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The Charmer and the Enforcer: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and the Challenge to Seventh-day Adventists

Kevin D. Paulson

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After a scant two days and four ballots, white smoke billowed from the chimney. And onto the portico of St. Peter's Basilica stepped Cardinal Joseph Aloysius Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

Thus ended two weeks of nearly suffocating papal dominance of the news, beginning with the passing of the late Pope John Paul II. With Ratzinger's election, the scramble began at once in the media to analyze and speculate as to what his reign will mean for the papacy and for the world. None could miss the powerful significance of Ratzinger having led for 24 years the so-called Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—the Vatican's infamous "Holy Office" known in previous centuries as the Inquisition.

Throughout the media's coverage of the election, specific reference was made to this most recent item on Ratzinger's resumé. In her broadcast the night of April 19, 2005, CNN reporter Paula Zahn labeled Ratzinger "the Grand Inquisitor." Speaking of Ratzinger's work in this regard, biographer John Allen observes: "You have to look back to the 16th century to find someone who had the same impact in that office."¹

Few who have followed this man's career need to guess at his convictions or policies. It was he who issued the document "Dominus Jesus" in 2000, in which the Sacred Congregation declared Catholicism to be the "sole path to salvation."² Upon being elected pope, Ratzinger declared his intention to "reunify all Christians"³—obviously on Catholic terms only, if indeed that Church is the exclusive path to heaven!

As telling as anything, perhaps, are Benedict's two leading spiritual mentors. One is St. Benedict, born around A.D. 480 and credited by many with founding the monastic movement in the Western church.⁴ The other is St. Augustine, for whom the new pope seems to have an even deeper veneration. "Augustine has kept me company for more than 20 years," he once wrote.⁵ Asked once to pick two books he would take to a desert island, Ratzinger chose the Bible and Augustine's *Confessions*.⁶ (Evidence suggests, as we will see, that he clearly prefers the latter to the former.)

Augustine's *The City of God* is reportedly also a favorite of Benedict's.⁷ The logical brainchild of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin—also mentioned in an article on the new pope's philosophy⁸—*The City of God* upholds the necessary supremacy of the church to the state, a concept which became the basis of the "divine right of kings" in medieval Europe. If indeed, as Augustine held, man is incurably depraved, even when sanctified by the Spirit of God, civil and physical force become appropriate tools whereby acceptable behavior is achieved. The racks and torture chambers of the Inquisition dovetailed neatly in this regard.

Like other Augustinians, whether Catholic or Protestant, Ratzinger advocates close ties between the church and the government, with the church the stronger partner. It was he who wrote the letter from the Vatican during the 2004 election, declaring that Catholic politicians such as Senator Kerry—who oppose the civil enactment of church teachings on issues like abortion—were to be barred from receiving communion.⁹ (Let it be remembered that the issue here is *not* disagreement with Catholic doctrine on the part of such politicians, but rather, their unwillingness to *enforce* Catholic doctrine through civil law. It is this unwillingness which, in Ratzinger's view, disqualifies a Catholic politician from taking communion.)

In his inaugural mass Sunday morning, April 24, the new pope further displayed his hard-line credentials, flashed earlier in the week in his homily against what he called the "dictatorship of relativism." At the inaugural mass he declared, "This is the end of cafeteria Catholicism," referring to those Catholics who pick and choose which of their church's teachings they accept and which they reject. Interviewed that same morning on NBC's "Meet the Press," Jesuit priest and *Ignatius Press* founder Joseph Fessio expressed similar thoughts, stating: "Those who rebel against the Church's authentic teachings are rebelling against God."

Sandro Magister, a Vatican expert at the Italian magazine L'Espresso, believes the reign of Benedict XVI could likely parallel that of the medieval Pope Gregory VII, who barred the clergy from marriage and forced his will on Europe's monarchs.¹⁰ Many will remember Pope Gregory as the one who compelled German emperor Henry IV to stand barefoot in the snow for two days, while he awaited an audience of reconciliation with the pontiff.¹¹

With John Paul II, the world witnessed a consummate charmer—a pious, charismatic gentleman of whom billions of all faiths were enamored. Perhaps now, in the words of John Allen,¹² it is time for the enforcer.

