Meet Our Staff

Since The Compass Magazine team members are spread out across the country, the ASI Convention a few weeks ago provided a rare opportunity to meet in person. The event also served as an opportunity to celebrate the diversity of our team and share the latest developments in our coverage of social justice, women's ordination, and Adventism.

New This Week:

The Bible, Social Justice, and Adventism

Should Adventists take a stand on poverty and other social issues?
Michael Younker (left) is the senior editor, responsible for writing articles and recruiting new authors. He is completing a doctoral degree in philosophical theology at Andrews University.

Project Manager Rachel Cabose (center) coordinates web content, plans events, and manages marketing for The Compass Magazine. She lives in Michigan and works as a freelance writer and editor.

As associate editor, Valmy Karemera (right) focuses on compiling the news section of the site. Valmy holds degrees in biology and theology. Originally from Rwanda, he now lives in Texas.

Which Compass staff member didn’t grow up Adventist? Read their bios to find out.

News on Women’s Ordination
Share your thoughts on the Seminary’s statement on headship in the church and a roundup of other viewpoints.

The Change Without Change
Michael Younker examines what happens when a legalist accepts Christ.

Coming Next Week…
Reports from the Adventist International Conference on the Bible and Science, including personal reactions from worldwide attendees.

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The Greek philosopher Socrates was known as the gadfly of the state because he attempted to “sting” his Athenian contemporaries into consideration of the justice and rightness of their actions. In his book *Socrates Meets Jesus: History’s Greatest Questioner Confronts the Claims of Christ*, Peter Kreeft addresses the gadfly phenomenon by exploring Jesus’ claims in a relativistic or at least diverse Christian society. What would happen if Socrates suddenly showed up on the campus of a major university and enrolled in its divinity school? How would he react to our values? To our culture? And what would he think of Jesus? Furthermore, what would that type of quest make of the multitude of Christian denominations in America and the varied ethical stances it produces?

In the Christian’s vocation it is unnecessary to engage in the Socratic Method either to discover Christianity’s universal message or identity markers or to give privilege of thought to non-Christians. Adventism’s definition of its identity rests not on critical inquiries from the observable world but on the worldview Scripture expresses in an eschatological context. This theological foundation has been its *raison d’être* for thinking, lifestyle, and mission outreach. What is not always clear is how that worldview should influence activities in the public arena. (Public action must be distinguished from private when the systemic activities of social groups are being analyzed.)

Recently there has arisen a stream of postmodern and more secular humanistic influences that have challenged the notion of how the church defines itself and operates its mission. This is typically seen in the bumper sticker “coexist” mentality. In times of ideological pluralism, clear and cogent identity markers with goals and purposes developed from Scripture are needed to meet what may seem to be an innocuous tip of the relativistic iceberg. But the rumblings of an unbiblical worldview below threaten to undercut the clear word of God to this present generation and in some minds make the voice of the church irrelevant because it fails to address what many non-Adventists see as “real-life issues.”

On the other end of the spectrum there are voices that would dismiss any attempt to engage a larger field of Christian responsibility in the world in favor of solely engaging in an “evangelistic” focus where the methods show little interest in the material life of those we minister to. The three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 must never lose their centrality in Adventist thought and mission.

What is needed is an approach, a pathway where Adventists’ eschatological mission can engage the very issues that secular or at least non-fundamentalist faith groups are addressing. We need to approach these issues from Scriptural truths as a source of help to “the least of these” as well as a bridge for dialogue. The Word of God not only speaks to people in buildings with steeples but deals with the fundamental issues of life that all people wrestle with. While the church’s main mission is evangelism to a world dying for lack of a Savior, it may be unclear to non-Adventists how that Savior is Lord of all creation if Adventists make it seem that theological orthodoxy is God’s sole concern for people or that His Word has nothing to say about the material needs and sociological crises we live with in society.

**Adventists: A People of Justice?**

I would argue that being an Adventist means living a life of mental, moral, and missional responsibility in light of the Lord and His truth that we hold dear in every theater of living. It is a message ultimately of the gospel, as Paul says, wherein the righteousness of God is revealed (Rom 1). This word “righteousness” traces back into about ten different words in the Old Testament, showing that the range of definition covers a variety of virtues, values, and situations addressed in life. Because he was thoroughly immersed in biblical thought, Paul’s understanding of the word “righteousness” included the notion of justice.

