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Presented at South East Youth Conference (SEYC) March 18, 2006

Later Than We Think: Worship Talk for SEYC, March 18, 2006

The president of Iran is in charge of his country's 18-year-old secret nuclear program, as the whole world now knows. Further, he believes the horrors of worldwide catastrophes will happen in his own lifetime. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be 50 next October. (2006)

His Shi'ite creed has convinced him that human beings, not only can influence but also hasten the long awaited return of the 12th Imam, known as the Mahdi. They believe that he will be Muhammad ibn Hasan, the righteous descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. His return will be preceded by cosmic chaos, war, bloodshed and pestilence. After this cataclysmic confrontation between the forces of good and evil, the Mahdi will lead the world to an era of universal peace.

Last September, Ahmadinejad delivered a speech at the United Nations. He claimed that he was surrounded by a halo of light for 28 minutes and that no one in the audience blinked while he spoke.

The Iranian president says, "The ultimate promise of all Divine religions will be fulfilled with the emergence of a perfect human being [the 12th Imam], who is heir to all prophets. He will lead the world to justice and absolute peace. Oh mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten." (United Nations Speech, Sept 17, 2005) He believes the return of the Imam is only two years away.

And, of course, the Iranian president has all the buttons at his fingertips to cause the chaos he predicts—if it will pave the way for world peace under the perfect human being. (See also Washington Times, Feb 6, 2006)

Does any of this scenario sound familiar to Seventh-day Adventists?

1. We too wait for the return of our Lord.
2. We too believe that human beings can hasten His return.
3. We too believe His return will be preceded by an unparalleled confrontation between the forces of good and evil.
4. We too believe that this cosmic time of trouble will end with our Lord leading the world eventually to an eternity of universal peace.

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Why does the Christian world and many Adventists find it easier to believe the possibility of the Iranian president's scenario than the distinctive Adventist scenario?

First, there is the fog and the fog buster: The Fog: The victory over evil was accomplished on the Cross 2000 years ago. Nothing more has to be proven—Satan lost, Jesus won, and all we have to do today is thank Jesus for winning the battle for us. Problem: If the war is already won, why are we still fighting?

The Fog buster: The Cross was the template of how the battle with evil can be won. Jesus showed us two forever truths: 1) He showed us the cost of sin; He paid that price so we will never have to pay it for ourselves; and 2) He showed us how we in turn can win this battle with evil—to overcome as He overcame—Rev. 3:21.

The sky-high question that all of us must answer clearly, for our own minds as well for others who are asking: What is all heaven and unfallen universes waiting for? Why is it taking so long?

Let's say it clearly and emphatically. There is something about the last generation that plays a highly significant part in the great controversy between good and evil. Remember, there will always be a last generation. Peter had it just right: "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? . . . Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless" (2 Peter 3:22-24).

Why has it taken so long for God's people to catch on as to how they fit into this picture? This question leads to a bigger question: Why didn't the first century Christians fulfill Peter's picture?

My favorite author pulled back the curtain and we see what even Peter did not see: "Satan was not then destroyed. The angels did not even then understand all that was involved in the great controversy. The principles at stake were to be more fully revealed. And for the sake of man, Satan's existence must be continued" (DA 761).

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Why was this all necessary? God would not declare victory before the victory had been won in the minds of intelligent beings everywhere, throughout the universe. Listen carefully: “It was God's purpose to place things on an eternal basis of security, and in the councils of heaven it was decided that time must be given for Satan to develop the principles which were the foundation of his system of government. He had claimed that these were superior to God's principles. Time was given for the working of Satan's principles, that they might be seen by the heavenly universe.” DA 759.

That's one half of the reason why time has continued. The other half is that God needed time for His principles to be fully developed, after this world had seen, in flesh and blood, what those principles really are. We still have time on our hands because those principles have not yet been fully reflected in those who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ.

And that brings us face to face with this simple truth: God is waiting for a final display of how His principles work. That is where this generation fits into the divine plan to put the universe on its “eternal basis of security.”

We have been told many times that the final generation will help God win the loyalty of the universe forever—they will face up to the heaviest, fiercest tsunami of evil that Satan has ever heaped on any generation in human history. And they will not flinch. They will show the universe how to endure: “Here is the endurance of the saints—those who have made a life practice of keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12). God is proud to stamp them with His seal of approval.

Of course, they will not stand up to Satan's ferocity on their own strength or with sheer will power. They will have learned how to throw themselves on their Lord's promises.

These last-day foot soldiers in the cosmic battle have decided, once and for all, that their general is worthy trusting, that where He is leading, is where they want to go. They don't only make plans for the next five years—they are more interested in where they want to be 5000 years from now.