Affirmation of Medieval Catholicism

In view of the papal transition now complete, it behooves Seventh-day Adventists to assess exactly where the papacy stands in relation to teachings against which the Protestant Reformers and the Advent movement have offered such vigorous objection. This is especially important because, in recent years, certain voices within Adventism have declared our historic views on this subject to be seriously outdated.¹³ One such individual recently declared that since the Second Vatican Council in 1962, "everything written about Catholic thought and life 'from the outside' before then has become obsolete."¹⁴

But despite this claim, and despite his loving and Christlike image in billions of hearts, the late John Paul II—throughout the years of his long reign—consistently upheld those medieval Catholic teachings which place papal dogma and tradition above Holy Scripture.

On December 12, 1984, the *Los Angeles Times* ran the headline, "No Forgiveness 'Directly From God,' Pope Says."¹⁵ The article reported:

Rebutting a belief widely shared by Protestants and a growing number of Roman Catholics, Pope John Paul II dismissed Tuesday the "widespread idea that one can obtain forgiveness directly from God," and exhorted Catholics to confess more often to their priests.¹⁶

In his proclamation of the "Great Jubilee of 2000," Pope John Paul reaffirmed the medieval practice of offering indulgences for sin. Those performing certain charitable deeds, such as visiting the sick, giving to the poor, or abstaining from alcohol or tobacco for a day, can earn an indulgence just as surely now as in the days of Tetzl.¹⁷ On September 17, 1999, a new manual was issued by the Vatican instructing Catholics as to how such indulgences can be obtained.¹⁸ Most recently, the January 30, 2005 edition of *Our Sunday Visitor* contained the following Vatican announcement:

During the Year of the Eucharist, which runs through October, Catholics can receive special indulgences for Eucharistic Adoration and prayer before the Eucharist.¹⁹

The Bible is clear that "there is one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). It is equally clear that confession and the forsaking of sin are essential in order for God's forgiveness to be obtained (2 Chronicles 7:14; Proverbs 28:13; Isaiah 55:7; 1 John 1:9). Quite obviously, if sin must be forsaken in order to be forgiven, only God is capable of forgiving sin, since only He knows the heart (1 Kings 8:39).

But the papacy of John Paul II, in contrast to these plain statements of Scripture, maintains vigorously the Church's supposed right to forgive sins, and to create its own conditions for sinners to receive pardon.

In another statement, the late pope presumed to disagree with Christ Himself, whom he claimed to represent:

Have no fear when people call me the "Vicar of Christ," when they say to me "Holy Father" or "Your Holiness," or use titles similar to these, which seem even inimical to the Gospel. Christ Himself declared, "Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called Master; you have but one Master, the Messiah" (Matthew 23:9, 10). *These expressions, nevertheless, have evolved out of a long tradition, becoming part of common usage. One must not be afraid of these words either.*²⁰

What did Jesus say? "Thus have ye made the commandments of God of none effect by your tradition... But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:6, 9).

This supreme devotion to tradition, as strong under the late pope as under his predecessors, has handicapped the Roman Church even when its moral stance is Biblically correct. As the late pope's legacy is being reviewed, his rigid opposition to the homosexual lifestyle and women's ordination is being commented upon. But as the church's spokesmen have defended his views, reference is repeatedly made to the *Church's* teachings, not those of the Bible. Some years ago,

at a forum featuring Church officials and gay Catholics in San Francisco, this same pattern was witnessed. Over and over again, “thus saith the Church” was the basis of authority. No reference was offered to the transcendent authority of Holy Scripture, to which all—including the Church’s hierarchs—are accountable.

Little wonder that such appeals to temporal authority are resisted by many who can’t figure out how fellow humans—whose fallibility gives every evidence of equaling if not surpassing their own—should have their commands obeyed without question.

When considering the words of both the new pope and his late predecessor regarding secularism, immorality, relativism, and other curses of the modern world, Bible-believing Seventh-day Adventists can only listen with mixed feelings. A part of us is inclined to say Amen, since we too lament the spread and hurtfulness of such tendencies. (Not to mention that the new pope’s denunciation of “cafeteria Catholicism” reminds the faithful in our own church of the very real problem of “cafeteria Adventism.”) But the papal practice of exalting tradition over the Word of God seriously compromises any value in these papal exhortations. Moral absolutism is right only if it is God’s objective Word that is seen as absolute! Otherwise, any conflict between the church and the world becomes a mere contest of human opinions.