These two nouns, righteousness and justice, are not usually seen as mutually inclusive. Though Adventist thinking
has shown the relationship between its eschatological message and the gospel, specifically in Revelation 12–14, justice has not been a big part of Adventist vernacular as of late. The deeper implication is the import of character formation not solely in the isolation of a privatized religion, but in shared relational care of others through the gospel’s transformative message. The paraenetic value (of or relating to moral and ethical instruction) of Adventist identity has been overlooked in terms of being a people of justice. What that looks like in everyday life is a wholistic gospel perspective that takes into account the entire canon of Scripture.

Though no one biblical book or genre can encapsulate the totality of a biblical worldview about justice, a good starting place to address the myriad of current concerns and critical inquiries into defining a solid ethical and active identity resides in the voice of the biblical sages. The Wisdom literature of the Bible (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) has much to say about the moral quality of human nature in relation to a range of issues. This message is applicable to every generation that faces a set of diverse matters in the ebb and flow of the changing tides of culture. The voice of the church has something to say in the public marketplace of ideas and praxis. Indeed, “Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice” (Proverbs 1:20).

We are dealing with foundational beliefs from a divinely inspired revelation that ought to play the primary and pivotal role in our thinking and affect our practice as a community. This rupture between religious activity and social movement and mobility is a modern phenomenon, though more churches are becoming socially aware and engaged in ministry to the least of these.

Before the revolutions (social, political, industrial, etc.) of the latter 18th and 19th centuries, Christianity stood at the center of Western culture and life. Churches ran schools and hospitals, provided social services and education, and actively engaged the political process. Today this thinking is foreign to modern sensibilities where the state operates almost in dichotomous fashion with faith-based initiatives, which have privatized their operations for the most part. I say “for the most part” because of progressive social justice institutions spearheaded by schools like Union Theological Seminary, with its history of education in the lines of civic responsibility and action. Its faculty included Gladden, Rauschenbusch, Tillich, Cone, West, and Reinhold Niebuhr, who influenced many generations of students and thinkers, including the German minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer. There is a long tradition of Christian social justice activists (see the works by Gary Dorrien like Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition).

The question that needs to be addressed for Adventist mission and theology is how we as a people with eschatological sensibilities should engage in civic responsibilities. Admittedly, our more recent tradition is not as robust and engaged as was our earlier history as a movement. Understandably the main objection to social action is our understanding of how church and state will integrate in the end of time. However, those feelings need to be balanced with what the Bible says of our duty to serve humanity in humanitarian ways (cf. Proverbs 19:17; Deuteronomy 15:10-11; Isaiah 58:10). Especially important is how Jesus’ words about care for poor are couched in terms of His soon return (Matthew 25:31-46).

Biblical sages address both the practical and intellectual person in terms of character development on the one hand and eternal destiny on the other. The fundamental differences between Christian action and humanistic action are the motives, goals, modus operandi, and outcomes each represent (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Eccl 12:13). A biblical stance resists quick emotive responses to inequities. A biblical worldview defines the kind of community the person of faith belongs to and the type of person that faith creates. The trajectory of that person and their faith is long-term and cultivates a sustained sensitivity to and activity for people in need irrespective of color, class, culture, creed, gender, etc. Much could be said about that community, yet for space limitations one area pertinent to issues of the day will hopefully show how a biblical worldview can define Adventists’ approach to social issues.

**Poverty: A Biblical View**

An important topic confronting the life of faith is social welfare. This is just one among many, but it was chosen because it interrelates on many levels with much of the world’s woe and is pertinent to Adventist identity.
In terms of social welfare, we should not limit our understanding to statistics and paradigm shifts within the politics of the day. Of the many aspects of social welfare, poverty is an issue that impacts the majority of our world for various reasons. How ought the Adventist relate to that reality? The Psalmist points out the welfare of the poor and socially maligned and brings forth pleas to those who have the capacity and charge over the social welfare of the people. “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute” (Psalm 82:3).

Should we therefore give money to every panhandler? Keep in mind that attitudes we carry today were not in the mind of the Biblical author. There was no idea of American exceptionalism or a “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” mentality. In fact, the Bible says much more about care for the poor than it says about growing personal fortunes. Contrary to common notions of the poor being greedy or lazy, the sages tell us that though there are results for hard work and laziness (Prov 13:4; 12:27), correlation between laziness and poverty does not mean causation.

