when the railroads from New York to Chicago were illumined by burning boxcars), and the Cripple Creek war in the Colorado gold fields.

Leaders in the major denominations lost confidence in the effectiveness of the gospel. Seminaries were depopulated as ministerial students quit theology to study for social-welfare degrees. Almost every sophisticated pulpit in the country demanded legislation to improve working and living conditions. It is said that any book became a best seller if its title contained the word “social.”

Rural poverty at the same time often resembled urban poverty, leading to Free Silver agitation. Racial injustice against poor blacks also provoked excitement. American preachers voiced their convictions in these areas also, demanding politically based reforms.

American Seventh-day Adventists.

conservative in theology and overwhelmingly Republican in political sympathies, saw the capital-labor, rich man-poor man scene through their interpretation of James 5 and vigorously opposed many of the positions taken by the liberal churchmen of the day. Nonetheless, or perhaps, *therefore*, they too caught the political fever—and it was this that led to the testimonies cited here.

Not to Proclaim Political Views

Ellen White encouraged voting under certain circumstances (see *Selected Messages*, book 2, page 337), and she did not advise Adventists to ignore political issues entirely. But she warned them to keep their political views to themselves and not to proclaim them "by pen or voice" (*ibid.*, pp. 336, 337).

Does this mean that Adventists should stand by and do nothing to relieve the conditions of the poor? On the contrary, it seems to mean that God calls them to clear the decks for action in the one area that really matters. "They are to carry the burden of a special work, a special message. . . . God does not call upon us to enlarge our influence by mingling with society, by linking up with men on political questions, but by standing as individual parts of His great whole, with Christ as our head."—*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 479.

The downtrodden of every nation desperately need better living and working

God calls us to clear the decks for action in the one area that really matters.

conditions. Adventists are to manifest the highest degree of social concern through medical missionary work, broadly interpreted, and, supremely, by preparing everyone possible for life in the new world where injustice and poverty will never appear. Adventists *don't need* to get involved directly in ordinary politically based reforms, because there are people even now working to bring about appropriate legislation. (We are told that already God has His agents at work in government to help Him pass good laws. See *Testimonies*, volume 1, page 203.) Adventists *ought not* to get involved in ordinary politics, because (a.) party affiliation can block their Christian influence over persons of other political parties, (b.) party differences within the church needlessly mute its witness to the unifying power of the gospel, (c.) party affiliation presupposes unlawful (2 Cor. 6) unity between believers and unbelievers, and (d.) political activity, which provides only superficial remedies at best, sidetracks the believer from his more effective potential.

Ellen White seems to be saying that if Adventists stay out of politics they can be assured that the dim torch of social advancement through legislation will be carried by other men and women; but, she appears to ask, if Adventists fail to proclaim the third angel's message with all possible tact and energy who will perform this grand service for the world? ■■

Seminary Doctor of Ministry Program Fully Accredited

The Theological Seminary at Andrews has received full accreditation for its Doctor of Ministry program.

Joseph G. Smoot, president of the university, was present at the meeting of the Association of Theological Schools (A.T.S.) in Boston when the action of the Commission on Accrediting was confirmed. This action makes Andrews' Doctor of Ministry program one of 16 such programs that are fully accredited by the A.T.S. in the United States, and one of only seven accredited by A.T.S. without any reservations. Official confirmation of the ac-

creditation was received in June at the university.

"This is an historical moment for Adventist education," said Arnold Kurtz, director of the Doctor of Ministry program, "in that it represents the first full accreditation of a doctoral program outside our medical school."

The program, in existence for three years, has had 10 graduates. Three more will be graduated this summer. It requires a minimum of 48 hours of course work, and includes a doctoral research project. It is designed to facilitate a high level of competence in the practice of ministry.

Plans are underway at Andrews to introduce more flexibility into the Doctor of Ministry program. The alternative will make it unnecessary for a minister to leave his church for a full year's residency at Andrews. A three-week intensive workshop session will cover one of the six-credit core areas for the Doctor of Ministry. The first session will be held at Andrews November 1 to 18.

For further information, contact Dr. Arnold Kurtz, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan 49104.