Ellen White warns us of what happens when Scripture is accepted as selectively authoritative:

Many professed ministers of the gospel do not accept the whole Bible as the inspired word. One wise man rejects one portion; another questions another part. They set up their judgment as superior to the word; and the Scripture which they do teach rests upon their own authority. Its divine authenticity is destroyed. Thus the seeds of infidelity are sown broadcast; for the people become confused and know not what to believe.²¹

The late pope’s adherence to tradition over the Bible has also been demonstrated by his steadfast defense of the unscriptural doctrine of clerical celibacy. On one occasion he even stated that “a man might commit adultery in his heart with his own wife.”²² The new pope’s fondness for the teachings of St. Benedict, who with Augustine was largely responsible for bringing this doctrine into the Church, gives evidence of similar if not identical thinking on Ratzinger’s part. (The un-Biblical notion that the absence of sexual intimacy somehow produces greater intimacy with God also, sadly, has its adherents in Protestant circles.²³) Opposing sex outside of marriage is one thing, but such statements and concepts as the above show more respect for the sexuality-despising extremism of the monastic movement than for the balanced, reasonable teachings found in God’s Word.

The new pope seems to be quite clear in his preference for tradition over the Word of God. According to *U.S. News & World Report*, in 1997 “he warned that the use of Scripture to evaluate Church teaching ‘was one of the most dangerous currents to flow out of Vatican II.’”²⁴ When asked what he hopes will occur under Benedict’s pontificate, former New York Governor Mario Cuomo answered: “An admission by the Pope that the man-made rules are alterable by the church that made them”.²⁵

I fear the Governor will wait a long time for that.

Papal Deification

As the late pope’s body lay in state in the Apostolic Palace within Vatican City, one reporter described it as “the body of God.” On CNN’s “American Morning,” broadcast on April 4, another reporter stated that while the pope’s body will be buried in St. Peter’s Basilica, different parts of his body will be sent around the world “so people can worship them.” It should be clarified that this was not stated in humor or in jest, but with profound seriousness.

Later on that same day, a Catholic devotee interviewed on television spoke of how “there should be joy” at the pope’s death, “because he has gone to sit at the right hand of the Father.”

Such statements certainly give new meaning to the word Antichrist! Strictly speaking, the word Antichrist means to take the place of Christ. Earlier we considered the Biblical declaration that “there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). It is He, and no one else, who is described as sitting at the Father’s right hand (Hebrews 8:1). Without question, the sacrilegious words quoted above call to mind Daniel’s prophecy of how the little horn “shall speak great words against the Most High” (Daniel 7:25). The book of Revelation likewise speaks of this power: “And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, and His tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven” (Revelation 13:6).

This blasphemy against “them that dwell in heaven” was perhaps most blatant in the comments of John Paul II on the role of the Virgin Mary in man’s salvation. The August 25, 1997 issue of *Newsweek* magazine featured a large picture of the late pope, with the following words—spoken in April 1997—printed beside his face:

Having created man “male and female,” the Lord also wants to place the New Eve beside the New Adam in the Redemption.... Mary, the New Eve, thus becomes the

perfect icon of the Church.... We can therefore turn to the Blessed Virgin, truthfully imploring her aid in the awareness of the singular role entrusted to her by God, the role of co-operator in the Redemption.²⁶

Even the secular-minded religion editor of *Newsweek* couldn't help contrasting this exaltation of Mary with the New Testament declaration that "there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).²⁷

Even with the adulation showered on the late pope, media comment has focused on the sexual abuse scandal that has lately tarred the reputation of the Catholic Church. In his provocative book on the scandal, *A Gospel of Shame*, *New York Times* reporter Frank Bruni observed, regarding the scandal:

It was endemic to a Catholic culture that had deified its priests in the eyes of their parishioners and thus rendered their children particularly vulnerable to exploitation by these men.²⁸

In Latin, the phrase by which priests are known is *Alter Christi*—other Christ.... One victim told [her counselor] she was taught that if she encountered both a priest and an angel on the street, she should walk toward the priest, because he is closer to God.²⁹

One girl who suffered abuse by a priest, who waited thirty years before breaking her silence, asked, "How could you tell your parents that God did this to you?"³⁰

