

A Better Way

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The title of this article¹ is lifted from a statement written by Ellen G. White at the turn of the century. The thought in essence is that because of the tensions between the races, the rigors of Jim Crow, white and black believers would be wise to build and operate separate facilities — “till the Lord shows us a better way.”²

It is my opinion that there are but three milestones left for us to pass before victory will be complete. The first milestone is *righteousness by faith*. Like the Jews of old, far too many of our members still depend too much on the law and too little on the merits of Jesus. The second milestone is marked *pilgrim ethic*. Like Little John, in the tales of Robin Hood, who disguised himself and went into a chosen city to spy out the land for attack, but who became so comfortable with the ease of city life that he forgot to return, some of us have forgotten our temporary status in this present society. In short, we have lost our pilgrim ethic. The third milestone is *brotherhood and togetherness*.

For as it is true that we cannot triumph until we have overcome ritualism, salvation by works, and the creature comforts that rob us of divine incentive, it is also true that the Holy Spirit can never supply that measure of power commensurate with Matthew 24:14³ while yet we remain a psychologically and structurally divided people. Because of this fact and because we know that our present segregated operations are not ideal, and because Ellen White implies that God will show us “a better way,” we do well to assess our situation occasionally to see if the time has arrived for a more practical and efficient way — in short, a better way of doing God’s work.

I

Two questions arise.

First, what is this better way? I believe it is the way of open fellowship

and complete desegregation by Seventh-day Adventists on all levels of communion, administration, and worship.

Second, are not we — who, with prophetic eye, go through the sweep of history dissecting kingdoms, analyzing the present, and outlining the future, who sing so blithely, “we are not divided, all one body we” — are not we ready for just such a fellowship? The answer is, sadly but emphatically, *No!* Our long, discouragingly weak record of race relations clearly negates any optimism.

Black Seventh-day Adventists were not accepted in the Washington Sanitarium until the late 1940s. Black people could not eat at the Review and Herald cafeteria until the early 1950s nor stay in the main units of the Florida Sanitarium or the Hialeah Hospital until the early 1960s. It was against regulations for blacks and whites to room together on our campuses until the middle 1960s. And it was 1965 before the largest white Seventh-day Adventist church in Detroit, if you please, would accept its first black member. Add to these the long-practiced quota system of accepting students in our institutions. Add that the brightest black missionaries have returned from service overseas with successful and lengthy records, only to have their tenure and accomplishments unrewarded within the structure while many of their white counterparts were immediately given positions of responsibility. These facts are but a sampling of what the past has been like.

But it is not only the past that speaks to us. More relevantly the present tells us that we are not ready. We are not ready because black Seventh-day Adventists cannot sit on the same pews with white Seventh-day Adventists in Mobile, Alabama. We are not ready because little black Seventh-day Adventist children cannot go to school with little white Seventh-day Adventists in Atlanta, Georgia. We are not ready because black administrators in the local conferences around the country know that there is little or no chance of vertical mobility within their respective structures. We are not ready because, although blacks have almost one-third of the combined membership of the Southern, Atlantic, and Columbia Union Conferences, we are not represented in the administrative structure of these bodies. (What goes on in these regions is no worse than what goes on in the rest of North America — and in fact may be somewhat better.)

II

Exactly what are the sociological, psychological, and theological forces that have produced this present state of affairs?

First, Adventists are a conservative people who have evidently taken their conservatism too far. We shun drastic changes in dress and diet. We are cautious in our financing and in other matters of policy. And well might we be. But to carry our conservatism into the area of human relations is to pervert and misapply an otherwise healthy tendency.

Second, Adventists are fundamentalists, given more to dogmatic views and authoritarian preachments that confirm our positions than to understanding principle. Of course, our stated doctrines are correct and our officially announced positions, even on human relations, are good. But because many leaders and lay members spurn the refining, broadening processes of research, relying more on text than context, and more on slogans than scholarship, we ought not be too surprised that we are slow to change any social or theological position. Neither conservatism nor fundamentalism is wrong. Jesus was a doctrinal conservative and was steeped in the fundamentals of the scrolls. But also he was a bold liberal in his social teachings and an outright radical in his social contacts.

Third, a significant factor in our approach to social change is this: having concluded that the world is hopeless and that we shall never be able to solve all the problems of society, we have evidently decided that we do best to stay out of social problems and keep busy carrying on "the work of the church." To this end we have not balanced our college and university courses of theology, education, business, and the natural sciences with sufficient offerings in the social and behavioral sciences. Thus our white church leaders are ignorant of the residual effects on the black man both of slavery and of the nitty-gritty problems of survival in the black community. Many white leaders believe it is a waste of time to study these issues, much less to provide the massive reparations due the black man for past indignities suffered at the hands of the slaveowner and the generations that succeeded him.

