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3 October 2002 Editorial: Thinking "Outside the Box"?

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"In order to truly experience God's vision, we must move outside the box" (1).

Appeals such as this are being heard more and more in contemporary Adventism. Subtle, unspecified language declaring the need for change, leaving listeners free to fill in the blanks as they see fit.

"Thinking outside the box" is just one example of this language. Other terms and phrases convey the same idea, such as "paradigm shift," "new era of rapid change," or a "willingness to let go of the old and move in new directions." Exactly which "box" we are to think outside of, which paradigms we should abandon, which "old" things we should let go of, remain conspicuously -- and perhaps purposely -- vague.

It is a dangerous trend, one which every faithful member of God's church -- from leadership to laity -- must steadfastly resist.

When details of the trend emerge, the danger becomes obvious. One such speaker, in the same context as the former, offers an outline of how Adventists need to change their approach to evangelism. In his own words:

In order to reach people in this new world, we must move from inside the box and operate outside the box, as follows:

FROM:	TO:
Word-based	Image-driven
Single-tasking	Multi-tasking
Asking, "Is it true?"	Asking, "Does it work?"

Information from authority figure

Come to us

Salt in the salt shaker

Recruitment

Membership

Information Super Highway

Go to them

Salt in the world

Deployment

Discipleship (2)

Much of the "image-driven" agenda this speaker describes is obviously congruent with the Bible-based message of Adventism. Few Adventists, for example, object to the full use of the information super highway as a tool for soul winning, nor have Adventists ever hesitated to take their message with vigor to new peoples and cultures throughout the world. But no faithful Seventh-day Adventist Christian should fail to react with alarm to any suggestion that we move from being "Word-based" to "image-driven" in our approach, away from asking "Is it true?" to "Does it work?" Whether those using such terms realize it or not, they are effectively asking the church to abandon the anchor of inspired counsel in pursuing its mission to the world. And since they are never clear which "box" they want us to think outside of, one can easily reach the conclusion that this refers to any inspired correction -- from either Scripture or Ellen White -- to various plans for growth and outreach which may be proposed.

It isn't the first time.

Whenever we consider ideas or thoughts of a spiritual nature, it helps to keep in mind the patterns of sacred history. Not only the explicit counsel of God regarding beliefs, worship, and lifestyle, but the inspired recounting of the experience of God's people must serve as a guide and a warning to the courses we choose now to contemplate.

When fomenting rebellion in the courts of glory, Lucifer too urged his listeners to "think outside the box." And a third of them did. Adam and Eve were enticed by the serpent to do the same. And for our first parents, thinking "outside the box" landed them outside the gate!

Cain certainly possessed a "willingness to let go of the old and move in new directions" when he offered fruit instead of the lamb God required. The descendants of Seth experienced a major "paradigm shift" when they intermarried with the daughters of men. And those in Noah's day had long been "thinking outside the box" when they encountered God's message for their day. So long, in fact, that when God's judgments finally fell upon them, they rushed to get "inside the box," only to find that it was too late.

Lot and his family were certainly thinking "outside the box" when they pitched their tents toward Sodom. The worship of the golden calf at Mount Sinai, as well as similar worship innovations pursued by King Jeroboam of Israel, demonstrated a similar "willingness to let go of the old and move in new directions." Clearly, both Aaron and Jeroboam moved from an "Is it true?" to a "Does it work" model for outreach and worship. But obviously, the sacred record is clear that God condemned each of these experiments in misbegotten creativity.

While Jesus often disputed the uninspired traditions which enslaved the people of His time (Matt. 15:9), He never invited His listeners to move outside the limits and guidelines of Holy Scripture. He declared, in His conflict with Satan, that man shall live "by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). He declared to His followers, "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed" (John 8:31). The

apostle Paul likewise declared: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

It would seem that neither Jesus nor Paul had much use for a spiritual pilgrimage that veered from the boundaries set by the inspired Word. Moving from a "Word-based" to an "image-driven" paradigm was certainly not on their agenda. Nor can one find encouragement in their teachings for ambiguous, unspecified appeals to "think outside the box" in spiritual matters.

In short, the Seventh-day Adventist Church dare not heed any suggestion, however well-meaning, to move outside the limits set by the written counsel of God. If change is needed in anything we do or say, in worship or evangelism or church life, let it be explicitly spelled out, not vaguely suggested in a manner which at best confuses and at worst misleads. And let the creative, restless minds among us remember, however humbling the process, to bring their ideas to the inspired writings for correction.

Neither the rush of technology nor the complexity of modern culture can relieve the church of the necessity of following the Berean example of searching the Scriptures as the faultless test of faith and practice (Acts 17:11). "To the law and to the testimony" (Isa. 8:20) must ever remain our watchword. Let us indeed be agents of change, but of that change which God's Word requires -- submission of the mind, the heart, and the body to the yoke of sanctified obedience.

ENDNOTES

1. *Columbia Union Visitor*, June 15, 2002, p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*



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