

The Challenge to the Church

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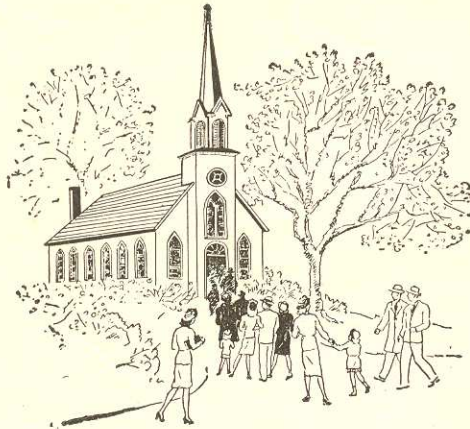
SOME time ago a Canadian magazine published an article reporting the findings of a research firm on the condition of religion in Canada. The report was not reassuring. While outwardly the church appeared to be healthy, its actual condition was far from encouraging.

The clergymen of various denominations who had been questioned gave, as their frank judgment, the opinion that the church was in a very sickly condition. One was amazed that it was still alive. Another flatly declared that, in many areas, the church "is unfit for the tasks of the hour . . . too pietistic and irrelevant in the face of the real stuff of life and the great issues of our day—the feeble guardian of personal decency and the fount of tranquility and optimism."

The opinions and attitudes of the man in the pew bore out these statements. The author of the article summed it up this way: "The church is often regarded as a dear but troublesome old aunt who musn't be offended, because, in the first place, she doesn't deserve it, and in the second place she might just happen to have a secret bank account."

Our personal observations lead us to conclude that this description applies, for the most part, to the Christian church not merely in Canada but around the world. Conditions may differ, but the status of the church is about the same.

With the Christian church, then, in an enfeebled condition, many are led to regard it as a spent force. They feel that many of the concepts, the morals, and the philosophies of Christianity are not geared to these decades of the twentieth century—if, indeed, they have been geared to the twentieth century at all. Accordingly, such men as Dr. Arnold Toynbee, the famous English historian, look upon the feebleness and ineffectiveness of the church and declare that the world is in need of a new religion. Dr. Toynbee suggests that possibly a kind of synthesis of the best of the four great world religions—Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—is what will most successfully meet the world's needs today.



As someone has said, "One of the greatest challenges to the Christian church is to demonstrate the validity of a 2,000-year-old religion in a modern world." This observation, pondered in the light of the foregoing thought-provoking facts, confronts the Seventh-day Adventist Church with the greatest challenge of its existence—the challenge of demonstrating to a skeptical world that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a valid, vital, forceful, and meaningful factor in this modern, scientifically enlightened but spiritually dark age.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ," cried the militant Paul. Why was he not ashamed of the gospel, at a time when Christianity still appeared to be an insignificant force in the world, members-wise, and hated, scorned, maligned, persecuted? Simply because it was—and is—"the power of God unto salvation." Paul knew from experience that the good news of Christianity was an electric thing that could revitalize indifferent, helpless, and hopeless men.

Today the world is desperately in need of a new Pentecost. "Never since the first century has the world been so ripe for a new apostolic age," declared one magazine writer some time ago. But where is the power that so dramatically changed the ancient world? Some might be tempted to be ashamed of the gospel today, because of its seeming lack of power.

Inspiration has assured us that the very same power that descended at Pentecost awaits the reception of the

church, to electrify it, and through it the world. In fact, there is to be an even greater demonstration of divine power than was manifested at Pentecost. "The great work of the gospel is not to close with less manifestation of the power of God than marked its opening" (*The Great Controversy*, p. 611). The scenes of Pentecost "are to be repeated, and with greater power. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was the former rain, but the latter rain will be more abundant."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 121.

Seventh-day Adventists agree that there is power in the gospel. But is the church measuring up to its role of demonstrating this power?

Has anyone ever asked you, "If your church is the true church, the church of prophecy, as you claim, and if God is leading you, why doesn't your church make a greater impact upon the world? Why isn't its message more widely known? Why isn't it sweeping the world as the apostolic church did?" An embarrassing question, it may be, but one we dare not avoid facing.

Few if any would be so bold as to claim that the church is doing all it can and should to shake the world. This is far from saying that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is Babylon. A sleeping church, yes, but a fallen church, no!

Watchmen and Light Bearers

Seventh-day Adventists have been called of God to do a particular work at this particular time, as He ordained nations and peoples in times past to do His work.

"In a special sense Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. On them is shining wonderful light from the word of God. They have been given work of the most solemn import—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels' messages. . . . The most solemn truths ever entrusted to mortals have been given us to proclaim to the world."—*Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 19.

"Seventh-day Adventists have been chosen by God as a peculiar people, separate from the world. . . . He has made them His representatives and has called them to be ambassadors for Him in the last work of salvation."—*Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 138.

But thus far we have not accomplished all that God raised us up to do. Far from it. Many years ago Sister White wrote: "God will employ

agencies whose origin man will be unable to discern; *angels will do a work which men might have had the blessing of accomplishing, had they not neglected to answer the claims of God.*—*Review and Herald*, Dec. 15, 1885. (Italics supplied.) A man may need a hammer for a certain job, but if one is not available he will use a stone, a wrench, or some other object.

Similarly, God is looking for this church to do the work He has peculiarly fitted it to do.

Faced with this great challenge, let us rend our hearts, and not our garments; let us turn unto the Lord our God. When, as a church, we follow this call we shall go forth "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners."