

Commitment vs. Capitulation

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31

The crucial challenge to Adventism in race relations is posed by the contradiction between its rhetorical commitment to fellowship without racial barriers, on the one hand, and the racial inequities which are typical of most of its own life as a church, on the other. The challenge is to discover ways of bridging the gap between the present realities and the normative commitment.

The idea of strategy and planned social change is one that is increasingly commanding the attention of social scientists. With an ethical commitment not alien to that of devoted churchmen, many of them are attempting to relate the growing wealth of knowledge contributed by the social sciences to the specific problems of modern times. In planning strategies for social change they have thus sought to implement values with the greatest possible intelligence. In like manner, the black leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church today is responding to an overwhelming concern and need.

I believe that any strategy within the church must give careful attention to the appropriateness of its objectives and to its ethical presuppositions. Let me inject right here that I hope no one will get "hung up" or defensive about the word *strategy*, which I use from time to time. It is a perfectly *good* word with significant meaning. It is not foreign to any member of officialdom. Its use as a tool is fully defensible as we view the precedent of its high regard among all levels of leadership within the church. Lest we lend ambiguity to the term itself, however, let me explain. *Strategy* may be understood as the general enlargement and organization of the capacity to achieve a chosen objective in the most effective way. *Tactics*, on the other hand, is the use that is made of strategy in the immediate situation by persons having a grasp of immediate problems and opportunities.

The direction of this paper is discussion of (1) the major racial problems confronting us today and (2) the limitations and possibilities inherent in the Christian philosophy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

I

32

The question of how our church can best meet the needs of its black constituents and black prospective converts in the face of the growing racial unrest in America is one that needs to be asked urgently and repeatedly. Daily we are brought face to face with evidences of the mounting frustration of the black masses crying out for the power to be free. These current cries are hostile, unsophisticated, uncouth, and unnerving. They testify to a gripping sense of revolt, revulsion, and resignation. A walk through the bleak tenements — or, perhaps better, a stay there for a few days for the “uninitiated” — would provide an unforgettable reminder that some in America are disinherited from the day of their birth.¹

As leaders, we must carefully avoid too harsh a judgment of those who raise their voices to champion a cause that would disrupt the status quo within the church. Perhaps, like their political and social counterparts, they herald a gospel demanding that the church use its abundant resources to serve the well-being of those whose real problems have too long gone unsolved.

It is not enough to answer that “integration” is the solution. For it is precisely the nature of the operation, or the lack of opportunity under some forms of integration, that is being challenged. After all, historically the black church was created as a result of the refusal of certain imaginative blacks to submit to the indignities of a false kind of integration in which all power was in the hands of white people.

There are those who say “tread softly” lest we endanger the gains already made. Well, maybe we need to learn how to define “gains.” The fact of the matter is, too often we are tempted to accept stated policy for practice. Resolutions are not worth the paper they are written on if they are not implemented. Since the Supreme Court decision of 1954, it is commonly known, *de facto* segregation in every major city in our land has increased, unemployment among blacks has gone up, and the gap has constantly widened between the incomes of nonwhites and whites.

In short, therefore, integration on paper is one thing, but a more nearly equal sharing of opportunity and participation is quite another thing. And this is precisely what is required as a precondition to appropriate human interaction. So let’s not get hung up on the tactics of the militants who em-

barrass and chagrin us with their methodology. Since they have appealed for a more honest kind of integration — one that increases rather than decreases the capacity of the minority member — they are saying that integration as it is now practiced is not meaningful.

The church, like the government, has taken a formal stand in its approach to human relations. The General Conference actions of 1961 and 1965 represent our most complete statements on the subject. A series of articles on the general subject of human relations appeared in the *Review and Herald* in 1966,² and the 1967 edition of the Church Manual carried a section entitled “No Wall of Partition.”

These statements, “woven around the many and stirring counsels” of Ellen White, indicate that some leaders have made an earnest effort to provide at least some moral guidelines for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in this most important area of race relations. But let me hasten to add that resolutions alone are *not enough*. Have these resolutions been sufficient to provide the proper balance and interaction in the field of race relations?

II

Now to the issue — to support or not to support the proposal of *black union conferences* in the church organizational system.

