

Friendly Fire in Sacred Groves

by Glenn E. Coe

On the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains is a stand of sequoias—the largest living things in our world. These giants of the forest are estimated to have lived more than 3,000 years. Although not as tall as the coastal redwoods, they reach heights of 310 feet with basal diameters of up to 40 feet. Early woodsmen cut an opening in the base of one of the trees to allow stagecoaches and, later, cars to drive through. The majesty of the sequoias and their millenia of existence reduces one to awe and an awareness of one's own mortality.

The Mariposa Sequoia Grove located near the southern entrance to Yosemite National Park was discovered by western Europeans in the early 1850s. In time it became part of the national park system. As you travel through the grove, as our family did in the summer of 1965, you can't help but notice that most of the sequoias have black scars left from prior forest fires. One tree is called the clothespin tree because it looks like an inverted Y with a large black hole burned through its base. Another, yet alive, is called the telescope tree because its inside has been burned away. You can walk inside and look up its middle like a telescope—its outside is only a shell. Not all the trees survived. Some have fallen. When the grove was first discovered by the white settlers, they noticed those black scars and so undertook measures

to protect the trees from further damage by fire. For more than 100 years these pillars of the forest were protected by humans from further fire damage.

It wasn't until the early 1960s that the well-intentioned guardians of the forest began to realize that their interference with the natural processes of nature was in fact more harmful than beneficial. The absence of fire had resulted in a proliferation of shade-tolerant trees below the sequoias, reducing sunlight within the grove. The shade trees competed for moisture and blanketed the soil with their needles and debris, making it impossible for sequoia seedlings to get started. Unable to compete with the faster-growing underbrush, the grove began to lose the vitality that comes from regeneration. It was in danger of dying out. The caretakers of the grove finally learned that fire, with its potential for seemingly devastating destruction, was also indispensable if these giants of the forest were to survive. Not only did fire burn away the underbrush, it also sterilized and fertilized the earth, creating an hospitable environment for the germination of new sequoias.

Another fascinating thing was discovered about fire and its relationship to the giant sequoias. The sequoia seeds are located in cones at the top of the trees. The cones are surprisingly small, usually two to three inches in length. The heat generated from the forest fires that sometime scars the trunks of the sequoia, dries the cones. After the fire, the cones fall with their seeds onto a now sterilized and fertilized ground. What at

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first appeared to be the one danger that could destroy these magnificent giants—fire—was in reality the very means by which they survived, grew, and perpetuated themselves into seeming eternity.

At one point as we drove through Yosemite, we could see smoke ahead rising from the forest. When we came to where the smoke was, we saw that, indeed, the forest was on fire. But there was a sign posted along the highway that read: “Fire by Management. Do Not Report.” Quite obviously, this fire was not to be viewed as threatening to the survival of the grove. This was friendly fire, fire recognized as healthy and, indeed, indispensable to the grove’s survival and well-being. Today, the Park Service does not wait for a lightning bolt to start a fire that could be devastatingly destructive. Rather, it includes fire as part of its program of care for trees and forests.

The church is like a sequoia grove. Pillars of truth, like the pillars of the forest, have existed for thousands of years. As you look at these pillars of truth, you see scars left from storms of controversy. They have been tested and survived. Along the way, other pillars did not meet the fire test and fell. Some people still trip over them. Still others have been left as empty shells—alive, but empty of meaning.

Today the church, like the sequoia grove, still lives with its pillars of truth. And the church will continue to live, if we don’t kill it by smothering it with protection. The church, like the grove, needs underbrush burned away, so that the sunlight can shine through, so the earth can be made ready for seeds of truth to germinate, find root, and grow; so that the work of the Spirit can continue and not be stifled by well-meaning, but ultimately destructive overprotectiveness. Tranquility, for which so many in the church yearn, can be deceptive. It is the most favorable climate for the nurturing of not truth but underbrush.

