

Where Our Liberals are headed — Damascus Road Departing Adventism

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The liberals in our ranks are on a pathway which will inexorably take them farther and farther away from the people of God.

When the National Sunday Law is enacted and Sunday worship is commanded, it will be but a little matter for them to abandon the faith of their forefathers—and unite with the bitterest enemies of Sabbathkeepers.

Oh, that our church leaders would recognize this!

—If they did, our leaders would seek to hold on to the conservatives in the church instead of siding with local liberal pastors when they eject conservatives for protesting the modernism which is being brought into their congregations.

—If they did, our leaders would stop appealing to the half-converted among us, when they urge their demands for ever-increasing leniency in standards, morals, worship practices, and doctrines.

Unfortunately, modernists are all too frequently taking the lead, and our leaders are becoming the followers. Gradually, many of our leaders are quietly committing themselves to values and objectives which destroy the heart of historic Adventism.

We will introduce this article by quoting from a tract study we released in June 1998: *Celebration Leads to Separation* [WM-833].

In 1992, Richard Fredericks left his position as associate professor of religion at Columbia Union College, in order to become senior pastor of the Damascus Seventh-day Adventist Church, in Damascus, Maryland. At the time, only about 100 were attending, when Fredericks turned it into a Celebration church.

This was done with the full approval of church leaders, in nearby Silver Spring, who were anxious to see if the semi-Pentecostal methods, used by a number of Protestant megachurches, could be used by Adventists to increase the number of non-Adventists entering the church.

Unfortunately, that was an unwise decision; for our leaders were willing to consider additions in membership to be a higher priority than maintaining historic standards of beliefs and practices. Quasi-

Pentecostalism is not the way to get people to heaven. It is unfortunate when denominations forget the reason for their existence. The Adventist Church was formed to give the final message of obedience to God's law, by faith in Christ's enabling grace. How far we have fallen in these last days!

"The gospel, not our law-keeping, defines all who constitute God's 'remnant' people," Fredericks said in one of his sermons.

In five years, Fredericks' church had grown to 600. Leaders were convinced that the Celebration approach was a good one. As with such churches elsewhere, Fredericks' church had dramatic skits, drums, and a small band up front playing "contemporary" music, hand waving, and various other demonstrations.

Yet, in reality, all that had really happened was that lukewarm Adventists from all over greater Washington, D.C. started transferring to Fredericks' church. As with other Celebration churches elsewhere, hardly any non-Adventists had united with the church; instead, church members had shuffled from one local Adventist congregation to another. Siphoning members from nearby Adventist churches is not genuine "church growth."

Yet something more subversive was also taking place. Collecting the liberals into one church and providing them with a measure of the "liberty" from standards that Aaron offered in his church services in the Sinai desert,—the liberals soon hankered for still more freedom.

And, as in a growing number of Celebration churches, Fredericks was the kind of pastor to lead them into it. You see, in the process of leading his congregation into semi-Pentecostal demonstrations, Fredericks had hardened his own heart and the hearts of his members against obvious Bible-Spirit of Prophecy counsel. Both were now prepared to distance themselves even more fully from Adventist standards and beliefs.

In 1995, with conference approval, the Damascus Church was renamed the *Damascus Road Church*. Shortly after that, they chartered a separate corpora-

tion and laid plans to build a new church—to be owned by their corporation.

The Potomac Conference set October 27, 1997, as the deadline for that congregation to dissolve this corporation (*Damascus Road Community Church, Inc.*). When this was not done, Fredericks was fired on October 27, and most of his members followed him.

On November 5, 1997, a contract was signed to purchase a 225-acre property for \$620,000. Since Sabbath offerings averaged \$65,000, Fredericks and the board felt they could safely go through with the deal.

This new, non-denominational church, located about 30 miles north of Washington, D.C., now has about 400 in weekly attendance.

Celebrationism cost the Potomac Conference dearly,—but no one at the conference office seemed to learn the lesson! Herbert H. Broeckel, conference president, declared that Fredericks' "innovative style" of worship services would continue!

