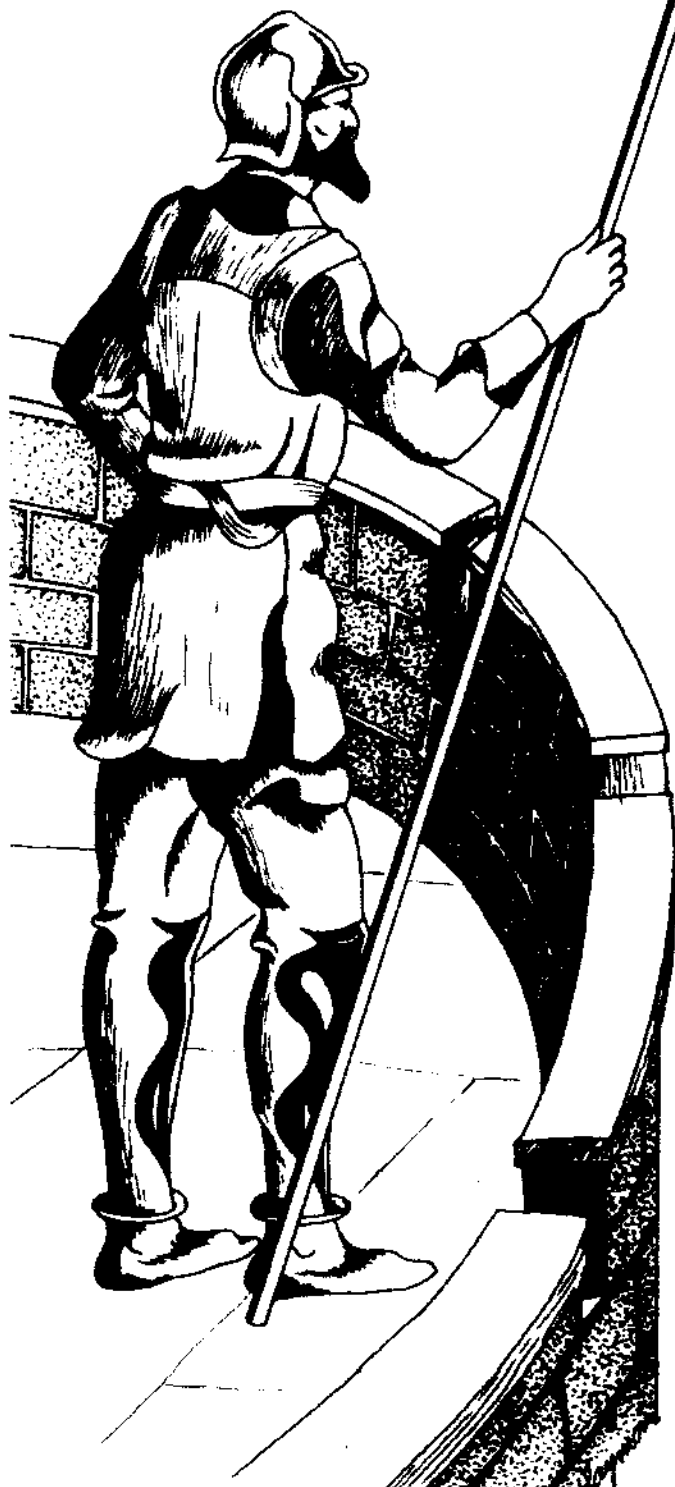


*"Watchman,  
what of the night?"*

*"The hour has come, the hour is striking, and striking at you,  
the hour and the end!"*

*Eze. 7:6 (Moffat)*



# THE 1952 BIBLE CONFERENCE

## THE SWAN SONG OF "HISTORIC ADVENTISM"

At mid-century, W. H. Branson assumed the presidency of the General Conference. Immediately, he was faced with one of the most difficult questions that had ever faced the chief administrator of the Church for decades. He was confronted with a challenge to the standard interpretation given to an event in the history of the Church. Elders R. J. Wieland and D. K. Short presented to the General Conference Committee their original manuscript - 1888 Re-Examined. It was assigned to the Defense Literature Committee for evaluation and reply. But the evidence indicates that Branson could not forget it. This is a part of what the 1952 Bible Conference was all about along with a re-evaluation of another historical event and applications of certain prophecies.