Now I do not suggest with Augustine that we strive to create a City of God here on earth. Nor do I agree with Walter Rauschenbusch, the father of the social gospel, when he says that we can expect to elevate society to the place where God can adopt us and confer immortality on the whole human race. I do not agree even with Martin Luther King, Jr., who foresaw a time when "justice will reign from the majestic hills of Pennsylvania to every molehill and mound in Mississippi."

But I do say that it is highly regrettable that the children of God have been dwarfed — in government, by such sons of mammon as John and Robert Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson; in religion, by Pope John XXIII,

who wrote in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* so eloquently about the social issue; and in education, in business, and in every other stratum of society, by other convicted and concerned men. The church will never solve all the ills of humanity. But as the moral conscience of the nation, the church is obligated — yea, duty bound, in the parlance of prayer meeting — not only to speak out against man's inhumanity to man, but to dedicate our finances, our votes, and, if necessary, our very lives to the freedom and dignity of the human body and spirit.

Fourth, yet another reason that we have come to this seeming social impasse is that historically we have beamed our evangelistic approach to the upper-lower and lower-middle class of citizens, the very segment that the President calls the "silent majority." Since most white church members come from this group, and since this is the white segment most threatened (in their jobs and in their neighborhoods) by the mobility of the Negro, we should not be too surprised that many white Adventists adore Barry Goldwater, praise George Wallace, hire Paul Harvey, believe David Lawrence, subscribe to the *U. S. News and World Report*, vote for Richard Nixon, cheer for Spiro Agnew, hate the Supreme Court, ascribe all liberal legislation to some sinister Kremlin plot within our midst, and persist in thinking that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a Communist.

Of course, the strongest deterrent, other than a misuse of the Bible ("Be ye not unequally yoked together") is a misapplication of Ellen White's statement referred to. In fairness it must be said, however, that our brethren in the General Conference have tried in several ways during the past few years to correct this misunderstanding. But education takes time.

Fifth, a further factor that must be taken into account is political expediency. Many white leaders do have understanding and conviction but refuse to act because they fear loss of prestige, loss of finance, loss of status, and even loss of job. The result is an unfortunate vacuum of leadership which leaves white lay members locked in their deep, dark prejudices.

III

Yes, there is a better way! But, no, obviously we are not ready for it. There is something more basic to be taken into account when we talk about what makes fellowship between the races so difficult, something that Ellen White said she feared would "ever remain a most perplexing problem" — the thoroughly ingrained myth of racial superiority. This myth, which grew so during two hundred years of slavery and ninety years of "separate but equal" coexistence, has produced two pervasive and binding effects.

First, white society — not all, but the mass of the population — has written off black America as inferior, cursed, and afflicted by God and nature. This is how the white slaveowners could say that not all men are created equal and could then hold men in slavery. Obviously God meant only all white men.

Second, the black man was forced to ascribe beauty and success to white features and a white culture, which by heredity and environment he was never to have. How unfair for the flat-nosed, kinky-haired African, to say that beauty is angular features, flossy locks, and fair skin. But the blacks believed it and even developed a color caste within their own ranks. Not until Stokely Carmichael did we dare to believe that black could also be beautiful. I am saying that the results of this philosophy of racial supremacy are still with us — black and white. Uncle Tom may be dead, but we still have some Brother Thomases around. The dangerous man now, however, is the “Oreo Negro” who, like the cookie by the same name, is black all over but white inside.

The acid test for the *white* man is what he thinks of his black brother, and the crucial question is his attitude toward intermarriage. If my white brother tells me that intermarriage is risky because society is basically against it, I will agree. But if my white brother tells me that intermarriage is wrong because God is basically against it, then I must question the depth of his understanding, if not the sincerity of his relationship.

The acid test for the *black* man, his social Gethsemane, is what he thinks of himself. He has passed the test only when he can say in the paraphrased words of Henry Coleman, “I thank an all-wise Creator of this immutable fact that the bulge of my lips and the texture of my hair and the color of my skin need not be inevitable tokens of my disgrace, but that that hair can cover a brain as keen and that skin a heart as pure as that which beats within any Saxon’s breast, and that these marks of my identity can become my badges of honor, symbols of a race that has attained a culture in 105 years that it took the white man 300 years to acquire.”

Because of the foregoing reasons, black Adventism was organized in 1944 into separate local jurisdictions with black leaders. What has happened since then in terms of growth, employment, and incentive to black youth well justifies that move.

It took blacks one whole century, from 1844 to 1944, to reach a membership of 9,000. In the quarter of a century since black conferences were organized, we have rocketed from 9,000 to over 70,000. While the church has grown at the rate of 75 percent during this time, including the black

work, the black conferences themselves have grown at the rate of 125 percent. During this time we have gone from 3 percent of the United States membership to 18 percent.