As if to signal the fact that what was left of the Damascus Church (after most of the members left with Fredericks) would continue to be liberal in worship and theology,—David Newman, former editor of *Ministry* magazine and the new pastor of the conference church at Damascus, renamed it the *Damascus Grace Fellowship Church!* Although a conference church, it is not called "Seventh-day Adventist," but "Grace Fellowship"!

That concludes a reprint of an earlier report by Pilgrims Rest. Here is the latest information on developments at the Damascus Road Church.

Richard Fredericks' Damascus Road Community Church holds meetings in the Damascus High School, while continuing to pay off the \$395,000 for a 225-acre church site. Fredericks mails out a weekly newsletter (called the *Weekly Update*) to his congregation. The following information is extracted from five of the most recent ones:

In the February 18, 1999 issue, after discussing the latest news about the gradual liquidation of the debt on the church property and appealing to more members to sign a pledge to give money to the Damascus Church, Fredericks turned to a new subject dear to his heart: *his plan to lead his flock away from the Bible Sabbath.*

"Let me close off news and focus now on alerting the DRCC [Damascus Road Community Church] family to a discussion that has begun at the staff and trustee level and is informally flowing out into various small group and individual conversations. That discussion is about our theological identity."

Fredericks is about to lead his church members farther away from historic Adventism, and mentions something Clay Peck, a former associate pastor at DRCC, told him recently. (After accepting a call to Colorado, Peck had also converted his congregation to liberalism and led them out of the denomination at about

the same time that Fredericks' local church in Maryland similarly split off.)

"This whole stage feels very New Testament to me, as Paul wrestled with Jewish Christian/Gentile Christian congregations, thinking through with them how to relate to the Old and New Covenant. Clay Peck warned me months ago this would be a necessary step, one he has already processed with his congregation."

So Peck has already led his congregation out of Adventism, and Richards is saying that he is being pushed that way himself. It would be more accurate to say he is pushing more than he is being pulled.

"I want to begin offering the Biblical perspectives we have been studying. I want to invite every DRCC member to begin doing your homework now prior to joining a formal discussion."

The announced meetings were held this month (March 1999).

"At the end of those four sessions, we'll decide how we are doing and what more is needed. I am really excited about this stretch because I think many old and unbiblical tapes still play in many minds due to an indoctrination that took place over many years."

Offenses must come, but woe be to that man by whom they come! I would fear to be in the shoes of the man who systematically tries to lead our people away from our historic beliefs and the Spirit of Prophecy. But Richard Fredericks—and many workers still in the church—are doing just that.

"I believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament is sidelined and distorted in Adventist theology in an effort to defend its 'unique' doctrines. These unique doctrines are seen as necessary to sustain the Adventist denomination's claim that it is God's unique and one true remnant church (a claim that is itself antithetical to the New Testament Gospel). These unique SDA doctrines are an interwoven package."

Fredericks then lists four points which he personally despises—and plans to fully lead his followers away from:

"The following list of beliefs is utterly unique to Adventism and to its more cultic offshoots. They are also tightly interwoven. I believe they are a destructive breeding ground for cultic separation from other Christians, for a denominational-centered eschatology and for the ongoing legalism:

• The 1844 message called 'the Investigative Judgment.'

• The SDA church as God's only remnant people.

• Ellen White identified as the 'spirit of prophecy.'

• The Sabbath defined as centering in corporate worship on Saturday only. Such worship then becomes the 'seal of God' . . causing Sunday cor-

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porate worship to then become the ‘mark of the beast’—the final apostasy. This teaching is emotionally the big one for SDA’s . . It is crucial for us to study it through as we move toward multiple worship service options on both Saturday and Sunday—and eventually other days as well.”

So, even before the discussion meetings begin, Fredericks clearly states where he is headed. He is not a bit embarrassed about the fact that he intends to take his entire congregation into Sunday worship.