Midway in his four-year term as chief administrator of the Church, Branson called for a Bible Conference to convene. The Autumn (Annual) Council voted that it be held in the Sligo Park Seventh-day Adventist Church from September 1 - 13, 1952. It was to be world-wide in its representation of the Church including delegates from the overseas divisions. Editors of the leading publications as well as the book editors of the major publishing houses, plus Bible teachers, evangelists, administrators, and representatives from the Theological Seminary, which at that time was located in Takoma Park, were invited to be present.

Through the pages of The Ministry, July, 1952, Branson announced to the workers of the denomination the forthcoming Bible Conference, and gave the reasons for calling the conference. He set these reasons forth in what he perceived to be their order of importance. He had announced as a goal of his administration the doubling of the Church's membership in four years. He cautioned that "we must never forget that in seeking to increase membership we are not searching for additions to a social club. We are searching for men and women who will give a responsive ear and heart to great and saving truths that God has commissioned us to preach." Then he added - "Our success in this heavenly

undertaking will be in ratio to our understanding of those truths and our flaming conviction that they are indeed the truth of God."

Recognizing that "a very great power resides in the truths of God distinctive for these last days," Branson set as "one of the prime purposes of [the] conference" the objective to "reaffirm those truths that have most certainly been believed among us through our history." (Our Firm Foundation, Vol. I, p. 15) [FF-1, and FF-2 will be used designating the two-volume report of the Conference in this article]

Based on this "prime objective," Branson's second reason for calling the conference followed closely. He wrote that "the Advent Movement was not built on question marks... We have great verities to preach. The purpose of this Bible Conference is to help us all to see how we can present those timeless truths most effectively in these changing times." (ibid., p. 16)

The third and final reason for calling the conference was concerning the need to recognize advancing light. He wrote - "We can at one and the same time affirm that we walk in the light - and thus have a heavenly message for men - while admitting that there are truths of God that as yet can be but dimly discerned." Then, Branson cautioned -

"Genuine new light will never cast a shadow on the light we already have. The purpose of our Bible Conference is not to cast shadows over present great areas of truth, nor to explore curiously dim areas to the distant right or left. But, keeping in step as a company bound for heaven, we shall seek to go forward. If, for example, some unfulfilled prophecy heretofore but dimly discerned on the horizon, and thus differently described in its details, can be seen more clearly, then we shall rejoice, thank God for the enlarged light, and go forth from the conference with one more point to add to our preaching." (ibid., p. 17)

In two editorials in the Review & Herald, the editor, Francis D. Nichol, explained to the laity of the Church the plans and need for a Bible Conference. He, too, emphasized the study of prophecy by this conference. He wrote, "Prophecy colors virtually all our doctrines. And it is of the nature of prophecy that it can be more clearly understood and more effectively presented as it merges into history." (ibid., p. 21)

When the conference opened, these two recurring

themes were again emphasized by Elder Branson: 1) that of "reaffirming those great and fundamental truths that have most certainly been believed among us throughout our history" (ibid., p. 45); and 2) to understand "that we are prophetic preachers - not prophets." As "prophetic preachers" we are "to deal with prophecy already fulfilled." (p. 56; emphasis his) On this point, he quoted counsel from James White. It is apropos for us now! White had written back in 1877 -

"Fulfilled prophecy may be understood by Bible students. Prophecy is history in advance. He can compare history with prophecy and find a complete fit as the glove to the hand, it having been made for it. But in exposition of unfulfilled prophecy, where history is not written, the student should put forth his propositions with not too much positiveness, lest he find himself straying in the field of fancy. There are those who think more of future truth than of present truth." (R&H, Nov. 29, 1877, p. 172)