Here we see how the recent scandals are less a product of human frailty than of bad theology. The pope and his priests are exalted by the Church and its members as infallible. While it is true such scandals have occurred in other religious communities, including our own, the undue reverence accorded Catholic priests makes abuse of this kind far more likely and difficult to address. How can an infallible person be held accountable for his actions? One child psychologist, after meeting with Boston's Cardinal Law regarding the priestly abuse of children, made these observations:

The cardinal said canon law had to be considered. We just looked at one another. Whatever we had just told him didn't seem to be registering.... Canon law was irrelevant to us. Children were being abused. Sexual predators were being protected. Canon law should have nothing to do with it. But they were determined to keep this problem, and their response to it, within their culture."³¹

It is a fact both painful and grotesque that while the late pope expressed shame and sorrow over the recent scandals, he nevertheless elevated Cardinal Law to a high post at the Vatican following his resignation from the Boston archdiocese. For a man who, under his jurisdiction, repeatedly placed children at the mercy of known pedophiles, to receive such a promotion—rather than the defrocking (not to mention criminal prosecution) he richly deserves—speaks vastly louder than any belated "apology" from one whose power within his Church is absolute.

The new pope, to his credit, has denounced what he calls the "filth in the church, even among those who, in the priesthood, should belong entirely" to God.³² If Benedict XVI decides to start cleaning house, he won't need to look far! Cardinal Law is not only ensconced at the height of Vatican power; he also participated in the recent election. Unless the new pope removes him—the very least he could do, considering his concealment of the darkest crimes—no volume of fine words will mean anything.

"Apologies"

Much has been made of the late pope's apparent apologies for past wrongs committed by the Catholic Church, involving such historical atrocities as the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the Holocaust. But the most basic problem with these apologies is that they failed to address the fact that all these crimes in question bear the endorsement of past popes. Such medieval pontiffs as Urban II, Innocent III, and Gregory XIII were directly involved in sponsoring, organizing, and offering official Church praise to such vile deeds as the First Crusade, the slaughter of the Albigenses in southern France, and the St. Bartholomew Massacre.

Recent research has also thoroughly documented the complicity of Pope Pius XII in sustaining the Nazi regime and turning a blind eye while millions of Jews went to their death.³³ When the German army invaded Russia on June 22, 1941—an act which brought about the death of over 20 million people, mostly civilians—Pius XII praised the invasion as "high-minded gallantry in defense of the foundations of Christian culture."³⁴

Over a century ago, Ellen White warned that such a veneer would be attempted by the papacy:

The Roman Church now presents a fair front to the world, covering with apologies her record of horrible cruelties. She has clothed herself in Christlike garments; but she is unchanged. Every principle of the papacy that existed in past ages exists today. The doctrines devised in the darkest ages are still held. Let none deceive

themselves. The papacy that Protestants are now so ready to honor is the same that ruled the world in the days of the Reformation, when men of God stood up, at the peril of their lives, to expose her iniquity. She possesses the same pride and arrogant assumption that lorded it over kings and princes, and claimed the prerogatives of God. Her spirit is no less cruel and despotic now than when she crushed out human liberty and slew the saints of the Most High.³⁵

One finds it fascinating that the recent “apology” by the late pope was in fact the first of its kind in papal history. When it was issued, the *New York Times* observed that Pope John Paul had done “what none of his 262 predecessors felt called to do—apologize for historical transgressions committed by Roman Catholics in the name of the Church.”³⁶ Reuters News Service likewise declared, “It was the first time in the history of the Catholic Church that one of its leaders has sought such a sweeping pardon.”³⁷

Quite clearly, the above Ellen White statement anticipated these apologies, over a century before they were delivered. This offers further proof that in the gift of Ellen White’s prophetic ministry, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been blessed with the “sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:19).

Sunday Laws and Religious Liberty

Much has been made in the accolades offered the late John Paul II of his presumed support for religious liberty throughout the world. But the late pope’s Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, (“The Day of the Lord”), issued on May 31, 1998, called not only for more faithful Sunday observance, but also applauded the Roman emperor Constantine for his “legislation of the rhythm of the week.”³⁸ Elsewhere in the letter the late pope called for the state to enforce Sunday-keeping by law.³⁹

Most dangerously of all, an article on the front page of the *Detroit News*, July 7, 1998, reported the late pope’s statement that a person who violates the sanctity of Sunday is to be “punished as a heretic.”⁴⁰ One was amazed that no one except Seventh-day Adventists appeared to express outrage at this dark hint of a return to medieval intolerance.