A starting point needs to be a change in thinking about poverty in general. An understanding of issues like economic, political, and social structures; population flux; educational factors; industrialization capacity and productivity; privilege; cultural mores; etc., can help modern minds to understand that simplistic mindsets about poverty are unwarranted. How then does a responsible interpreter of the Word of God deal with this complex issue? Historically, in society the politics of language has been efficient in maintaining social orders. However, the interests of the biblical sages focused on wealth in terms of the quality of character (Ps 112:3; Prov 3:9; Eccl 5:19) held in tension with the profusion of poverty by making distinctions between being a foolish and a wise person. That distinction is grounded in ethics (Prov 13:18; 23:21). In short, wealth or the lack thereof is not a matter simply of hard work versus laziness, but is spoken of in terms of character that is part and parcel of structural forces that typically do not benefit the maligned and disenfranchised.

The biblical sage supports an agenda that seeks to assuage the disparities resident in society (Job 24:5). We can agree that not all wealthy people are hardworking and some fit into the negative categories defined in the Word of God: those who take bribes (Ps 15:5; Prov 15:27; Eccl 7:7), oppress the less fortunate (Job 35:9; Prov 22:16), or cheat their neighbor (Ps 12:2; Prov 26:18, 19).

The counsel to the person of faith many times has nothing to do with one’s socio-economic status, but is an issue of character. Contrary to the name-it-claim-it gospel, it is irresponsible to believe that today accumulated wealth is due to following the wise counsel of the Bible despite one’s moral center. So what should the Christian response be? God is on the side of the oppressed (Ps 103:6; 146:7), not because they are better people, but because He is a God of justice.

(Watch for Part 2 of this article in the coming weeks.)
The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, the church’s flagship theological training institution, has posted on its website a statement entitled “On the Unique Headship of Christ in the Church.” This seven-page document rejects the idea that “any human can rightly assume a headship role within the church.”

The document lacks any detailed information concerning dissenting perspectives that may be held by members of the Seminary faculty on the various issues it addresses, which range beyond simply headship in the church to the nature of leadership as well as to that of the relationship between a husband and wife. In any case, given that the worldwide church has undertaken the study of these subjects and will soon decide on the course(s) to pursue concerning them, the timing of this document’s release certainly places it as an important contributor to the ongoing dialogue on these issues within the broader church. As the church moves forward in its discussions on the more controversial and differing perspectives on these issues, it will be interesting to gauge its influence and the reactions it receives.

QUESTION: What's your assessment of the biblical strength or weakness of the arguments presented in “On the Unique Headship of Christ in the Church”? Does this document provide any helpful perspectives relevant to the women’s ordination debate?
Women’s Ordination: The Elephant in the Room at 2015 GC Session?

Valmy Karemera

As the Seventh-day Adventist Church gets ready for its 60th General Conference Session in 2015, the subject of women's ordination continues to dominate the headlines. The 3ABN channel recently aired a panel discussion at ASI featuring Pastors Jay Gallimore, Stephen Bohr, and Doug Batchelor. At the same time, a survey was sent out by 3ABN, and its results can be seen here.

Following this, another town hall meeting addressing the issue aired from the ASI convention featuring the GC president, Dr. Ted Wilson, and the NAD president, Eld. Dan Jackson. On the heels of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) meetings, a Youtube video has also emerged that claims to be neither pro- nor anti-women’s ordination, but one that attempts to provide a moderate view.
Church of England Approves Female Bishops

Valmy Karemera

Ending 2000 years of practice and 20 years of bitter division, the Church of England approves female bishops.

Photo: Lincoln Cathedral, England, by Michael Beckwith (Uploaded by russavia) [CC-BY-2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons
How do we persuade people to follow Jesus? This is not as easy a question to answer as we might suppose. Let’s look at the story of the brothers Charles and John Wesley, as told by Ellen White, to see why.

White observed that “[Charles] Wesley and his associates were led to see that true religion is seated in the heart, and that God’s law extends to the thoughts as well as to the words and actions. Convinced of the necessity of holiness of heart, as well as correctness of outward deportment, they set out in earnest upon a new life. By the most diligent and prayerful efforts they endeavored to subdue the evils of the natural heart. They lived a life of self-denial, charity, and humiliation, observing with great rigor and exactness every measure which they thought could be helpful to them in obtaining what they most desired—that holiness which could secure the favor of God” (GC 254).