Foot soldiers take their battle plans seriously. Just before His arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to our Heavenly Father: “As you sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). That was the Christian church's job description—the same as His! Could it be any clearer?

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Again, what was our Lord's job description? Verse four: "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do."

Jesus is describing God as a Heavenly Franchiser. He has something special to offer all who would buy from Him. But he is not an ordinary street vendor. His primary task is to set up franchises all over this planet. He is looking for partners who are convinced that what He is selling is the most important enterprise anyone could buy into.

The golden arch of MacDonald's, Holiday Inns, H and R Block, Olive Garden Restaurants and thousands more of very familiar names are franchises. And some of these local franchises have lost their personal investments because they did not continue to properly represent their company name. They lost their investment because the restrooms were not up to standard; because customers waited five minutes too long for their order; because the buns were not as tasty or warm as headquarters expected, because attitudes did not make customers feel welcome—and on and on the tests went. They didn't represent Headquarter standards.

Jesus is the Divine Franchiser who has offered local franchises to men and women in every generation. He has had many takers. Some wanted His name but not His quality control. Some wanted His power but not His Spirit. Some wanted to capitalize on His advertising but not His character.

But He has always found some who would get it. Working for the Company of the Heavenly Vendor becomes their life. Nothing is more exciting. These local franchises know that they are not as perfect as their Pattern, but they do know that if they keep listening to Headquarters, and keep close to the company representative who is always by their sides, their local operation will increasingly reflect the original Divine Franchiser.

They have made up their minds that following the Original is not a burden, but a pleasure—they follow headquarter's principles not to impress their Chief but to honor Him.

They rally around His public trademark, the sign known everywhere as His ownership—ever since He raised His flag on that seventh day in Eden.

It's striking how often the flag is mentioned in the [Congressional] Medal of Honor citations for the Civil War. Out of 1,520 Medal of Honor citations

during the Civil War, 467 were given to men who either defended the flag of their side or captured a flag of their opponent.”¹

The flag-bearer was at the center of the storm of battle, the most vulnerable. Although he carried no weapons, he was always at the head of the charge. Soldiers always kept one eye on his flag because it told him if his group was advancing or retreating. And, of course, the enemy kept their eye on that flag. They knew that bringing down the flag-bearer was the quickest way to disrupt the attack. The command, “rally ‘round the flag” was not merely a romantic phrase; it meant the difference between success and failure for the regiment.

Very few held the flag throughout the war, too many fell. But one, Leopold Karpela, of the 46th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, volunteered to be the color-bearer in 1862 and was wounded on July 30, 1864—too wounded to continue.

Who was Leopold? He left Prague when he was eleven, and forever grateful for his newfound freedom in America. His exploits in the various battles, beginning with the Goldsboro Expedition and through the Battle of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania and the Battle of the Crater—became legendary. His commanders were in awe with his courage, always exposing himself to the blizzard of lead in order to make the flag more visible.

His CMH citation included these words: “While color bearer, he rallied the retreating troops and induced them to check the enemy’s advance . . .”²

Throughout human history, God has had His color bearers, His flag-bearers. Many known, many more unknown. When we think of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Daniel and Paul, our hearts skip a beat. Somewhere in God’s universe, something even more meaningful than the CMH will be given to their kind—even today we are rallying ‘round the flag’ because of their courage and desire to do nothing that would bring dishonor to the flag of truth and the Name of God.

In the end time, God’s last-day loyalists will raise the flag in the face of its enemies. Honest men and women the world over will eventually rally “round the flag” represented by the seventh-day Sabbath. It will take all the perseverance, courage, and quiet loyalty of Leopold Karpela for God’s

¹ Allen Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 19.

loyalists to face latter-day blizzards, not of soft lead but perhaps of ridicule, disdain, or material hardship.

This Sabbath flag represents the honor of God in the Great Controversy. God has given His flag to men and women who claim His name. They will be the color bearers in the last scene in the great drama when the curtain is about to come down. They will have a message so compelling that honest men and women around the world will “step out from the rebel flag” and stand under freedom’s flag—“the blood-stained banner of Prince Emmanuel.”³

Every one of us must ask ourselves often, do I have what it takes to carry our Lord’s flag? Am I an honest franchiser carrying my Lord’s name, so that no one will ever have to wonder if there is a disconnect somewhere?

Frankly, that is why we are here today—to sharpen up our courage and our enduring power so that no one ever will have to wonder whom we really represent. So that no one, in heaven or on earth, will ever wonder whose side we are on. So that no one in heaven or on earth will ever wonder if we can be trusted with eternal life.

<http://herbdouglass.50megs.com/sermons.htm>