In the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1994 under the late pope’s auspices, it is stated that “the right to religious liberty is neither a moral license to adhere to error, nor a supposed right to error.”⁴¹ And who, in the Catholic system, defines what error is? Obviously the pope.

The late pope’s contempt for religious freedom is also affirmed in the best-selling book *The Keys of This Blood*, by Malachi Martin, a leading Catholic author and defender of Vatican policies. Martin specifically mentions Seventh-day Adventists and others who oppose the papal agenda,⁴² then states the following regarding the support of such groups for religious freedom, in contrast with the late pope’s attitude:

Every person (according to Adventists and others) must literally be assured the right to choose Hell over Heaven. That obligation carried to that extreme not only sets the Minimalists (Adventists, etc.) apart from John Paul; it sets them against him, as well.

It sets them apart from the Holy Father, because democratic principles cannot take precedence over divine revelation.... It is axiomatic for John Paul that no one has the right—democratic or otherwise—to a moral wrong.⁴³

Many will remember how, some years ago, former New York Governor Mario Cuomo was threatened with excommunication by the late Cardinal John O’Connor, due to Cuomo’s belief that Catholic opposition to abortion shouldn’t be enforced through civil law.⁴⁴ As we noted earlier, we need to be clear what the issue is in such disputes, and what it is not. Every church, including our own, has the right to expect its members to uphold and adhere to its doctrinal and moral teachings. But the Cardinal was threatening the Governor with excommunication because the latter, while he supports the Church’s stand on abortion, doesn’t believe Church dogma should be forced by law on those who don’t accept it.

We noted at the beginning how the letter regarding Catholic politicians and Communion originated with Ratzinger.⁴⁵ In the light of this, one cannot but think of the following statement of Ellen White:

Let the restraints now imposed by secular governments be removed and Rome be reinstated in her former power, and there would speedily be a revival of her tyranny and persecution.⁴⁶

The Ecumenical Papacy

On Sunday, April 3, the day after the late pope’s death, George Stephanopoulos of ABC’s “This Week” reported that among Protestant evangelicals, Pope John Paul II was more popular than either Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson. The previous evening, on CNN’s “Larry King Live,” Billy

Graham had declared John Paul II "the moral leader of the world." Let us remember, of course, that this is the same pope who declared Catholicism the "sole path to salvation."⁴⁷ What indeed has become of Protestantism when its leading spokesman pays such homage to the papacy, thereby casting shame over the graves of those whose very blood sealed their conviction that salvation comes through Christ alone?

President George W. Bush, though himself not a Catholic, has the distinction of being the first American President to attend a papal funeral. (Not even President Kennedy, who was in fact a Catholic, attended the funeral of Pope John XXIII in 1963.) And when Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI, this stalwart defender of papal orthodoxy and foe of civil liberty was hailed by Bush as "a man who serves the Lord."⁴⁸

Some years ago, population scholar Stephen Mumford, in his provocative book *American Democracy and the Vatican*, wrote of the papacy's role in the ecumenical movement:

The ecumenical movement was critical in setting the stage for advancement of the Vatican's agenda. For the Vatican, this movement has been a great success and, for everyone else, a colossal failure. Not only did the Vatican step up its abuse of American freedom with the coming of the ecumenical movement; Protestants were standing by to apologize for the Vatican in the name of religion.⁴⁹

The late pope's reign witnessed an acceleration of Catholic-Protestant unity for political purposes.⁵⁰ Lutherans and Catholics have agreed on a "joint declaration" regarding justification by faith, the former—like Billy Graham's accolades—making a mockery of the sacrifices made by those who gave their lives rather than to accept the false teachings of the papacy.⁵¹ Pentecostals have likewise apologized for "visions of the end of time that condemn the Catholic Church for spiritual harlotry and idolatry," and for stating that Catholics "advocate salvation by works, denying the grace and truth of the Gospel."⁵²

In none of these gestures of unity has the Catholic Church moved one inch. All the movement has come from Protestants. The words of the modern prophet have again been fulfilled:

And let it be remembered, it is the boast of Rome that she never changes. The principles of Gregory VII and Innocent III are still the principles of the Roman Catholic Church. And had she but the power, she would put them in practice with as much vigor as in past centuries.⁵³

This union will not, however, be effected by a change in Catholicism, for Rome never changes. She claims infallibility. It is Protestantism that will change.⁵⁴

And it is happening. And under Benedict XVI, all signs point to the likelihood that it will continue to happen.