The introductions placed in both volumes of the Bible Conference reports were written by D. E. Rebok who served as secretary of the conference, and who, at the time, was President of the Theological Seminary. Certain points which he makes in these introductions also shed light upon the purpose and objectives of the Bible Conference. We shall note one or two points now, and comment later on another. Rebok called the conference "the high-water mark of the Advent movement," and "one of the greatest convocations of God's people this side of Pentecost." (FF-1, p. 12) He noted - "The conference was not called to settle any theological problems." (ibid.) The studies presented "are not an official pronouncement of the church. They do, however, represent the best thinking on the part of sincere, honest, earnest, devoted, loyal men - Seventh-day Adventists, first, last, and always - who tried to give expression to our conception of the great truths believed, held, and taught by Seventh-day Adventists generally in all parts of the earth." The presentations were "to galvanize our convictions on present truth." (ibid., p. 13)

The question now comes - What was taught at this Bible Conference on theological topics which now divide the Church?

First, it must be recognized that no topic was presented on the doctrine of the Incarnation. The closest any speaker came to the subject of the Incarnation was by H. L. Rudy in his study

of the mediatorial ministry of Christ. See FF-2, pp. 43-45. There is a reason why this subject was avoided. In 1949, D. E. Rebok had been asked to revise, Bible Readings for the Home Circle. This he did, altering the chapter, "A Sinless Life," eliminating the statement - "On His human side, Christ inherited just what every other child of Adam inherits, - a sinful nature." (p. 115, 1914 edition) See comments in Movement of Destiny, p. 427-428.

While we are prone to lay all the doctrinal deviation and compromise in the church to the SDA-Evangelical Conferences of 1955-56, there were changes in doctrinal perceptions taking place at the highest levels of the Church prior to those fatal conferences. Actually, the main thrust of the compromise in 1955-56 was in the critical area of our sanctuary teachings regarding the atonement.

What was said on this subject at the 1952 Bible Conference?

W. G. C. Murdoch, presented a paper on "The Gospel in Type and Antitype." He stated:

"In the work of atonement there was of necessity a sacrifice, but there must also be a priest." (FF-1, p. 333)

"The atoning sacrifice was made certain upon the cross, when Christ uttered the words, 'It is finished.' This sacrifice becomes effectual for individual sinners by the priestly ministry of Christ in heaven. ... Necessary and helpful though the ministry of Christ is in the holy place in heaven, yet His service there does not entirely do away with sin." (ibid., p. 334)

"As in the type, sin was dealt with in three stages: first, the sacrifice by the sinner in the court; second, the blood being ministered in the holy place by the priest or high priest; and third, the entire cleansing of the sanctuary. This last work was accomplished in the most holy place by the high priest alone. Christ meets all three. He is the sacrifice; He is the priest in the holy place; He is the high priest in the most holy." (ibid., p. 336)

Here is expressed a basic premise of Adventist theology. This premise needs to be maintained but it also needs to be conformed to the teachings of the Word. Christ became the High Priest upon His inauguration into the Order of Melchizedec on the Day of Pentecost, and as that High Priest ministered in the holy place of the Heavenly Sanctuary. Other faulty per-

ceptions should have been rectified without denying the basic premise.

