

## WHERE HAS THE ADVENTURE GONE?

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:10-15, RSV

When you read Bible texts such as our reading for this morning, the one thing you are struck by is the excitement and adventure that characterizes what happened in the early church—large crowds, controversies, people responding to the gospel, traveling to the various parts of the world where the gospel had never been preached before. When you contrast that with what at least some of us perceive as being true today, we wonder.

I think most of you will remember a *Sligoscope* editorial I wrote titled, “Bored in the Lord.” I tried to describe the feelings that I think most Seventh-day Adventist teenagers have about religion, especially if they live in this area. I am sure that we could list many contributing causes to the boredom—lack of recreational programs, lack of facilities, lack of leadership—or we could just pass it off as a phase. Some might say this: “I was bored about it all when I was young also, so when you get older and mature a little your values begin to change. Let some of these 16-year-olds find out that life isn’t always what it is cracked up to be. Let them experience some pain and suffering and then they may realize that religion is something that they need and they will turn to it quickly enough.”

But there is abundant evidence contradicting that kind of analysis. Even in our own time, the new religions that have sprung up and shown vitality are filled with the young—Hare Krishna, Moonies, etc.

If you look back, history shows a similar pattern. The early church was led by young people, many in their early and middle twenties. Our own Seventh-day Adventist Church was really “pioneered” by young people barely out of their teens. In my own life, which I have talked about very little from this pulpit, I was in my teens when I made my commitment to Christ. At 15, religion was the most exciting dimension in my life, much more so than sports and even my social life.

With my buddy, Ron Halvorsen, I tried to do some apparently silly things in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Brooklyn: We held a series of old-fashioned evangelistic meetings. We did the preaching, advertising, organizing, with other ministers acting only in an advisory capacity. Young people from the Greater New York Academy (GNYA) played the portable pump organ, cleaned out the hall (which was a bookie joint during the rest of the week), acted as ushers, provided the special music, ran the projectors, etc. A large part of the student body was caught up in what we were doing.

Much to my mother’s embarrassment, newspapers ran articles on what we were doing entitled, “Teenage Gangsters Turn Evangelists.” Television personalities like Virginia Graham interviewed us on their talk shows. *Faith for Today* had their scriptwriters do a show around our experience in which we starred on live television. In fact, when we were teenagers in the early 1950s, dozens of students from GNYA could claim fairly extensive acting experience on live TV because we were always the ones used by the telecast for parts. We used to wear the makeup home on the subways, with blue shirts, so everyone could tell we had been on TV.

We also used to go out street preaching. We’d set up a projector in Flatbush or De Kalb Avenue or Pacific Street and preach to adults. We’d give out tracts, etc. Today, 99% of our teenagers wouldn’t be caught dead doing what we did, except perhaps go on television and hope to be “discovered.” And that

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is OK. What worked then might not work now, at least not for everybody everywhere.

As I look back on those years of intense involvement in the church, of profound happiness in serving God, I think the key to my excitement about being a Seventh-day Adventist at 15 years old—and the key that is largely missing today—is that being an S.D.A. meant living a life of adventure.

Where has all the adventure gone? This is a question I ask of the church at large and of the religious experience of our young people especially.

I think I know where my adventure went. What starts out as a fresh, creative adventurous enterprise eventually gets organized, institutionalized and ordinary. There is nothing wrong with this. It is necessary as a program or project grows. But we do pay a price; the original adventure diminishes.

The *Faith For Today* program is a good example of this. The original “live” shows had many flaws in them. Eventually, the programs were taped, but they lost the element of “liveness.” It became necessary to hire professional actors. Elder Fagal got caught up in the “grind” of continuous weekly demands, and it has become very hard work for him. The local church and conference that started and supported the program gave up control and support to the General Conference. What started as an adventure may still be one to some extent, but it is not a fraction as exciting as it used to be.

When I was in college, the New York Center was just beginning. It was the vision and dream of E. L. Branson and Joseph Barnes, and it was a great adventure. But no longer.

The Student Missionary movement began here at Columbia Union College. It was a true adventure with great excitement. It is not as exciting now, except for those who get the privilege of going.

