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### Parley: Another Look at "Adventists and Politics"

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## Another Look at "Adventists and Politics"

### Londis Questions

C. MERVYN MAXWELL'S article "Adventists and Politics" (October, 1976) was characteristically well done. But "politics" seems to be implicitly defined in the article as forming "political alliances" and engaging in partisanship on controversial issues. Yet the classic view of politics is "anything pertaining to government," the art of governing.

In the United States the church does involve itself selectively in politics in this large sense by testifying before congressional committees about legislation it believes unfair to Sabbathkeepers and nonunion workers. We also support "temperance" legislation and dry up towns when we are able. We throw our influence behind certain issues and against others. Is it intrinsically inappropriate to do this? What criteria can we employ to help us decide that *these* issues require our involvement, but the issue of economic exploitation of the poor by large U.S. corporations here and abroad does not? Should we be speaking out against hunger as the evangelicals are doing? (See July 16, 1976, *Christianity Today*.)

My questions emerge from the fact that sin infects not only individuals but also structures, that an attack on personal evil while ignoring social evil is to perpetuate evil even in the individual. Are there not some issues that transcend "political alliances," issues that have little or nothing to do with party politics but have a great deal to do with how orphans and widows are treated, for example? Very little discussion of these questions has transpired in my lifetime; I believe that many would profit from a careful examination of them.

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### Maxwell Replies

My unabridged *Random House Dictionary* gives seven different defi-

nitions for the word "politics." The phrase "anything pertaining to government" is not one of them. It is likely that this phrase is offered by some dictionaries. It is a good etymological definition, based on ancient Greek usage, but it seems to me that it is not much help in discovering the will of the Lord for twentieth-century Adventists. After all, by this classic definition, strictly construed, merely paying income tax turns us all into politicians. Even talking about staying out of politics becomes a political activity, and Ellen White's counsels about politics are vitiated at the outset.

Inspired writers can be understood clearly enough "for all practical purposes" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 19). And as for politics, Ellen White declares that *all* Adventists and, indeed, all "who are Christians indeed" should refrain from wearing political badges and should "let political questions alone" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 476). She gives two basic reasons: (1) to avoid improper relationships with unbelievers, and (2) to avoid superficial solutions to human ills that could only sidetrack Adventists from their prime mission of proclaiming the third angel's message. At the same time and in the same context she summons Adventists to be active in temperance and religious liberty work (*ibid.*, pp. 475-484).

In denying politics while demanding temperance activity Ellen White evidently sensed nothing inappropriate or contradictory. What, then, were her criteria and what were the criteria of Seventh-day Adventists in general during our first one hundred years?

A few paragraphs of history may be of help. The early Adventist position against political involvement grew directly out of something quite basic and significant to the SDA way of thinking, namely, our early Sabbath theology as related to the third angel's message.

The third angel's message, of course, directs special attention to Sabbathkeeping at the end of time. Hence it also calls attention *implicitly*

to the seal of God (perfection of character) and *explicitly* to the mark of the beast (rebellious Sundaykeeping). By further implication, since natural law is a part of God's commandment in the broadest sense, the third angel's message also calls attention to physical hygiene and medical ministry.

From the third angel, Adventist pioneers derived not only the content of our characteristic message but also the dynamic of our unique sense of mission. They came to believe that they were called to carry a special Christ-centered warning to the world at a special point in earth's history.

These concepts were well worked out by the early 1850's. Within the 1850's, Bible study also led to the conclusion that the second beast of Revelation 13 is a symbol of the United States of America and that the U.S.A. would some day enforce the mark of the beast and persecute observers of the seventh-day Sabbath. Also in the 1850's, it should be remembered, the U.S.A. was both condoning and conducting the practice of slavery. Adventist pioneers in general were so opposed to slavery that it was very easy for them to believe that America was already speaking "like a dragon" in anticipation of the ultimate fulfillment of Revelation 13. It seemed true beyond a doubt that a nation that would enslave a racial minority would someday persecute a religious minority.

With the United States providing such clear evidence that it was out of harmony with God, Adventists questioned whether they should so much as register to vote, let alone cast their ballots. Some *Review* correspondents, such as R. F. Cottrell and Joseph Clarke, answered with an emphatic No. James White, however, was not willing to share their stand. In the *Review* for April 21, 1860, White allowed that any Adventist could vote if he wished to, provided, of course, that he did so privately and did not get caught up in party spirit—for the *spirit of party politicking*, White emphasized, is contrary to the spirit of present truth, the third angel's message. (After all, to quarrel and debate hardly helps a person perfect a

Christlike character in preparation for the seal of God.)

The American Civil War was preeminently a political affair, with the voting for America's future carried out with bullets instead of ballots. During the Civil War Ellen White urged Adventists *not* to enter the army, her basis being that military service would unavoidably conflict with observance of the Sabbath of the third angel (*Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 361). Instead she called upon Adventists to pray, not fight, for the end of both slavery and the rebellion. (See *Testimonies*, vol. 1, pp. 355-368.) As they responded to her appeals, Adventists prayed that the outcome of the war would be such that the slaves could hear about the Sabbath and be free to accept and observe it.

