

WATCHMAN, WHAT OF THE NIGHT?"

The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night:
if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come. Isaiah 21:11-12

THE HOLY FLESH QUESTION - I

In the previous thought paper - Fundamental Adventism - we discussed the challenge that the close of probation presents to the living saints who are to be translated without tasting death. They must reflect the image of Jesus fully. They must be conquerors in the battle with evil. In contemplating such an experience, certain questions must be clearly answered. In the last issue we projected a question relative to the uniqueness of such an experience, and a reasonable answer. There is, however, another question which must receive consideration - the question involved in the concept of holy flesh.

At the turn of the Century - 1899 - 1901 - a movement developed in Indiana called the Holy Flesh Movement.¹ This movement was initiated by the conference revivalist, S. S. Davis, and was actively supported by the conference president, R. S. Donnell, and his committee. The entire working staff of the conference, except five men - two ordained, and three licentiates - embraced the movement.

This is no insignificant fact when one recognizes that in 1900, there were thirteen ordained ministers and fifteen licentiates in the employ of the Indiana Conference. The few stalwarts for the truth did not have an easy time against the combined ministerial force in favor of the movement. [History ran a repeat in a recent Indiana conference administration over the book - Questions on Doctrine.]

The movement in Indiana was accompanied by much emotional extravaganza. S. S. Davis in reporting the beginning episode in Evansville, stated that

"the Spirit was poured out in a large measure" and that they were "actually having pentecostal times and apostolic experiences."² The following year (1899) S. S. Davis was made Conference Revivalist. Summarizing his work in the places where he held meetings, he writes of the "manifestations of the power of God" and that in every instance there were "shouts of victory" which made "the churches ring."³

An eyewitness has left on record a description of their services. It reads:

In their church services, they would preach and shout and pray until someone in the congregation would fall unconscious from his seat. One or two men would be walking up and down the aisles watching for just such a demonstration, and would lay hold of the person who had fallen, literally dragging him up the aisle and placing him on the rostrum. Then a number, perhaps a dozen, would gather about the prostrate form, some shouting, some singing, and some praying, all at the same time. Finally the individual would revive, and he was then counted among the faithful who had passed through the Garden [of Gethsemane].⁴

This aspect of the movement, Sister White soundly condemned. In a Testimony which brought an end to the Indiana excitement, she declared:

The manner in which the meetings in Indiana have been carried on, with noise and confusion, does not commend them to thoughtful, intelligent minds. There is nothing in these demonstrations which will convince the world that we have the truth. Mere noise and shouting are no evidence of sanctification, or of the descent of the Holy Spirit. Your wild demonstrations create only disgust in the minds of the unbelievers. The fewer of such demonstrations there are, the better it will be for the actors and for the people in general.⁵

Many times the flamboyant externals tend to overshadow the concepts that form the basic objective of a movement. I fear that this is the case with the Holy Flesh Movement of Indiana. Unless we can see clearly the objectives and the pitfalls of this movement, we shall not learn the lessons which this part of our denominational history would teach us. Just what were these men - the Conference Revivalist, the Conference President, and the members of the Conference Committee - seeking to realize? First they wanted to see the churches

of Indiana experience a revival and a reformation. *Their objective was the preparation of the people of God for translation.* Let us face this fact - a more worthy aim could not be found anywhere than this which stimulated the holy flesh men of Indiana. The error was not in their objective, but the doctrinal concepts which they held for achieving this objective proved their undoing.

After the "dust" had time to settle, the emotional extravaganza was forgotten. But the basic doctrinal beliefs involved were still very much alive. Ira J. Hankins, the conference president who replaced R. S. Donnell after 1901, wrote a letter to S. S. Davis asking him eight questions relative to his beliefs and teachings. Two of the questions concerned holiness and translation faith; four involved the doctrine of the incarnation; and the other two were general in regard to Sister White's Testimony for Indiana.