Conclusion: The Challenge to Seventh-day Adventists

The most powerful pope since Innocent III now lies buried under the Vatican rotunda. Because of his efforts, the papacy bestrides the earth with more power than at any time since the Middle Ages. Because of him, a global power structure whose ideas and weaponry caused free nations to tremble now lies in ruins,⁵⁵ its memory symbolized by the million-plus pieces of the Berlin Wall now held as souvenirs throughout the world. His pontificate witnessed the reaffirmation of the darkest and most sacrilegious dogmas held by the Catholic Church. And his blatant appeal to political power as a means of achieving his goals has set in motion the very forces predicted by Inspiration to precede the second coming of Christ.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, thus occupies a position of awesome power, perhaps unparalleled in papal history. The charmer has passed from the scene; the enforcer is now on stage. He is elderly—78 years of age, and may not have much time. But then, neither may we!

In the present writer's view, three challenges to Seventh-day Adventists arise from the now-completed papal transition:

1. *The stage of history is being set for the final crisis.* All the evidence we have reviewed offers proof that the papacy has not changed, that its unscriptural dogmas are held with as much fervency as in times past, and that the Church's efforts to regain power over civil governments continue at a brisk pace. The credibility of those liberal Adventist claims that the papacy has "changed," that Ellen White's predictions of the last days have been rendered "obsolete," is as dead as the late pope himself. Sincere truth-seekers, especially among the church's youth, will increasingly find such claims absurd and oblivious to reality. As indeed they should!

Columnist Michael Barone, in the latest *U.S. News & World Report*, comments on the growing power of religion in American politics, declaring, "If you read the headlines, you run the risk of thinking we are headed toward a theocracy."⁵⁶ He goes on—foolishly, he may soon learn—to assure his readers this could never happen: "No religion," he writes, "is going to impose laws on an unwilling Congress or the people of this country.... America is too diverse and freedom-

loving for that."⁵⁷

Barone better read Revelation 13—not to mention the writings of Ellen White! In her words:

Political corruption is destroying love of justice and regard for truth, and even in free America, rulers and legislators, in order to secure public favor, will yield to the popular demand for a law enforcing Sunday observance.⁵⁸

To secure popularity and patronage, legislators will yield to the demand for a Sunday law.⁵⁹

Barone's naivete notwithstanding, his words—and the constant media coverage not only of recent papal developments but also of the growing power of the Religious Right in American politics—indicate thoughtful men of the world are pondering these issues, and doing so in public. Any lingering notion that Adventist eschatology is somehow irrelevant to the contemporary world cannot possibly be taken seriously, by anyone.

As events quicken on the global stage, emphasis on the soonness of Jesus' coming and preparation for the final crisis will become increasingly imperative within the church. The prophet's admonition will ring ever truer:

Prophecy is fast fulfilling. More, much more, should be said about these tremendously important subjects.... Great pains should be taken to keep this subject before the people. The solemn fact is to be kept not only before the people of the world, but before our own churches also, that the day of the Lord will come suddenly, unexpectedly. Let no one feel that he is secure from the danger of being surprised. Let no one's interpretation of prophecy rob you of the conviction of the knowledge of events which show that this great event is near at hand.⁶⁰

2. *The final conflict will be a battle of dueling fundamentalists.* The word fundamentalist, used in this context, refers to those who believe in a set of transcendent absolutes, whether true or false, as opposed to relativists, who hold such beliefs to be impossible for finite mortals.

The growth of Catholic strength in the Third World has been paralleled by a similar change in the balance of power in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In both cases, this has meant the ascendancy of conservative theological elements over liberal ones. Philip Jenkins, in his recent book *The Next Christendom*, demonstrates the rapid growth of the Christian community in Third World nations, and the corresponding rise of conservative morals and theology.⁶¹

Recent global decisions by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on issues such as women's ordination give evidence of this. Intense and divisive though it continues to be, most of the current struggle between liberal and conservative theology in the Adventist Church is found in First World countries, which altogether make up barely fifteen percent of the worldwide Adventist body.