There have been periods when religious leaders have attempted to achieve a level of control that quelled all dissent and controversy. Jesus was born during such a time. And what did he do?

He started fires. He healed on the Sabbath. He socialized with sinners. He praised Samaritans. He treated women as equal to men. He touched lepers. He befriended the lonely and powerless. He called for obedience to those higher principles and truths that transcended the petty rules by which religious leaders controlled the people. He pointed out the truly enduring pillars of truth that had become obliterated by the underbrush of custom and tradition. Jesus planted seeds of truth and understanding that germinated, took root, and grew.

The Apostle Paul recognized those saplings of truth for what they were. So simple, so uncluttered, so pristine in their beauty. Toward the end of his last missionary journey, after all the years and miles of taking the good news of the gospel to Jews and Gentiles throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia, he decided to return to Jerusalem to meet with the church leaders at the church headquarters.

Before he set out for Jerusalem, Paul met for one last time with the saints at Ephesus. As he looked out at the congregation that included many Gentiles who had accepted Jesus as their Lord, Paul spoke from his heart. He spoke eloquently of “faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,” and of “the gospel of the grace of God.” He told them that “fierce wolves” would come in among them. “And from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things.” He commended them “to God and to the work of his grace.”

When he arrived in Jerusalem Paul told the church leaders of the things God had done among the Gentiles. At first, the church leaders glorified God, but then they told Paul that they had certain concerns about what he was preaching. “You see, brother,” they said to Paul, “how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs” (Acts 21:20, 21, RSV). Paul, you are going too fast. You are burning down trees that provide us with shade—

that we have come to like. This gospel cannot mean that our orthodox customs must be destroyed.

Although Paul submitted himself to the authority of the church leaders in Jerusalem, there is no question but that these were the very voices that Paul had in mind when he told the Ephesians that men would come in among them speaking perverse things contrary to the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel of the grace of God.

For years, the Association of Adventist Forums, and *Spectrum* have influenced others to remain interested in Adventism and Christianity. We have tried to burn away the underbrush that has grown up around the pillars of Scripture; among them “faith in our Lord” and “the gospel of grace.” Sometimes we have been told, paraphrasing the leaders at Jerusalem, “You see, brothers and sisters, how many thousands there are coming into the church from around the world; they are all zealous for the law and the traditional standards of the church, and they have been told about you that you teach all Adventists to forsake Sister White, telling them not to accept everything she has written and not to observe the customs and standards of the church.”

Paul realized that the underbrush of Judaism was suffocating and sapping the vitality of the church and so he set out to burn away the underbrush. I am proud to have been a part of an organization that is in the tradition of Paul and of his Lord. The great pillars of truth will withstand and survive the fires of inquiry, of examination, of

discussion. These are friendly fires—not fires of hostility or destruction. They are necessary fires, if the light of God’s wisdom is to shine through.

As we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the AAF, I want to pay tribute to the many who sacrificed their careers as they, out of love for their church and commitment to scriptural integrity, tried to burn away the underbrush of Adventism. They realized that that underbrush has too often choked and discouraged many of the bright and talented within the church; has obscured the truly great pillars of Christianity and of Adventism. For their efforts, these church workers have often been misjudged and maligned by the very church they love so dearly. We, today, acknowledge you and thank you for your efforts, which ultimately benefit the grove. I pay special tribute to those whose vision and common sense led to the creation of an organization that asserted the rather simple but central notion that Seventh-day Adventists should be able freely to discuss issues of concern to them. The commitment to free speech and the right to differ led to the creation of our great nation 200 years ago, and to the organizing of the Adventist Forums 20 years ago. I hope that we who have followed have been true to the vision of those who created and established the Association of Adventist Forums and *Spectrum*.

The Association of Adventist Forums continues to set flames in sacred groves so that the great, sturdy pillars of Adventist faith and practice can flourish as never before. To that mission this association remains committed.