Now suddenly the local conferences have become formidable forces, numerically and financially, within their union conference territories, and we are brought face to face with a crisis of relations akin to that of twenty-five years ago. The burning question then was whether or not our churches had grown sufficiently in size and number and need to warrant separate conferences. Conferences are now so well developed in size and need as to require the specialized supervision of black leadership. Is the cultural gap so wide and our leadership and personnel needs so indigenous to our blackness that our work will be further enhanced by eliminating all white administrative direction between us and the General Conference? In other words, what about black union conferences?

Idealism says, "No. Stick with the present structure; things are bound to get better."

Realism says, "Yes. In the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his poem *The Chambered Nautilus*, it is time to leave this outgrown shell, to build thee more stately mansions, O my soul."

Patience says, "Maybe tomorrow it will change."

Pragmatism asks, "Is not today the tomorrow you looked for yesterday?"

Prudence pleads, "Wait. If the government could break down Little Rock and hundreds of school systems North and South, surely our brethren will yield."

Practicality reminds us that the government had bayonets and threats of withholding funds as two very effective means of persuasion but that neither of these means is available or ethical in our polite Christian communion.

IV

And so we have come to the crossroads. We have reached an emotional and tactical crisis. I do not know how the logistics of this tactical problem will be solved. But one thing is certain. Things will never be the same.

It would seem that our leaders must make one of three decisions.

First, the General Conference can act swiftly and massively on an organized timetable to implement and enforce, suffering local autonomy if necessary, our announced position on desegregation within the Seventh-day Adventist Church — so much, in fact, that black and white conferences will eventually be completely merged. Such a program, if implemented in stages and begun immediately, would produce a minimum of shock and

trauma and allow for increased association and fellowship among the leaders and members of both races. Without this interaction we can never really know and understand one another.

Second, the church can admit its unreadiness or inability to create and achieve the quality of brotherhood we need. It can concede its unfamiliarity with distinctly black problems, such as the ghetto, and decide that under the circumstances it will be best to let black leadership handle its own money, organize its own programs, select its own leaders — in short, “do its own thing.”

Third, the church can refuse to do either and hope that the problems will somehow solve themselves.

To do the first, to inaugurate a massive program to desegregate and merge, would be working toward the ideal. To do the second, to organize the black work into separate unions, would be natural and practical if the former is not now possible. To do neither, but simply to cast anchor and hope for day, would be catastrophic.

For the forces that made Rosa Parks sit in the front of the bus, that made young students face “Bull” Connor and his dogs, that sent Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court, Carl Stokes to the mayorship of Cleveland, and King to his grave are abroad — not only in the land but also in the church. Business will never be the same.

We are not bitter. But we have discovered that while our white brother was telling us to go back home and raise our ingathering and to pray, he was busy building beautiful churches for his people, well equipped schools for his children, and first-class homes for his family. And then, while we were suffering materially because of the economic deprivation inherent in the American capitalistic system, the few whites and blacks who sensed the inequities were encouraged not to rock the boat. Thus many a black saint who was faithful in his offerings — investment, birthday, missions, week of sacrifice, thirteenth Sabbath, famine relief, Voice of Prophecy, Faith for Today, and Loma Linda University — has been buried from a third-class ramshackle church. And many a black young person has left the church because both black leaders and white leaders were more concerned about foreign missions by proxy than they were about the poor at hand.

Now we do not claim that black union conferences will solve all black problems; in fact, this *administrative* accommodation must be accompanied by special *financial* accommodation if we are to succeed. As for union conferences, we realize that our knowledge of all their operations is still somewhat incomplete.

But we blacks have peeked in through the windows of apprenticeship and know enough about the processes. We have grasped the rules sufficiently — the printed ones, the “you understand” kind, the firm ones, and the ones that can be changed when the administration desires to do so — to go into business for ourselves. We have discovered how to use the kid gloves of diplomacy and have learned to read the complex blueprint of structural organization. We have located the loopholes of policy and have marked the trapdoors of failure. We have practiced and memorized the shibboleths of administrative success. And as children say in the game they play, it’s “ready or not, here we come.”

There are two forces with which we must reckon, the support of which we will need if union conferences are to be a reality.

The first is the support of the white leadership. Actually, not too much persuasion should be needed. It is a paradox of note that our white brethren seem surprisingly willing to let black union conferences come about. It would appear that white leaders, like Pharaoh, would be greatly relieved if we would pack up our sensitive, restless militancy and take our own private route to the Promised Land.

The second — and much more formidable — force is the attitude of the black laity. For in spite of their concern about inequities, black leaders have some legitimate skepticism about further separation and would be at no small disadvantage in discussing with our lay members the dirty linen of discrimination within Adventism. Such a discussion could be very disconcerting and unsettling and would have to be handled delicately and skillfully.