Taylor G. Bunch spoke on "The Atonement and the Cross." He stated - "The death of Christ on the cross paid the redemption price, but His blood must be applied to the repentant sinner through His own mediation, in order that the atonement or reconciliation may be complete. (FF-1, p. 373)

This presentation was followed with the subject of "The Mediatorial Ministry of Jesus Christ" by H. L. Rudy, a vice president of the General Conference. He declared plainly that "the message concerning the mediatorial ministry of Christ is God's answer to the apostasy of the last days. It is the heart of Christianity." He added - "The enemy of souls is determined to profane the blood of Christ and to nullify His mediatorial ministry." (FF-2, pp. 11-12) In summarizing the first section of his study, Rudy noted - "The cross cannot be separated from the life and teaching that preceded it and of which it was the crown. Neither can the cross be separated from His subsequent ministry at the right hand of God in the temple in heaven." (ibid., p. 23)

In discussing this heavenly ministry, Rudy observed that a part of that ministry was to put away sin. "The putting away of sin includes the work of judgment. Christ's sacrifice provides not only for the forgiveness of sin but also for its complete eradication, putting it out of sight so that it will never rise again." This final eradication will come "after atonement has been made" through Christ's ministry "in the heavenly sanctuary." (ibid., p. 60)

Rudy discussed some key questions which arise as a result of certain statements found in the book of Hebrews. He quoted Hebrews 9:11-12, and then commented:

"Christ made the atoning sacrifice once for all, and when He entered the 'holy places' in heaven He 'entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.' 'Eternal redemption' indicates that the full price was paid, and by His sacrifice the work of redemption is to be fully and eternally completed." (p. 63)

There is a question as to whether the phrase, "having obtained eternal redemption" (KJV) would be better translated if it read, "thus securing an eternal redemption" (RSV). As can be recognized, the translation in the KJV indicates a completed work at the cross, while

the RSV points to a continuing work as the result of Christ's entering into His heavenly ministry. The RSV translation is in harmony with the Greek usage known as "identical action." Rudy arrived at the same conclusion by limiting the words, "eternal redemption" to the sacrifice on Calvary.

Noting "the beginning of the investigative judgment in 1844," Rudy observed that Christ began "a new phase of His mediatorial ministry." He stated - "Christ entered the most holy to perform the work of atonement. He ceased His ministration in the first apartment." (p. 65)

It should be clearly observable that the speakers at the 1952 Bible Conference - men of repute in the Church - held to a two apartment heavenly sanctuary, and that Christ as High Priest began performing a work of atonement in the most holy commencing in 1844. These men, while recognizing that a sacrificial atonement was made once for all on Calvary, also recognized that the work of redemption was not completed at the Cross, but there was to be a final atonement through the work of Christ as High Priest in the most holy apartment of the Heavenly Sanctuary.

Yet in three years, conferences would begin between representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Evangelicals, Barnhouse and Martin. At these conferences, this very basic doctrine of the sanctuary truth would be repudiated. Further, in the resulting publication - Questions on Doctrine - some of these very men who spoke at the 1952 Bible Conference would become a part of the committee approving the book, which contradicted the very things they proclaimed at the Conference.

To recognize an atonement at Calvary - albeit calling it a "sacrificial atonement" - and to teach an atonement in the most holy place of the Heavenly Sanctuary is to teach a dual atonement. Yet the book, Questions on Doctrine, emphasized - "**Adventists do not hold any theory of a dual atonement.** 'Christ hath redeemed us' (Gal. 3:13) 'once for all.' (Heb. 10:10)" (p. 390; emphasis theirs) Recalling Rudy's comments on "eternal redemption," it is most interesting to observe how the book QonD handled the words. A caption for section VIII in the chapter on "The High-Priestly Ministry of Christ" reads - "Redemption Absolute by the Victory of Christ." (p. 381) Rudy had pointed out that while the redemption price had been paid, there was to be a continuing work of redemption as "Christ entered the most holy to perform the work of atonement." But what did QonD set forth under

"Redemption Absolute..."? Note carefully:

"How glorious is the thought that the King, who occupies the throne, is also our representative at the court of heaven! This becomes all the more meaningful when we realize that Jesus our surety entered the 'holy places,' and appeared in the presence of God for us. But it was not with the **hope** of obtaining something for us at that time, or at some future time. No! **He had already obtained it for us on the cross.**" (p. 381; emphasis theirs)

A footnote indicates the writer(s) of the book was basing this concept on Hebrews 9:11-12 as translated in the KJV. However, they do note the meaning of one word - secured - as found in the RSV. So they were not unaware of the other possible translation of these verses.