The human need for adventure is almost instinctive. There is a fundamental drive in us. I feel safe in saying this because we are made in the image of God, the Creator, and creation was certainly an act of adventure! In our own lives, success or failure is not assured. We are never really sure whether we will make the goal we have set for ourselves, but to do or attempt nothing is misery.

We often start a project with the exciting fever of discovery; then it becomes standardized and routine. The first landing on the moon was so thrilling, but later landing reports did not elicit the same response.

The spirit of adventure in the church must be constantly renewed, if religion is to be truly stimulating and exciting for young people. (The same principle holds for most human experiences, including marriage.)

Why don't we have more of this spirit in the church? In some ways, the first steps toward adventure in religion are more difficult than in other areas of life. You may have to break habits of thought and action and convention—burn your boats behind you, so to speak. Often, this requires unusual courage.

I am talking about quality adventure, not quantity. Quantity alone always leaves a gap, a sense of incompleteness.

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The enjoyment of adventure in children is contagious, almost overwhelming. The man who founded the Boy Scouts (and probably provided the inspiration for our own Pathfinder organization) made the “lure of adventure” the chief educative motive in the Scout movement.

In religion, the joy believers have in spreading their faith comes not just from their conviction [that] they possess the truth, but also from a sense of excitement, almost exaltation, of experiencing an adventure.

To believe that one possesses divine truth that others have missed—to belong to this elect group—is an adventure. This is one of the sources of the strength of an evangelizing group. The members feel that they are participating in a great spiritual adventure. That may be what S.D.A. young people who grow up in the church never catch. They believe the adventure is out there, not in here. For me, I had been “out” there and had learned that the adventure was really “in” here.

The conformist spirit never enjoys adventure, but the revolutionary spirit always does. This is at least a part of the attraction of communism and other movements—the excitement of trying to change the whole world.

Read the account of the early church in Acts. There was an adventure every day—opposition from authorities, beatings, jailings, preaching to large crowds, miracles, intense fellowship and prayer. What a spirit of adventure!

One of the major tasks of our present leadership, especially in the youth department, is how to renew the church, to make religion exciting and adventurous again. The problem is that leaders always hope that fervor in religion is renewed by continuing to travel in the direction the church is already going.

But when it comes it usually takes the form of a new departure, and one which is at first disconcerting to [leadership], because it runs quite counter to the view they have of the Church in the light of the past. They feel that the new movement of the Spirit is betraying and destroying more than it is preserving and accomplishing. And so the official Church always resists these far-reaching spiritual adventures and only afterwards perceives that it has been saved by those whom it has persecuted. (*The Adventure of Living*, by Paul Tournier, Harper and Row, p. 40)

What happened when Paul and Peter wanted to go to the Gentiles with the gospel? There was a “fight” with the church leadership.

Where are the adventures of today? This is the curse of an ultraconservatism in religion. We dare not take any risks. No risks with our money. No risks with our approaches. No risks with our people.

But, if we are to keep young people vitally committed to this message of the gospel we preach, they had better find some adventure in it somewhere. As Mother Theresa said, “Give the young something hard to do for Jesus and they will respond.”

The reason why sporting events are so popular with most of us is that we get our adventure vicariously by identifying with a team.

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Many people find their jobs dull and unrewarding and look for adventure elsewhere. In fact, Studs Terkel in his book, *Working*, states that most people hate their jobs.

Marriages can become dull and repetitive with all the adventure gone. Love can't be routine; some adventure is essential. Let me repeat a limerick:

Bored with your adored,  
Bored with your Ford,  
Bored with your Lord.

The tragedy is that we have missed the understanding of God as the great Adventurer. The true story blazes out from Genesis and the gospel—risk-taking, daring, ultimate commitments, people such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua. The Bible never stopped to talk about people who did not participate in the adventure of God.

Fearful people cannot participate in adventure. The joy in adventure is the joy of anticipation of success! But we must be courageous enough to risk failure. When we are adventurous, life itself becomes an adventure. "We all feel that we have something tremendous at stake in our lives; that we have only one life to live; and that the stake is at risk in every minute of our existence...in every decision and option we make." (Tournier, p. 98)

We want our young people to find that for themselves, and that is why we have acquired the Boonsboro Camp. We are coming to the great climax of history, the consummation of all adventures of all history—the greatest adventure of all. Only those who now live with that spirit will be able to live with it then.