It seems as though Wesley was on the right track, doesn’t it? Is it not true that God’s law extends to the thoughts as well as to the words and actions? Is it not important to be diligent and prayerful in our efforts to subdue our natural evil hearts? But, White concludes, Wesley and his friends “did not obtain the object which they sought. In vain were their endeavors to free themselves from the condemnation of sin or to break its power” (GC 254).

Why did Wesley fail? Was there a problem with his goal to seek God? Surely not. Nothing he did, in and of itself, was wrong! His life of self-denial, charity, and humiliation was not incorrect. But it all availed Wesley nothing; he was left empty.

White commented that the English brothers, “after being ordained to the ministry, were sent on a mission to America. On board the ship was a company of [German] Moravians. Violent storms were encountered on the passage, and John Wesley, brought face to face with death, felt that he had not the assurance of peace with God. The Germans, on the contrary, manifested a calmness and trust to which he was a stranger” (GC 254).

What could be the source of this Christ-filled calmness, Wesley wondered? What did these men have that he did not? White describes the answer: “On his return to England, Wesley, under the instruction of a Moravian preacher, arrived at a clearer understanding of Bible faith. He was convinced that he must renounce all dependence upon his own works for salvation and must trust wholly to “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (GC 255-256). It is a point that cannot be emphasized enough. White noted that “through long years of wearisome and comfortless striving–years of rigorous self-denial, of reproach and humiliation–Wesley had steadfastly adhered to his one purpose of seeking God. Now he had found Him; and he found that the grace which he had toiled to win by prayers and fasts, by almsdeeds and self-abnegation, was a gift, ‘without money and without price’” (GC 256). Only after this realization was John “established in the faith of Christ” and “his whole soul burned with the desire to spread everywhere a knowledge of the glorious gospel of God’s free grace” (GC 256).

But the final point White mentions should also not be forgotten. John Wesley “continued his strict and self-denying life, not now as the ground, but the result of faith; not the root, but the fruit of holiness. The grace of God in Christ is the foundation of the Christian’s hope, and that grace will be manifested in obedience. Wesley’s life was devoted to the preaching of the great truths which he had received–justification through faith in the atoning blood of Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit upon the heart, bringing forth fruit in a life conformed to the example of Christ” (GC 256).

Lessons for Evangelism

I see one central point to be derived from the Wesleys’ conversion: It is faith in Christ and Him crucified which is the
message we are to bear. However, given that not all have had the background experience of the Wesleys, a few additional points can be learned from the story above for us today. There are different ways of being legalists, as the Wesleys were, before their conversion. And some are obviously not legalists, believing that an exacting life is not necessary at all. Together, this can make the Christian life seem perplexing to many.

There is nothing that turns away skeptical young people from Christianity faster than the early Wesley brothers, who insist that their exactitudes in life are the essential key to Christianity. Conversely, equally dangerous is the Christian who is slack in his life on many matters; the young person interested in Christianity will fail to see the reason why he or she should inquire further into religion, when it seems to make very little difference in the life of a purported believer.

One can rightly wonder: In what way did John Wesley change after his conversion? In his case, not much on the outside. His attitude literally made all the difference in the world. The power of a union with Christ transformed his failed life of “perfect” obedience into a saved life of repentant faith that worked. It was the paradox of justification by faith and the failure of all human logic on display.

Rightly might one ask of Wesley, “So, what has changed? You do nearly the same things!” Indeed, Wesley might respond, “Nothing has changed. But everything is different!” Human logic cannot explain this, thus, it appears a great mystery. The change without a change. It is self-evidently true, but logic seems incapable of explaining it.

The above is why we Christians must take great care in the personal discipleship and mentoring we provide to those new in the faith. It is all too easy to fall into a soft legalism of many different varieties. Our religion can become one of personal legalism, wherein we avoid bad movies and music, and exercise and eat right... but do not understand the life of faith. Or, conversely, we can become swept up in the social activism of our church, organizing soup kitchens, helping the poor, doing door-to-door ministries, and giving home Bible studies on Sabbath afternoons about the prophecies of Revelation 13... and still not understand the life of faith. I see both trends happen all too often in our church.

Indeed, it must always be remembered that “great is the mystery of godliness” (1 Tim 3:16). So we should not pretend it is not a mystery! But it can still be taught, and learned, as it was with the Moravians and John and Charles Wesley.