Certain facts ought to be understood at the outset of such a discussion.

It would have to be understood that the organization of black union conferences would be officially determined on the basis of race and would result in segregation at every connectional level of the church below the union conference staff.

It would be incorrect, for two reasons, to assert that the existence of black union conferences would require complete segregation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In the first place, a number of states have never been included within the regional conference framework and therefore might not be included in the boundaries of those regional conferences that would comprise black unions. In the second place, the position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not specify that any person may be denied membership in any local church fellowship because of his race. Constitutionally, a black union conference would be defined by its regional churches and conferences, not by any provision requiring all black Seventh-day Adventists to belong.

But now it is time for all of us to stop playing church and to start living like we are the “royal and chosen priesthood” that we say we are. Too often

we stir our constituents into a distorted view of God's concern for them here and now by promoting a total view of his relevance for their lives in terms of the "other world" in the distant by-and-by. And too often we have apologized for exerting group pressure when we seek to relieve the oppression among us. This apologetic attitude must go. We dare not apologize for exerting group pressure, for we have been oppressed as a group, despite our individual qualifications.

We cannot recover the past. But, within the limits set by nature and history and our intelligence and resolution, we can make the future. We make the future either by default or on purpose. Since we help to make the future in any case, it is better to make it, not by letting things ride, but by having some idea of where things ought to go and doing whatever is possible to make them go in that direction.

As a church, we are plagued by the critical gap that exists between the nature of our witness and the caliber of our actions. Nowhere does this gap yawn more dangerously than when we try to face, or try not to face, the question of our living as brothers, black and white, within our own churches. The not-too-remote analogy between the Seventh-day Adventist Church organization and the American political organization, from local to national levels, is inescapable. At virtually every point where there are obstacles to desegregation within the church, one sees a parallel to familiar obstacles which he has encountered in the fabric of his own community.

The opportunity for leadership holds out the buoyant hope that solving the problem within the ranks of Adventism may point the way toward elimination of the nation's most corrosive social illness and toward a more healthy state of the national conscience.

Because of the many, many inequities that are apparent, we have opened the floodgates on ourselves. In short, the patterns of racism are so obvious in so many areas of church life and thought that many black Seventh-day Adventists are losing confidence in the commitments of the church to healthy human relations. Many black Seventh-day Adventists feel that the overt and covert support of a substantial number of white Adventists given to the philosophies projected by such men as Eric Hoffer, David Lawrence, and Paul Harvey make racism endemic to the Adventist way of life.

Consequently, the philosophy of separatism is gaining within our church as it has in secular circles. When we must admit to ourselves that we do not have the spiritual courage to come to grips with the problems that make mockery of our faith, then we may be admitting that our faith is a mockery.

III

To my white brothers, let me say that too long you have equivocated. The pattern of your response has been only to yield under pressure. Where are your hearts? Where are your consciences? Where are your souls? Have not yet the scales fallen from your eyes to see, from your minds to know, and from your hearts to experience that what blacks request is no more than you expect — as individuals, as churches, as local conferences, as union conferences, as committees, and as boards — for yourselves?

35

It may have been important for you to yield to the support of church opinion, or black protest sentiment, or the ideals of the American creed in the past, but of even more importance should have been your yielding to "thus saith the Lord." There are few biblical scholars who do not admit that the Bible does indeed talk about a *unity* that is incarnate, that must become tangible and find expression within this world. The language used by Paul to describe the church seems to support this position fully. In at least twelve separate passages he uses the analogy of a physical body to describe the church, usually with the members of the church represented by the working parts of the body.³

Now, a church is not an association of those Christians who happen to like each other and who can therefore set their own exclusive rules. When that happens, the church has not simply omitted a moral implication of the gospel — it has allowed a fundamental question to arise as to whether it belongs to the church of Jesus Christ. Trying to solve the race question by asking where people "feel at home" is no good. The church is not our club. It is God's holy instrument in which we have been permitted a place — but a place which has room only for God's task, and no room for our conditions and preferences.

For the church to turn its back on its most fundamental religious teaching — the "great commandment" of loving one another, however one may disguise the rhetoric to avoid admitting it — would seem a repudiation of the basic reason for the existence of the church. Without real integrity with respect to the basic religious purpose of the church, it is questionable whether such a religious institution can long endure! Certainly its moral and religious leadership would be greatly weakened.