Frankly, the man is brazen. Would you want to be in his position? Pity his poor followers! I mentioned this to one of the workers here, and he replied: “They are getting what they wanted, for they have chosen to stick with him.” How very true. Be careful who you follow.

There is a lot of talk by some about “following Jesus,” when actually they are following men. To really “follow Jesus” is to cling to Him and, in His enabling grace, to read and obey the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy!

Instead of this, the members of the Damascus Road Community Church are following the ongoing speculations of their pastor.

Regarding the above four points:

- The investigative judgment is clearly given in Daniel 7, with inspired commentary in *Great Controversy*, chapter 28. Read it again this coming Sabbath.

- The truth is that the commandment-keeping people of God are His remnant church. The “remnant” of Revelation 12:17 are not all professed Christians as Fredericks claims, nor is it everyone on Adventist church books, as some of our own people maintain. The remnant does not necessarily correspond with enrolled church members. Only those who have the experience of Revelation 14:12 in their foreheads (beliefs) and right hand (practices) will be counted as among that number.

Fredericks goes on to say that many Adventist Bible teachers and church leaders covertly agree with his position.

“Along with the Christian church at large, I do and have rejected all four of these aberrant doctrines for years. Many, perhaps most SDA theologians are deeply embarrassed by some or all of them. Many SDA leaders have personally told me so. I had no desire to circle back and address these issues, since we are no longer an SDA congregation.”

Later in this newsletter, Fredericks mentions a few of his “proofs” that the Sabbath is worthless:

“Sabbath was never once identified in Scripture as the only proper day for worship.

“Corporate Sabbath-worship, to the exclusion of worship on all other days, is never once identified as any kind of test.”

“Sabbath is identified as a day of ‘rest,’—but never particularly as the one true day in which it is right to gather in worship.”

“Going to church on Saturday does not make one a true Sabbath-keeper according to the Fourth Commandment (which never mentions worship in connection with the Sabbath).”

“Sabbatarianism is wrong when it is held up as a moral, binding, and salvation issue.”

“Nowhere in Scripture is ‘keeping the Sabbath’ equated with the idea that we can only worship on Saturday.”

—Such blatant errors take one’s breath away! This is the poisonous miasma Richard Fredericks’ followers are breathing, and which will ruin them if they remain with it.

When a person once imbibes wrong thinking, he becomes hypnotized and is led on from one error to another.

Before closing, Fredericks makes this accurate observation:

“It is interesting that more and more SDAs, tired of what comes from their own publishing houses, turn increasingly to the wisdom of these ‘mark of the Beast’ Sunday Christians for spiritual nourishment. They know these authors, speakers, and singers worship Christ on other days, yet many SDAs admit they are looking to them for a greater depth of spiritual wisdom and insight for living (writers such as Max Lucado, Bill Hybels, Chuck Swindoll, or John Stott).”

That concludes Richard Fredericks’ February 18, 1999, newsletter.

In his March 4 newsletter, Fredericks says the study sessions are about to begin. But, in the March 10 issue, he mentions a large snowstorm which suddenly hit the area, postponing the meetings and reducing them to three instead of four. The remainder of the newsletter is a diatribe attacking God’s holy law as something that was done away by Paul.

In his March 18 newsletter, Richard Fredericks notes that they are about to convene their third and last meeting on the Sabbath.

“As a pastor to my congregation, I felt the need to circle back and clarify my convictions and beliefs—and those of the other teaching pastors and staff. I do this so that if there are those at DRCC who still believe specific Adventist teachings, they will know the staff of DRCC does not.”

Fredericks explains why he must reject historic Adventism:

“These unique SDA beliefs, I believe, build barriers between SDAs and other genuine Christians. They also make witnessing to non-Christians a complicated and unexciting task for SDAs . . Most of all, this cluster of unique SDA teachings, I believe, has muddied or totally distorted the New Testament Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The precious truth that we can live a new, clean life in Jesus Christ is thus rejected for the shallow “only

believe" error of modern Protestantism. In the name of "liberty," God's holy law—and the Bible Sabbath enthroned in its heart—is thrown down and trampled upon. Fredericks declares that those who obey the Word of God are "building barriers" between themselves and other Christians.

