

DISTRACTIONS

Driving while intoxicated is a serious offense because the driver is incapable of operating a vehicle safely, thus endangering themselves and other motorists. The story is told of a police officer who was staking out a bar to catch potential DUI offenders. It was past midnight when an extremely drunk man stumbled out of the bar. He went to the parking lot fumbling for his keys, trying to unlock five or six cars before locating his. Meanwhile, several patrons left the bar and drove away. Once inside his car, he rummaged around the switches, trying out the brakes, lights, and windshield wipers. More patrons left the bar, until finally his was the only car left in the parking lot. He started his car and departed. As soon as he pulled away, the officer went after him, pulled him over, and gave him the breathalyzer test. When it came up negative, the officer was puzzled and muttered to himself, "How could this be? The breathalyzer must be broken." The driver grinned and said, "No, the breathalyzer is OK. Tonight I'm the designated decoy!"

What is a decoy? A decoy is someone or something used to draw attention away from another. A decoy is specifically designed to distract and deceive. In the story, the "designated decoy" is a person who remains sober but attracts drunk. His joy is to divert the attention of the police officer so that his drinking buddies can escape unnoticed. In our spiritual journey we are prone to be distracted. We may be preoccupied with many good things at the expense of the most important thing. A decoy is meant to obscure the essentials from the peripherals and the eternal from the temporal.

Jesus commented that "Martha was distracted with much serving." Martha had been distracted by things that were of secondary importance. More important, the church is mandated with a marching order of winning the world for Christ and preparing to receive the seal of God. We should be about our Father's business and refuse to be sidetracked. I would like to focus on two distractions which are pulling the attention of Seventh-day Adventists from preparing the way for Jesus to return.

CONSPIRACIES

Recently I received a catalogue on how to improve your health. It consisted of 88 pages, 27 of which dealt with secret conspiracies. There were 188 separate DVD's, each one to two hours long, about secret things which affect us in one way or another. Conspiracy theories are bombarding us from every direction. They seem to be high on the popularity scale in our DVD and Internet age.

Unfortunately, we are not immune to the desire to know what is going on behind the scenes. We want to know what nefarious groups are plotting our destruction, how many Jesuits have infiltrated our church, how many secret prisons are being constructed underground, how the government is manipulating the weather, or what hidden asteroid is going to strike earth any minute.

Now the reality is that some of these theories may be fact-based and a real threat to us, but the beauty of conspiracy theories is that there is no way to separate fact from fiction, so we can choose the ones we like best and make these our present truth message. Conspiracy theories are no part of our mission or message. By definition, they are unprovable, or they would be called conspiracy facts. When we share unprovable theories our credibility about Bible truths is diminished.

But the real problem is that they are distractions. When our energy and time are devoted to searching out and sharing the latest theory, we have taken that much time away from our real mission, which is to overcome our character defects like temper or pride or selfishness, so that we will be ready for the seal

of God and the latter rain. In addition, we have blunted our real message, which is God's power to change a practicing sinner into a holy, sinless reflector of Christ through the everlasting gospel.

POLITICS

This distraction may be more sensitive, but it needs to be addressed. But first a little history. During the Presidential campaign preceding the election of 1884, *Review and Herald* editor Uriah Smith lamented that "there is nothing in either nomination to excite enthusiasm in the mind of any person who regards purity and principle above party success and political spoils.....The triumph of the principles involved in the election of either candidate will be a disgrace and misfortune." (RH July 15,, 1884)

Such pessimism regarding national elections was nothing new. Back in 1856 Roswell F. Cottrell wrote that it would be of no use to vote, since the United States was soon to form an image to the beast anyway. One would not vote for a bad man, and politics was so crooked that to put a good man in office would only corrupt him. (RH Oct. 30, 1856) When President U.S. Grant ran for reelection, Uriah Smith editorialized that to engage in the spirit in the spirit of the campaign would be "sure death of spirituality. Seventh-day Adventists can spend their time to better advantage. Let the dead bury their dead. Keep out of it." (RH Aug. 13, 1872) Yet in the next week's issue the editor conceded, "If a person wishes, when the time comes, to go and deposit his vote, he can quietly do so, and then go about his business, without plunging into the spirit, and heat, and strife, of the canvass [campaign]." (RH Aug. 20, 1872)

When Abraham Lincoln first ran for President, James White concluded there was nothing in the Bible prohibiting an Adventist from casting his vote. He neither recommended nor opposed voting. He would not condemn those who voted, and trusted that they would not condemn him if he did not vote. (RH Aug. 21, 1860) Adventists felt an obligation to vote for temperance and against Sunday laws. The third General Conference session resolved that "the act of voting when exercised in behalf of justice, humanity and right, is in itself blameless, and may be at some times highly proper." (RH May 23, 1865)

Political agitation must be ruled out because of its tendency to set church members one against another. In addition, campaigning would inhibit our witness by placing barriers between us and those of a different political persuasion whom we seek to reach with God's message. "Keep your voting to yourself. Do not feel it your duty to urge everyone to do as you do." (2SM 337) Adventists and others face another problem: knowing for whom to vote. While the positions of Presidential candidates may be rather clear owing to media publicity, the strengths and weaknesses of a myriad of lesser office-seekers remain largely unknown. So what are we today going to do?