Have we come to the point where, in these final hours of earth's history, we must admit to ourselves and to the world that in all things physical we shall be as the fingers are to the hand, but in all things philosophical we shall be one, as the hand is to the fingers? I believe that viewpoint is just as untenable today as was Booker T. Washington's position in 1895.

To my black brothers who fight the issue by supporting the idea of organizing black union conferences, let me say that I support the spirit of your concern for an effective program that will give our black brothers and sisters what they rightly deserve. We are in a black revolution in this country, and it's real. For the most part, I think that many of us would agree that the aims of the black revolution are quite legitimate.

The caution that must be observed, however, is in the area of strategies and tactics, for our cause is not secular but spiritual. There is a fine line in many instances, we would agree, but Christians have never endorsed the philosophy that the end justifies the means. In other words, we must be careful that our motives are correct. If we would overcome our obstacles, it can still be true today that "my strength is as the strength of ten, because my heart is pure."

The concept of black power and black revolution did not begin in the summer of 1966 with the desperate and anguished cry of those who participated in the James Meredith march for voter registration in Mississippi. It began in those early days on the plantation in the hearts of the oppressed who sang, "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave." The black revolution was in process when Frederick Douglass, that great black statesman, declared, "Our purpose here is neither to beg nor to borrow, but to state the determination of black men in America to exact from this nation not one whit less than our full manhood rights." In other words, the black revolution of today is building on a foundation that has already been laid.

I say that NAACP, CORE, SNCC, SCLC, the Muslims, and many others have contributed toward the gains, small or great, that have been made. It is a ridiculous affront to the mission and martyrdom of Martin Luther King to assess his program as having been visionary. I know that I for one am not too old to remember Jim Crow trains, buses, waiting rooms, and rest rooms; black and white water fountains; closed doors at hotels, motels, restaurants, and a whole bag of "black magic" — all designed to "keep us in our place." Perhaps those gains were small ones, but they were gains, nevertheless. Someone had to stick his neck out, and King did just that.

And so today, as in yesteryear, there is a small but determined cadre of black men and women who are dedicating their energies, and in many cases their lives, to the unfinished task of liberating black people from the psychological, cultural, social, and economic shackles that have rendered them powerless for centuries.

They are concerned with shattering the old icons of whiteness and rightness, of white sheep and black sheep, of white purity and black decadence —

with validating in the minds of black people regenerative black images and black models and a black perspective on the world. It is a just cause waged against the debilitating cycle of hope and despair that has characterized black life on this continent for four hundred years. Their task is monumental, and it is not made easier by the diversionary tactics of the game-players. It is imperative that the black community know the difference between the committed and the comedians.

IV

We cannot yield to the temptation of using secular means to accomplish spiritual ends. It is time for black and white brothers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to accept the commitment of *brotherhood* seriously. Let us implement our bold declarations. Let us admit the sins that have separated us. Let us rectify the inequities, and let us begin now. If we are not prepared to do so, then the establishment of black union conferences will forever haunt us for what we are — weak, vacillating, and unprincipled.

Therefore, I would urge our brothers, *black and white*, to accept these reforms immediately:

1. That the union conferences establish an equitable and uniform policy for the adjustment of departmental positions and committee and board assignments so as to reflect balanced black participation.

2. That the union conferences adopt a uniform and simplified procedure for transferring black ministers across local conference lines for pulpit assignments to white churches.

3. That economic sanctions be initiated against those church organizations that refuse to support the authority of the church in matters of race relations, since the church has never strictly supported the policy of "local autonomy."

4. That the church achieve racial parity in employment of blacks and whites, particularly in the educational, medical, and publishing fields.

5. That the church promptly appoint more blacks to union conference departmental positions and establish such guidelines as will enable these blacks to participate on a regular basis, so that they will be invited to serve the needs of the conferences and the churches (black and white) within the union.

6. That black representatives be appointed immediately on the General Conference level to serve in departments not now having black representation (as the Education, the Lay Activities, the Medical, and the Young People's Missionary Volunteer departments).