We would have to remind both the lay people and ourselves that not all of our white Adventist brethren are prejudiced or afraid. It is easy in the excitement of a revolution to generalize about the ruling class. But I will say that my travels around the Southern Union Conference have acquainted me with some white workers and laymen who are genuinely concerned. I have met them at youth camps in Tennessee, at campmeetings in Florida, at teacher conventions in Georgia, on campuses in California, in churches in Michigan, at worker retreats in New York, and within the halls of our church headquarters in Washington, D. C.

V

As we stand on the threshold of what seem to be such momentous events, let us resolve to dedicate ourselves to some very clear-cut rules of operation.

Rule Number One. Let us refrain from the temptation to mark certain

brethren for political criticism because they are not so aggressive as we are on these issues. Some men may not want to alter structure; some may want to, but not so fervently as others; some may feel there is no other way. In any event, we must try to avoid polarization of our own ranks. If and when black unions do come about, there must be no vindictiveness nor petty reprisals. Frankly, I would rather be on the tugboat of integration chugging slowly upstream toward the Promised Land than on the sleek new battleship *Black Union* witnessing political purges, verbal homicide, and structural genocide among ambitious, glory-seeking, so-called "soul brothers."

Rule Number Two. Let us remember that one of the pitfalls of revolution is loss of respect, by the revolutionists themselves, for all leadership. We may be justified in engaging in honest debate with leaders; we may be justified in attacking the myth of human infallibility; we may be justified in saying that the present structure is not sacrosanct. But, in fighting inequities and seeking to better the structure, if we also lose respect for office, rank, tenure of service, and experience, we are setting the stage for frustration and anarchy. Since the real reason for black union conferences is to facilitate the work in black communities, the vehicle which we fashion for this purpose must have a responsible and respected chain of command. Let us not be guilty, therefore, of throwing out the organizational baby with the structural wash.

Rule Number Three. Let us concede that, as well as things have gone, we might have done better. Three hundred years of cultural deprivation have left their mark. We are still weak in spots. We must conquer our penchant for lateness, inattention to details, and lack of long-range planning — a result of our manana complex, no doubt. Let us handle campmeetings, tent meetings, church services, departmental reports, business meetings, board meetings, and personal affairs with greater dispatch, accuracy, and punctuality. We must be no less concerned about *quality* of operation than we are about *quantity* of growth.

Rule Number Four. Let us determine that black union conferences will not be exclusive but, rather, clear-cut models of brotherhood in which our white brethren may also enjoy the privileges of membership and structural authority. Let us show them how it is done. . . . And, finally —

Rule Number Five. Let us remember that black union conferences, if they do come about, will be but the ultimate form of a structural separation necessitated by circumstances which we hope will change eventually and that their presence is a vivid reminder of a great weakness — a weakness not of principle but of practice within our church.

When Hannibal, perhaps the best known of all black militarists, was called upon to lead the Carthaginians in battle against Italy, he performed one of the most stunning feats of warfare by spurning the popular route to Rome, the French Riviera, where he knew his progress would be fraught with premature battles and probable defeat before he even reached Italy. Instead, he crossed over the rugged, seemingly impassable Alps on a march of fifteen days. He encountered ambush by hostile tribes, storms, landslides, and near starvation, all of which ate away his forces, reduced his already inferior numbers, and made his mission highly improbable.

But, then, in the spring of 218 B.C., finally he emerged from the forests and stood with his troops on a plateau, the kind that the Greeks called an acropolis, overlooking the valley of the Po. Rallying his forces about him, Hannibal pointed to the shoreline of Italy in the distance and said, "Gentlemen, you have done well. You have fought hard. I am proud of you. Carthage is proud of you. But we must prepare for the real struggle. Here we stand upon the acropolis. Yonder lies Rome."

It has not been easy, but today we blacks have emerged from the shadows of history to an emotional and structural acropolis. However, it is clear that we have not reached our destination. Yonder lies the holy city. And we must fight on for the conquest in our day.

We blacks do not choose to march on a separate, parallel path to victory. But if we are forced to, let us strive valiantly until God, by whatever circumstance necessary, brings us to that dramatic confluence of social interaction wherein we can join hands with our brethren and, with complete togetherness, move on to capture our prize. Let our faith be strong, our motives pure, our expectations great, our determination unbending. With justice toward all, and malice toward none, let us advance this our grand cause until God shows us a better way.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 This article is based on an address delivered on the occasion of the South Central Conference annual banquet December 16, 1969.
- 2 ELLEN G. WHITE, *Testimonies for the Church* (volume nine of nine volumes. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1902), pp. 206-207.
- 3 Matthew 24:14: And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.
- 4 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., in his speech, *I Have a Dream*, given at Washington, D. C., in 1963.
- 5 WHITE, *ibid.*, p. 214.