INSPIRED COUNSEL

There is an entire chapter in *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (pp. 475-484) dealing with our relation to political involvement. Following are some selections from this chapter.

Those who teach the Bible in our churches and in our schools are not at liberty to unite in making apparent their prejudices for or against political men or measures, because by so doing they stir up the minds of others, leading each to advocate his favorite theory. There are among those professing to believe present truth some who will thus be stirred up to express their sentiments and political preferences, so that division will be brought into the church. The Lord would have His people bury political questions. On these themes silence is eloquence....We cannot with safety vote for political parties; for we do not know whom we are voting for.

A major problem here is our current political parties. A little background may be helpful. The United States started out with several parties, but eventually settled into a two party system, the Whigs and the Democrats. The Whigs disintegrated before the Civil War, and were replaced by the Republicans. However, the positions held by each party have changed with time so that our modern parties have no similarity to what they were one hundred or even fifty years ago. Our political parties today have become an either/or situation. If you don't agree with everything the current party stands for you are an enemy to be opposed. Labeling becomes the norm and demonizing anything not part of your tribe. Today our country is in verbal warfare. Let us look at several issues of principle based on Scripture.

- Do you oppose the restriction of religious liberty?
- Do you oppose abortion on demand?
- Do you oppose torturing prisoners?
- Do you oppose cruelty to animals?
- Do you oppose the massive destruction of nature for profit?
- Do you oppose the threat of gay rights destroying religious liberty?
- Do you oppose the invasion of privacy in our electronic age?
- Do you oppose the oppression of minorities by the rich and powerful?
- Do you oppose the decay of moral values in an increasingly secular society?
- Do you oppose the proliferation of legalized drugs?

Here we have a major problem. The Republican party opposes five of these issues, while the Democratic party opposes five of these issues. Whatever party you vote for, you will vote against five issues of principle. Neither party has the whole truth. Voting for one party requires choosing which principles you will set aside. This is especially dangerous if we pick one or two of these issues and vote for whomever supports those issues. However, all the other baggage comes with that person or party. Do you see why Ellen White asked us to bury political questions? But there were two issues Ellen White strongly urged Adventists to vote for—temperance and religious liberty—and here she gave her strongest warning.

We cannot labor to please men who will use their influence to repress religious liberty....The people of God are not to vote to place such men in office; for when they do this, they are partakers with them of the sins which they commit while in office....Those who are Christians indeed...will not wear political badges, but the badge of Christ. What are we to do, then?—Let political questions alone.

The following is very serious counsel for teachers and leaders in the Adventist Church.

Those teachers in the church or in the school who distinguish themselves by their zeal in politics, should be relieved of their work and responsibilities without delay....The tithe should not be used to pay any one for speechifying on political questions. Every teacher, minister, or leader in our ranks who is stirred with a desire to ventilate his opinions on political questions, should be converted by a belief in the truth, or give up his work....If he does not change, he will do harm, and only harm....As a people we are to stand under the banner of Jesus Christ....It is a mistake for you to link your interests with any political party, to cast your vote with them or for them. Those who stand as educators, as ministers, as laborers together with God in any line, have no

battles to fight in the political world. Their citizenship is in heaven. The Lord calls upon them to stand as a separate and peculiar people. He would have no schisms in the body of believers....Is it their work to make enemies in the political world?—No, no....The questions at issue in the world are not to be the theme of our conversation. We are to call upon the world to behold an uplifted Saviour....Then let there be no shade of strife among Seventh-day Adventists.

I wonder, could it be any clearer. Do we really believe that we are citizens of the heavenly kingdom, which is not based on earthly values and methods? Yes, we are fortunate to live in a land of freedom and we should work to keep that freedom as long as possible, but our focus and energy cannot be given to feuding politicians and parties. The unique United States is not our real home. But there is one thing that we are counseled to vote for.

On the temperance question take your position without wavering. Be as firm as a rock.

The counsel is really quite clear. Do not entangle yourself in political issues. Keep your focus on our mission and our personal preparation to receive the seal of God.

The following is a confession of faith from a group of Christian leaders, which is very relevant to our situation today.

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography. Our identity in Christ precedes every other identity....When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church's role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government's role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace, rewarding good behavior. When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out....It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them....If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not—nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God He announced, is the Christian's first loyalty, above all others.

There are many things that are interesting and not sinful in themselves, but they are distractions. Satan does not have to snare us in apostasy. He just has to distract us enough so that we lose our focus and go off on tangents until we actually delay rather than hasten Christ's coming.