

TABOO



*For years I followed
the faith of my parents;
then their "heresy"
shattered my world*

by Don Phillips

as told to Dorothy Grunbeck Johnston

THE GREASE in the frying pan sizzled as the eggs plopped in one by one. Mother poured the breakfast milk. That day in February 1918 seemed to be another routine day for our family in Pasco, Wash. I was only two at the time, but the day became significant for the youngest as well as the eldest in our family.

After breakfast I busied myself with a small shovel in the dirt beyond the back steps. My four-year-old brother Jack wandered to the sand pits down by the river. There he and a neighbor girl hid in a sand tunnel. As we later learned, two other children began jumping on the sand above them, and the cave collapsed. Anne managed to wriggle out to fresh air. Jack didn't.

My parents reeled under the shock of Jack's death. Groping for something, Someone to console them, they turned to Seventh-day Adventism, the church of my grandparents. From then on, the writings of the SDA "prophetess" Ellen G. White governed almost all our activities.

Mrs. White was believed to have had the "spirit of prophecy," so my dad rated her books on a par with the

Bible. Her writings were to be studied and obeyed to the letter. I once saw a picture of a man standing beside a stack of different books she had written. The pile was higher than the man's head!

Mrs. White began writing during a crucial period in SDA history. An earlier church leader, William Miller, had predicted that Christ would return in 1843, and when that failed, in 1844. When 1844 came and went without Christ's second advent, many followers of Miller became disillusioned. Others clung to their hope, and one Millerite reported a vision of Christ entering the heavenly "Holy of Holies" instead of returning to earth in order to complete atonement for sins. Later Ellen White, wife of an elder in the SDA Church, took up this view and launched her extensive writings defending SDA doctrines.

Less than a month after my brother's death, Bonnie was born, and in years that followed, three more sisters. Meanwhile our family moved twice, and finally settled in Ukiah, Calif. I was enrolled in the one-room SDA school where I attended nine years.

My four sisters and I were never allowed to forget that the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, began Friday at sundown. Woe to the child whose bath was not taken and whose shoes were not shined by this deadline! On Friday, Mother prepared

food to be eaten on the Sabbath. Often the menu included a meatless "meatloaf," since Mrs. White strongly advocated vegetarianism. The "meatloaf" included beans, soybeans, and grains. Ellen White also condemned the use of baking powder, so Mother's cakes were made accordingly. Sabbath school and the worship service occupied our Sabbath mornings.

My entire social life revolved around the church. Mrs. White had frowned on competitive sports, so Dad's answer when I asked to play basketball was, "No!" But sometimes I broke the rules and went to watch others play. Since the church banned fiction, even my reading was restricted.

When I was 14 I heard a message on the coming of Christ which touched me deeply. Tears streaked my cheeks as I walked home. At last I turned into an alley. There I knelt, weeping and praying. "O Lord," I prayed, "I want to be ready when You return. I want to be Your own."

From the time I was small I had hoped to become a Seventh-day Adventist missionary or pastor. Now this desire burned even brighter in my heart.

I was only 15 the summer I started out as an SDA colporteur. That summer four of us toured Humboldt County, especially around Eureka, Calif. We camped in the redwoods and fanned out for house-to-house

canvassing during the day. Our opening wedge was a health book called *The Home Physician*. I always urged customers to buy the doctrinal books, *The Great Controversy*, or *The Marked Bible*.

I became so enthusiastic for this work that when I was 17 I took it up again—this time in Utah. My friends and I boldly invaded Mormon territory in the Cache Valley. Knowing that the population was 98 percent Mormon spurred us on to make Mormons into Seventh-day Adventists.

Then I received letters from home indicating that my parents had been listening to heretical teaching. After one year I returned from my missionary adventure greatly disturbed. It was unbelievable that my parents could doubt the great doctrines.

I arrived home in time to witness a trial at the local SDA church, where my father was to state his position regarding the "2,300-day doctrine." This related to Miller's interpretation of Daniel 8:14 which presumably predicted Christ's return to earth in 1843.

My father wrote on a blackboard to demonstrate how Miller's reasoning was wrong. My mother, sitting next to the church clerk, saw some papers which stated that father had already been excommunicated from the church. This, then, was only a mock trial! Indignant, she rose to her feet to defend Dad. "Strike Mrs. Phillips' name from the books," the clerk was ordered.

Deeply hurt at this injustice to my parents, I got up and walked out, determined never to return to a Seventh-day Adventist church.

My world had suddenly crumbled around me, like the sand tunnel around my brother. Though confused and bewildered, I knew the

Lord had not failed me. Yet I could not bring myself to attend church on *Sunday*.

Finally, because I was interested in a girl, I attended a Christian Endeavor camp, and later I forced myself to become a "Sunday keeper," as the Adventists say. I now began to realize that I, who had been so zealous to convert the "confused," was myself confused.

All my life I had been taught that the sins of people would be placed on a scapegoat, and that this scapegoat was Satan. Now I discovered the teaching of I Peter 2:24, "Who (Christ) *His own self* bare our sins in His own body on the tree." Could Seventh-day Adventism be an unscriptural cult? I wondered.

"My mind is open, Lord," I prayed. "Please reveal Thy truth to me."

Before long I heard a sermon on hell which convinced me that the SDA doctrines of "soul-sleep" and "no hell" were unscriptural. I had been taught that when a person dies his soul immediately falls asleep. Even the soul of a child of God was supposed to sleep in the grave.

Now I realized how unscriptural this doctrine was. Nothing could be clearer to me than Ecclesiastes 12:7: "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." And Paul declared he was ". . . willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:8).

And I found no way to reconcile the SDA teaching of the annihilation of the wicked with Christ's teaching of an everlasting hell: "These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matt. 25:46).

While my search for the truth went

on, I began dating Jean Pierce. Upon finishing junior college in Riverside, Calif., we were married on June 17, 1939. Then an uncle of mine influenced us to go to Houghton College in New York.

A church near the campus needed a preacher. Anxious to serve the Lord, I candidated and was accepted. I was preaching on Sunday, yet feeling guilty for "breaking the Sabbath," as we used to call it.

But the Spirit of God used several verses to deliver me from this burden: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). And Romans 14:5 clinched it: "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." At last I began to worship wholeheartedly on the first day of the week, the day commemorating the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At college evangelistic meetings in 1942, I went forward to dedicate my life. There the shackles of Seventh-day Adventism dropped from me. A new and blessed buoyancy replaced the old oppressiveness as I pastored churches in New York, Illinois, and California.

In 1951 we went to Brazil, South America. It was my privilege to work with Brazil Youth for Christ and the Light of Life correspondence program in World Gospel Crusades. Jean's poor health brought us home after two terms, and we now have a pastorate in Portland, Ore.

How I praise the Lord for His deliverance from the false doctrines of Seventh-day Adventism! It is wonderful to be free from legalism, and to *know* that I can serve and glorify Him. ■