Let us first note the subject of holiness and translation faith, as this was the terminology the Holy Flesh people used in discussing the subject of perfection. The second question that Hankins asked Davis was worded as follows:

Do you believe that this testimony [Sr. White's Testimony at the 1901 General Conference Session regarding the Movement in Indiana] condemns certain things you and others taught in this state?⁶

To this question, Davis replied:

The testimony certainly does condemn the doctrine of Holy Flesh as taught by some in the state; but this testimony must not be construed as to forever separate the term, "holiness" from humanity. . . To make it mean an entire separation of the term "holiness" from the human family would be to contradict the Bible, and inasmuch as the testimonies are to agree with the Bible would be to destroy the testimony. But it still remains a fact that the testimony does condemn the preaching of the doctrine of Holy Flesh as it was taught by some in Indiana. The wording of the testimony shows that it was the application of the word, "holiness" to the flesh in the sense of being fully redeemed, made immortal, *so that it would be impossible to sin;* and that the framer of these questions so understands is proven by question number eight. ⁶

The contention of Davis in reply to the question is very clear. He understood the testimony of Sister White to condemn a position that would teach that

an individual in this present life could receive a state of holiness, where it would be impossible for him to sin. Did the testimony condemn this? Observe what Sister White stated:

Let this phase of doctrine [perfection in the flesh] be carried a little further, and it will lead to the claim that *its advocates can not sin*; and since they have holy flesh, their actions are all holy. What a door to temptation would thus be opened! ⁷

Does this then exclude the necessity before the close of probation for a person to reach a state of holiness where at all times he *wills* not to sin? If such a state is not reached, how can sins after the close of probation be forgiven? These questions need to be carefully studied and answered by our church leadership. Time is too short for further delay!

In Question Number Eight, Elder Hankins asked S. S. Davis for a detailed explanation of his beliefs in regard to perfection. The question read:

Do you teach that conversion embraces the mind and body, so that in this life the body is fully cleansed from sin, and sinful tendencies; *and is brought back to the condition of man before the fall*, or does this work begin now and end with the resurrection of the just? Do you teach that those who fully appropriate the offering of Christ by faith will never pass under the dominion of death, and that the reason men die is because they fail to grasp the fullness of the gospel? ⁶

In reply to this question, S. S. Davis divided the question into six parts, and answered each part separately. He defended his answers with references to the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, and "a long lesson on translation" by Dr. Kellogg, which he states appeared in the 1899, General Conference Bulletin. He cites the experience of Enoch as commented upon in the Testimonies, quoting, "He was a representative of the saints who live amid the corruption and perils of the last days. For his faithful obedience to God he was translated. So also, the faithful, who are alive and remain, will be translated." ⁸ Davis concluded on the basis of this testimony that the gospel does have the power to bring God's people to the same state of perfection enjoyed by Enoch. Then, he

concluded his reply with these words:

If we who are living today could only grasp it. O my brother, you certainly don't mean to say that the testimony for Indiana condemned all these good things which the Bible and the Testimonies so abundantly abound.⁶

But to one section of Question Number Eight - "and [the body] is brought back to the condition of man before the fall" - Davis forcefully stated, "NO, emphatically NO, this is precisely what the testimony condemns."⁶ One looks in vain for some reference in the Testimony for Indiana that would meet this specific point. But Davis knew what the Holy Flesh folk taught with reference to the Adamic nature; and he knew that this concept led to what the testimony did condemn. A false premise led to wrong methods and teaching in seeking a worthy objective - the preparation of a people for translation. An analysis of this false premise must await the next Thought Paper.

¹All statements of historical fact in regard to this Movement are from the writer's research on the subject, and are documented in a paper on file in the James White Library at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

²Review & Herald, August 23, 1898, p. 543

³Review & Herald, April 10, 1900, p. 237

⁴G. A. Roberts, "The Holy Flesh Fanaticism", June 11, 1923 Document File 190 at the Ellen G. White Publications office, Washington D. C.

⁵Ellen G. White, "The Late Movement in Indiana", General Conference Bulletin, 1901, p. 421

⁶Letter from S. S. Davis to Ira J. Hankins dated March 15, 1903. Copy in the file of the writer.

⁷White, Ibid., p. 419

⁸Ellen G. White, Testimonies to the Church, Vol. 2, p. 122

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