The haunting question still remains. How could men pictured as "sincere, honest, earnest, devoted, loyal men - Seventh-day Adventists, first, last, and always" deny the faith they proclaimed at the Bible Conference in so short a time after such a public confession? Unless we can find the answer, we are again face to face with a theological crisis. Either our faith, based in sanctuary theology, is sound; and can be supported by a plain "thus saith the Lord," or else it is faulty and needs to be jettisoned. There have been those over the years who have done just that. And, if Desmond Ford's boasting is to be believed, a vast majority of the present day scholars in Adventism do not really believe the sanctuary teaching either, "except for some few dedicated to upholding the traditional positions for reasons other than scholarship."

It must be recognized that the Evangelicals dangled before the brethren the proverbial "carrot." Martin was writing a book on the "cults," and if, justifiable reasons could be found, he would no longer present Seventh-day Adventism as a cult, but as one with the body of Christ. Adventism would be considered a part of the ecumenical mainstream of Evangelical Christianity. But if such acceptance was the real reason, this is a tragic justification for the surrender of the truth committed in sacred trust to the Advent Movement.

We must look beyond this to find the real answer. The basic cause appears to be our failure to understand the counsel given to the Church in 1901. Speaking of a unity needed that will bear "the test of trial," Ellen White wrote that "we have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn." (TM, p. 30) The fact is that

those who spoke on the subject of the sanctuary at the 1952 Bible Conference did not carefully scrutinize their topic, to see what needed to be unlearned, as well as what needed to be learned, but rather merely repeated previously held positions, some of which cannot be sustained by the Scriptures. The full blame cannot be placed on the individual speakers because they were bound by rules placed upon them by the planners of the Bible Conference. It was plainly stated - "The conference was not called to settle any theological problems." (op. cit) But those involved in planning the Conference had to know that there were problems in this area that needed to be addressed. To address these problems does not mean that we discard this basic tenet of Adventism which gives to the Movement its uniqueness. It does mean, however, that we clean up our theology in this area and bring it line with the Scriptures.

Those who are attacking the Sanctuary theology of Adventism today want to quote this scholar and that scholar. But the position of all the scholars in the world on a given subject does not necessarily mean one will have truth. To merely substitute the thinking of scholars for the quoting of the Writings is not the goal to pure unadulterated truth. Rather a coming together in a prayerful study of the Word of God as did our pioneers with the objective of unlearning as well as learning would accomplish much.

There is another facet of the 1952 Bible Conference which needs to be considered. We noted at the beginning of this analysis of the conference that at the very start of his presidency of the General Conference, Branson was presented with the challenge of Elders Wieland and Short in their original work - 1888 Re-Examined. The gist was that the Church had rejected the message of righteousness by faith as given at the 1888 General Conference session, and to that day in 1950 had not recovered the original message as given by the two messengers God sent - Jones and Waggoner. In the "General Introduction" to the two-volume report, Rebok begins his explanation with the emphasis of "Seventh-day Adventists and their message of righteousness by faith." He declared that this theme ran "through every study presented, and that without any foreknowledge or planning." (FF-1, p. 11) This generalization is hard to believe when one surveys certain of the presentations.

The subject on "The Lord Our Righteousness" presented at the Bible Conference was given by Branson himself. In his presentation, he declared

that "the message of righteousness by faith given in the 1888 Conference had been repeated here." Following the same line as Rebok, Branson stated:

"Practically every speaker from the first day onward has laid stress upon this all-important doctrine, and there was no prearranged plan that he should do so. It was spontaneous on the part of the speakers. No doubt they were impelled by the Spirit of God to do so. Truly this one subject has, in this conference, 'swallowed up every other.'