What says the Word of God?

"Satan therefore laid his plans to war more successfully against the government of God by planting his banner in the Christian church. If the followers of Christ could be deceived and led to displease God, then their strength, fortitude, and firmness would fail, and they would fall an easy prey.

"The great adversary now endeavored to gain by artifice what he had failed to secure by force. Persecution ceased, and in its stead were substituted the dangerous allurements of temporal prosperity and worldly honor. Idolaters were led to receive a part of the Christian faith, while they rejected other essential truths.

"They professed to accept Jesus as the Son of God and to believe in His death and resurrection, but they had no conviction of sin and felt no need of repentance or of a change of heart. With some concessions on their part they proposed that Christians should make concessions, that all might unite on the platform of belief in Christ.

"Now the church was in fearful peril. Prison, torture, fire, and sword were blessings in comparison with this. Some of the Christians stood firm, declaring that they could make no compromise. Others were in favor of yielding or modifying some features of their faith and uniting with those who had accepted a part of Christianity, urging that this might be the means of their full conversion. That was a time of deep anguish to the faithful followers of Christ. Under a cloak of pretended Christianity, Satan was insinuating himself into the church, to corrupt their faith and turn their minds from the Word of truth.

"Most of the Christians at last consented to lower their standard, and a union was formed between Christianity and paganism . . . There were some, however, who were not misled by these delusions. They still maintained their fidelity to the Author of truth and worshiped God alone."—*Great Controversy*, 42-43.

"There have ever been two classes among those who profess to be followers of Christ. While one class study the Saviour's life and earnestly seek to correct their defects and conform to the Pattern, the other class shun the plain, practical truths

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which expose their errors."—*Great Controversy*, 43.

"Protestants now urge that the resurrection of Christ on Sunday made it the Christian Sabbath. But Scripture evidence is lacking. No such honor was given to the day by Christ or His apostles. The observance of Sunday as a Christian institution had its origin in that 'mystery of lawlessness' which, even in Paul's day, had begun, its work. Where and when did the Lord adopt this child of the papacy? What valid reason can be given for a change which the Scriptures do not sanction?"—*Great Controversy*, 54.

It started with Celebration worship services at the Damascus Road Seventh-day Adventist Church several years earlier. Church leaders were quite pleased at the prospect of using quasi-Pentecostal church services to help bring the multitudes into the church. It ended with a split-off group which is rapidly casting away their faith in all our historic beliefs! At the present time, their four primary weekly meetings consist of a worship service, dance rehearsal, drama rehearsal, and "weigh-down workshop."

Where is the group headed? Desmond Ford imagined that he had great truth for the world when he started his church, *Good News Unlimited*, and began lecturing around the country and broadcasting.

But few were interested. Adventist liberals did not have much to offer. "Only believe" was already being preached in the other churches.

Ere long all the liberals among us will discover that they have no future. Aping the world only makes them the tail. They have climbed onto the train of apostate Protestantism, and it will carry them into Sunday legislation. Someday they will turn on us and become our bitterest enemies. But their delusion will continue—right on down to the end.

Well-aware of its precious teachings, they rejected the Spirit of Prophecy. But, in so doing, they destroyed themselves. It is a pitiful tragedy.

Beware! Beware! Cling to Jesus and the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy. Fear to displease Him. Fear to cast aside even one sentence in those sacred writings.

Soon the gates will open and we, with all the others who love God and by faith in Christ's enabling merits keep His commandments, will enter through them into the Holy City.

Hold fast! Hold fast! Let no man steal your crown! You dare not let that happen, for you are too important to God. He loves you and wants you to live with Him forever. Yet He cannot save those who reject His Word and disobey His requirements.

— Vance Ferrell