Not warfare or the machinations of men but "God alone" could put an end to slavery (*ibid.*, p. 266). Forty years later she attributed emancipation to the same Source (*ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 223). Ellen White's deep spirituality apparently led her to eschew superficial activism. She saw the *sinfulness* of oppression as being so deep that no human device can remedy it. Not because she cared so little about the oppressed, but because she cared so much, Ellen White sought an ultimate divine solution to their plight. Should we, who honor her memory so highly, do any less?

After the Civil War was over, temperance and religious liberty issues assumed a new prominence. Ellen White, as we know, considered medical missionary work—including temperance work—to be the right arm of the third angel's message. Consistent with this understanding, she counseled Adventists to vote for temperance legislation at every opportunity. At the same time, however, consistent with her characteristic convictions, she reminded Adventists that God expected every one of them to avoid all ordinary politicking and party spirit, which have nothing to do with the proclamation of the third angel's message (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pp. 475-484).

In the year 1882 an ordained Adventist minister, William C. Gage, accepted a one-year term as part-time mayor of the city of Battle Creek. In the *Review* of April 11, 1882, editor Uriah Smith and General Conference president G. I. Butler hastened to apologize for this development. They reaffirmed their conviction that Adventists ordinarily have no business getting involved in politics, and explained that absolutely no non-Adventist could be secured to run on the

temperance ticket. As things turned out, Gage chose not to run again the following year, and neither did any other Adventist. In November, 1882, in the midst of Gage's term as mayor, Ellen White delivered an earnest public rebuke to him and to other leaders at Adventist headquarters. Of William Gage she stated, "He has ever been a curse to the church in Battle Creek." She added: "I warn the people of God *not to take this man as their pattern*" (*Special Testimony to the Battle Creek Church*, Nov. 30, 1882, p. 6; italics supplied).

Gage had run for a merely local election. On the national level the banishment of slavery by the United States brought about an appropriate softening of attitude among American Adventists toward their national government. A consequence of this changed attitude was that some Adventists here and there began to engage enthusiastically in party politics. In the late 1890's some ministers even preached on the politics of economic and social change. Ellen White (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pp. 475-484; *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 331-340); and the *Review* editors (*Review*, April 11, 1882; May 16, 1899) scathed such persons, apparently with success. They reminded our people that our role in this world is to advance the third angel's message.

Adventists learned their "no politics" lesson so well that when Senator H. W. Blair introduced his Federal Sunday-closing bills in 1888 and 1889, many of them took no action to oppose this radical new development. Predictably, Ellen White pointed out that the relationship between Sunday legislation and the mark of the beast is so close that opposing Sunday laws is an integral part of the third angel's message (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 715). Then, lest anyone assume that appealing to government for religious freedom is tantamount to engaging in politics, a *Review* editor pointed out that "all that Christianity asks of kings is to be let alone" (*Review*, Nov. 24, 1896). Well said! Religious liberty work is not so much a political as an antipolitical enterprise. It is an endeavor to keep government *out* of the church.

Repeatedly, as the years went by, Ellen White urged young people to study hard and prepare for the crucial moment when they might need to stand in legislative or deliberative assemblies to appeal for religious freedom—for some day the United States most certainly would undertake to enforce anti-Sabbath legisla-

tion. (See such references as *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pp. 82, 87; *Education*, p. 262, *Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 463.)

In one statement (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 82) made during an extensive discourse delivered to the Battle Creek College students about preparation for a life of service, Ellen White's stenographer recorded her as saying that the students should prepare to "sit" in deliberative and legislative assemblies. The word "sit" was a departure from her customary use of "stand" or "appeal to" when speaking of Adventist activity in legislative and deliberative assemblies. Well aware of her strong stand against politicking, no one thought anything of this substitution at the time. Nobody then or for long years thereafter supposed that Ellen White in that college address advised Adventist youth to prepare to be politicians. How could they have?

In almost every presidential election year during our denomination's existence articles have appeared in the *Review* to guide Adventists in their relationship to the political process. The advice soon became standard: (1) Vote if you wish for candidates and ordinary issues, and (2) vote without fail for clear moral issues such as temperance and religious freedom, but (3) keep your political views to yourself, avoiding all party labels (compare the General Conference recommendation published in the *Review*, May 23, 1865).

So far as I know, the year of change was 1960. In that presidential-election year, more than forty years after Ellen White's death and eighty years after the publication of her Battle Creek College address, a writer in the *Review* drew the conclusion that by using the word "sit" Ellen White had endorsed careers in government service for SDA's (*Review*, May 19, 26, 1960). Eight years later another writer in the *Review* innocently cited William C. Gage as a helpful example for Adventists to follow when making their political decisions.

Some Adventists thereupon proceeded to turn our denomination's historical position and the characteristic counsel of Ellen G. White upside down and stand them on their heads.

**Summary:** Adventists evidently *should* engage in temperance and religious liberty work but *should not* engage publicly in ordinary social legislation or in party politics. The basic criterion involved in this distinction is the *third angel's message*, with its spiritual, legislative, and missionary implications. ❏