"And this great truth has been given here in this 1952 Bible Conference with far greater power than it was given in the 1888 Conference because those who have spoken here have had the advantage of much added light shining forth from hundreds of pronouncements on this subject in the writings of the Spirit of prophecy which those who spoke back there did not have. The light of justification and righteousness by faith shines upon us today more clearly than it ever shone before upon any people.

"No longer will the question be, 'What was the attitude of our workers and people toward the message of righteousness by faith that was given in 1888? What did they do about it?' From now on the great question must be, 'What did we do with the light on righteousness by faith as proclaimed in the 1952 Bible Conference?'" (FF-2, pp. 616-617)

Though unspoken it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the 1952 Bible Conference was a staged response to the challenge that Elders Wieland and Short had presented to the Branson administration as it assumed the leadership of the Church two years earlier. However, it must also be recognized that Branson linked a revival of the message of righteousness by faith with his objective of doubling the church's membership in four years. In connection with his presentation, he declared - "The reception of the righteousness of Christ by the Church today will bring the second Pentecost. [Is this an admission it had not been received previously?] Revelation 18:1-3 will be fulfilled. Thousands will be converted in a day as the message of salvation through Christ swells to a loud and mighty cry. With such power in the message, who shall say that a four-year period is too short a time in which to double the number of those who are brought into the church of God?" (ibid.)

To Branson, righteousness by faith was a

doctrine, the acceptance of which would produce a quantity harvest. He challenged the leaders present from all the church's world divisions - "It is within your power to carry this message of justification and righteousness by faith back to the very ends of the earth. You can instruct every worker in this doctrine. You can encourage the brethren, in turn to set it before the churches. You can sound throughout your divisions an appeal for our people everywhere to lay hold of this mighty experience." (*ibid.*, p. 618)

The issue of repentance was left unresolved, and the focus was centered on quantity rather than quality. With this conference, the "numbers game" began in earnest. In 1950, the membership of the Church stood at 716,538 members worldwide. In 1990, that figure exceeded 6 million. But what is the spiritual condition of the Church today? No one can say that the church today reflects in experience that righteousness which is by faith, yet we profess to believe it doctrinally.

Beyond the aspects of theology, some of the conference speakers discussed prophecy. W. E. Read presented a series of studies on "The Great Controversy" which included a study on "The War of Armageddon." He presented this as a spiritual battle rather than a literal conflict to be fought in a specific geographical location. (FF-2, pp. 285-311) This opened the door to advanced thinking on the subject. I recalled that but a few years prior when I had entered the ministry, I was severely chastized by the conference president for suggesting such a thought at a midweek study which I gave in the church where I was located. What I had said that night was quickly relayed by letter or telephone to the conference office.

Arthur S. Maxwell discussed at this conference "The Imminence of Christ's Second Coming." In this presentation, he listed three areas of unfulfilled prophecy: 1) Developments in the United States; 2) Developments in Palestine; and 3) The Seven Last Plagues. He used point #2 to correct some of the Church's teaching in the previous decade. The publications of the Church in the 1940s had emphatically stated that Israel would never become a nation again. Yet in 1948, it did become a nation. As a result, Maxwell stated - "There is one prophecy concerning Palestine that we should all be watching with special care. Said Jesus, 'Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.' Luke 21:24." (FF-2, p. 230)

We living today have seen this prophecy literally fulfilled, yet we are not willing to come to terms with what was meant by that fulfillment. The Church has since 1952 sponsored another Bible Conference in which it was declared, "Adventists do not see theological importance in the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 or the annexation of Old Jerusalem in 1967." (North American Bible Conference, 1974, "Adventist Eschatology," p. 6) Evidently in 1952, the brethren thought the words of Jesus did have significance and counseled that its coming fulfillment be watched "with special care."