Liberal theology has been in similar decline in Protestant churches for the past several decades.⁶² Ambiguity empties the pews; clarity fills them. Not many of any age or generation care to spend three choice weekend hours in pursuit of a religion as uncertain as their Wall Street portfolios! Barone's editorial, quoted earlier, likewise notes that "religions and sects that have grown" in recent decades "are those that make serious demands on members; those that accommodate to secular critics and make few demands decline in numbers."⁶³

The claim of some in the media, covering the recent papal election, that a hard-line approach by the Vatican may drive millions from the Church, may well be unfounded if recent history is a clue. Evidence from throughout the Christian community for the past few decades has been clear that the harder the line taken by a religious body on moral and theological issues, the more likely it is to grow, not shrink.

The impact of the late pope on young people has especially been noteworthy in the media. One CNN reporter said he couldn't fathom how "an old man who tells people not to do things" could be so popular with youth. Whatever we say about the falsity of Catholic doctrine, the response of Catholic young people to the moral clarity of John Paul II goes far in putting the lie to the popular notion of Adventist liberals that doctrinal and moral rigidity chases the youth from the church.

The fact is that fundamentalism is on the rise throughout the world, and liberal ambiguity is on the wane. This, too, is a sign of the end. The Sabbath/Sunday issue would likely be so much foolishness to liberal denominations, as it is to liberals within Adventism. This is something only fundamentalists are likely to care about, on either side of the debate. Moreover, the prevalence of obviously supernatural developments in the last days will leave no room for the skepticism and higher-critical doubts of the theological Left. The secular mind, such as we know it, will effectively cease to exist.

In short, the struggle of the end-times will be a struggle of fundamentalists. A contrast of fundamental error with fundamental truth. Efforts by the church to "reach the secular mind" will

soon confront the reality that such a mindset is rapidly losing its appeal to a world stalked by uncertainty, ceaseless disasters, and a constant state of crisis. As the final events draw closer, with increasing supernatural occurrences and the appearance of supernatural beings, relativism and higher-critical skepticism will become as anachronistic as the Flat Earth Society. The question will no longer be, Does supernatural power exist? No one will then be asking, Are there absolute truths? Supernatural events will occur all around; no one will be able to doubt them. The absolutes of God's Word will be clearly placed alongside the absolutes imposed by the global powers of Antichrist. The questions at that time will be, Which supernatural power commands my allegiance? Which set of absolutes will I obey?

3. *God is waiting on us.* Finally, we cannot forget who is really responsible for holding up the return of Jesus.

The increasing signs of the last days are important to arouse our awareness and inspire our consecration. But ultimately, God is not waiting on global events. God is waiting on His unprepared church. It is their "holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God" (2 Peter 3:12), that will finally determine when Jesus will come. It is their need to be sealed in their foreheads, which requires the Spirit's transforming them into "all the fulness of God" (Ephesians 3:19), that restrains the winds of strife (Revelation 7:1-3). It is at the time of the seventh angel, when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord (Revelation 11:15), that the mystery of God shall be finished (Revelation 10:7), "which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

Ellen White is in complete harmony with these Bible verses when she declares: "When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own."⁶⁴ Momentous as the events around us surely are, God is not waiting on the pope, the world economy, natural disasters, or the U.S. government. God is waiting on Seventh-day Adventists.

May He not wait much longer!

Endnotes

1. John Allen, quoted by Dan Gilgoff, "Watchdog or Attack Dog?" *U.S. News & World Report*, May 2, 2005, p. 36.
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Pastor **Kevin D. Paulson** serves on the pastoral staff of the Greater New York Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Through the years he has published articles in many publications. He is also editor of [Quo Vadis](#), a truth-filled magazine predominantly featuring the work of SDA young people. Kevin is also the speaker for "Know Your Bible," a radio program broadcast each Sunday at 5:30 p.m. on WMCA 570 AM, in Hasbrouk Heights, New Jersey. Pastor Paulson received his BA in Theology from Pacific Union College in 1982 and an MA in

Systematic Theology from Loma Linda University in 1987.