7. That a sum of \$5,500,000 be allocated for the black Seventh-day Adventists as restitution for the extent to which they and their ancestors were and have been robbed of their time, health, energies, and manhood and deprived of their education by this nation. The distribution of these funds should be apportioned as they are included in items 8 to 17 (following):

8. That a fund of \$2,000,000 be created to offer financial assistance to worthy black students who would be encouraged to engage in church employment on the completion of their college education.

9. That a fund of \$1,000,000 be established to offer financial assistance to those seeking aid to pursue their education on graduate or professional levels and that special attention be given to the needs of those going into medical and paramedical fields.

10. That \$1,000,000 be allocated to the regional conferences to stabilize their economic base.

11. That a reduction of seven percent in tithe percentages for the regional union conferences be granted.

12. That the Inner City Fund be increased from \$100,000 to \$250,000.

13. That a fund of \$250,000 be established to support black students who engage in the Student Missionary Program to promote an interest among black youth for future foreign service.

14. That a fund of \$250,000 be established to assist those black teachers already engaged in Seventh-day Adventist Church employment to pursue advanced study.

15. That the General Conference appropriate \$50,000 annually over the next five years in scholarship assistance to white students who would be recruited as students for Oakwood College, so as to frustrate the pattern that would suggest that Oakwood College is a segregated institution.

16. That a \$50,000 operating supplement be provided annually above the normal operating base increase to Oakwood College for five years to provide for a cushion that would meet the demands of any emergency that would arise.

17. That a \$25,000 operating appropriation be granted annually to Pine Forge Academy over the next ten years, so as to stabilize its economic base.

18. That a \$25,000 operating supplement be provided annually above the normal operating base increase to Riverside Hospital for five years to provide for a cushion to meet the demands of any emergency that would arise.

What is the rationale for making such requests? Seventy-four years ago, in 1896, Ellen White said that the black people are due a debt of love, and that God has ordained that restitution should be made. This is our great opportunity as a church today.

Where do we go from here? If our hearts are right, we must plan an effective strategy for racial desegregation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. On each church level considered, effective strategy will require a variety of actions that are interactive and mutually supportive. Included should be strategies (1) emphasizing the changing of attitudes and (2) emphasizing direct changes of social patterns and institutions through active intervention.

39

There is no valid ethical ground for categorical insistence on restricting strategy to techniques of "persuasion" and "education" in the removal of racial barriers in the church, notwithstanding the common assertions to the contrary. The very existence of such barriers is not ethical, and the racial composition of the membership and basis for participation in the church is not properly a matter requiring the consent of persons in the church.

The implied commitment to unity and harmony *above all else* has dangers. Too often the majority have yielded their convictions on race relations to the demand for unity and harmony, with the result that hard-core segregationists are able to define the nature of the unity. In short, efforts to change the status quo are interpreted as disruption of fellowship rather than as desirable creative innovation in harmony with the basic values of the church.

Those who have witnessed our avoidance of a serious program toward desegregation within the church claim that we have been deceptive and dishonest. Some have given up in despair to the point of rejecting the principle of an interracial community of brethren. Some among us wish to organize black union conferences. But others of us feel that we must caution against attempting to obliterate the trace of racial shame that might be lurking in our souls by embracing a kind of racial chauvinism — as if in reply to past exclusions (and often in response to present conditions) we will create our own patterns of exclusiveness.

Where do we go from here?

It is time now to have a dramatic confrontation with our consciences (with the Spirit of God within us) to the extent that God will work a revolution — not of rhetoric, but of righteousness (right doing) among us,

designed to enhance the achievement of a progressive Christian fellowship rather than a distorted racial isolationism born of the deluded wish to skirt scriptural injunctions for the sake of unity, harmony, self-determination, "advancing the cause," or whatever reason.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 LOUIS E. LOMAX, *To Kill a Black Man* (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing Company n.d.), pp. 162-163. (Read of Martin Luther King's Chicago experience.)
- 2 ELLEN G. WHITE, The Bible Provides Guiding Principles in Race Relations, *Review and Herald*, March 24 and 31, 1966.
- 3 See Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:16; Ephesians 1:23, 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 4:12, 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:19, 3:14; John 17 (stressing the unity of Christians).