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## LETS TALK IT OVER

Having been a delegate to the 1952 Bible Conference from the Southern Union, I retain memories of certain experiences which occurred. Prior to the conference, and in preparation for his topic, Arthur S. Maxwell sent out a survey card to the ministry of the church on how they related to the belief in the soon return of Jesus. Some very pointed questions were asked. I was eager to hear the results of this survey, and so listened with rapt attention to his presentation. The survey revealed that the concept of the return of Jesus was only lightly regarded by the ministry of the Church. The majority placed the return well into the next century.

We had been told that there would be a report of the conference, and that each speaker was being taped for transcription. This led to very little note taking on my part because I believed I would get it **all** in the two volume publication. However, when the books were published, Maxwell's report of his survey was deleted. I wrote to him, and asked him for a copy, but he declined as he had been instructed by the highest levels of church not to release any details of his survey.

However, in listening to his presentation, the section on developments in Palestine and the counsel to watch "with special care" for the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus in Luke 21:24, passed by me as if I never even heard it. Even in checking the book after its release for the report of the survey, I missed the point. Years later, after having made a study of the prophecy, I was visiting with Elder D. K. Short in his home, and he called my attention to Maxwell's comments on Jerusalem.

While at the conference, I recall the reaction to W. E. Read's presentation on Armageddon. W. R. French, a respected Bible teacher of many years, became very incensed over the spiritual view as it had been presented by W. E. Read. Friends and former students obtained a room in Washington Missionary College (now Columbia Union College) for him to present his views on the subject. I attended his vigorous defense of the "old view" but left unconvinced.

There was also a strong discordant note to the presentation by Dr. Edward Heppenstall on "The Covenants and the Law." The reaction became so pronounced that following his topic a statement was made that there would be editing of the presentations before publication. How much was done in reference to Heppenstall's could be determined only by comparing the taped transcription, if still available, and the published record in Our Firm Foundation, Vol. I, pp. 435-492.

At the time of the presentation, I was sitting behind veteran evangelist, Allen Walker. He had had many "battles" with the Church of Christ ministers in the South. He perceived of Heppenstall's message as demolishing the very arguments he had used in defending the truth in public debates with the ministers of that Church. As Heppenstall progressed in his topic, Walker would stomp his feet, and one could see that he was restraining himself from getting up and challenging him directly from the floor. He knew that if he did, he would be called out of order as it had been plainly stated, "there was to be no open-forum type of discussion." (FF-1, p. 29) Finally he got up and walked out as he could take no more.

There is an interesting comparison that can be made between the men involved in the preparation for the 1952 Bible Conference, the speakers at the Conference, and the men who became members of the committee which approved the book, Questions on Doctrine, following the SDA-Evangelical Conferences, three years later. The 1952 Bible Conference Planning Committee consisted of twenty-two members chaired by Branson himself. These men selected the topics and the speakers for the presentations. Twelve of these men took speaking responsibilities. Ten of the men on the Bible Conference Planning Committee also became members of the committee which approved the book, Questions on Doctrine. Of these ten, eight had been speakers at the Bible Conference.

One fact of the above comparison needs to be

noted. Of the four General Conference vice presidents during the Branson tenure, three took speaking appointments at the Bible Conference. The one who did not, R. R. Figuhr, became the next General Conference president and chairman of the Questions on Doctrine Committee.

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### AN OBSERVATION

The book of Exodus, Chapters three through forty cover but two years in the history of the Children of Israel. Of the thirty eight chapters, twelve are devoted to the design, building and erection of the sanctuary, the services of which are a type and shadow of the Heavenly. (Heb. 8:5) One contains the Law of God, and seven describe the Old Covenant and the "type" covenant God made with Israel through Moses. Contrast this emphasis on a two year period with the fact that the Bible devotes only eight chapters to the first 1600 years of human history.

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It was a man, and not an ostrich, who invented the dictum that "what you don't know won't hurt you." The truth is the precise opposite.

Ralph Barton Perry

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Any frontal attack on ignorance is bound to fail because the masses are always ready to defend their most cherished possession - their ignorance.

Hendrik Van Loon

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