

We SHOULD Be Involved in Politics

by Tom Dybdahl

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

William Blake, "Milton"

"Would to God all the Lord's
people were prophets."

Numbers 11:29

Seventh-day Adventism is an American religion. It was born, nurtured, and it came of age here, shaped wholly in American culture. Despite its wide spread, there is still remarkable uniformity among Adventists throughout the world. And today, with about one-fifth of the membership, Americans in America control the world church.

That is by no means all bad. Part of Adventism's genius was its reflection of America's best values and ideals: its energy and optimism and hard work. America provided a relatively peaceful base for the church to grow and expand, while maintaining a solid financial structure.

But to an apocalyptic body, close identification with any state is dangerous. A state seeks to

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build and maintain an earthly kingdom; apocalyptists look for a city whose builder and maker is God. A state uses earthly power, military might, to achieve its goals; apocalyptists depend upon divine intervention. In our case, close association with America has become a seductive liaison.

Recently, the metamorphosis of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its relationship to the American state has been examined historically.¹ But what we have not done is to ask what these changes have done to the soul of Adventism. For America cannot be transformed in Adventist picture rolls from a great and terrible beast to a gamboling little lamb without a corresponding change in the church's attitudes and beliefs. And that is just what happened.

In the beginning, Adventists saw the state as irrelevant. The world and its governments were passing away. Adventists were considered to be strange, otherworldly people. They had little concern for the state and its activities, and no desire to be involved with government.

By 1860, this view had shifted. The government was viewed as a once benevolent, but now corrupt, power. The church felt that its duty was to point out the sins of the state. The *Review and Herald* thundered against slavery and those leaders who tolerated it.

But the war passed, the church grew, and so

did its desire for acceptance. Jesus was coming soon, but He wasn't here yet, and there was the time being to deal with. So the great beast began to lose its horns, and the church became more tolerant of the state. In this century, that tolerance has become active affection.

The result is that in its life-style and outlook, Adventism has virtually become Americanism. We accept America's basic social, cultural and economic values. We support the status quo, favor conservative politics, and eagerly seek our share of America's wealth and power.

Why this eager embrace?

A major reason for our positive view of America is that it has "separation of church and state." We are free to practice and spread our religion as we see fit, without government interference. That is, indeed, a great blessing. And we are anxious to oppose any threat to this crucial principle, and to support a government that maintains it.

The problem, however, is that we have taken this principle too seriously. The constitution says simply: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The intent is clear: that the state should not have control over any church or its activities. But what has been read into this idea is something far broader, and far different.

Adventists—along with most American fundamentalists—not only accepted this principle, they accepted its converse (which did not logically follow): that the church should have nothing to do with the state or with its laws. Separation of church and state became separation of religion from politics. We arrived at a sort of gentleman's agreement, unspoken of course, that since the state had to leave churches alone, then churches should leave the government alone. Most politicians thought that was just fine. The church's work was to "preach the gospel" and "save souls," while the government took care of "politics." (These phrases are not caricatures. They are still employed regularly in discussions of this issue.)

But there are some serious problems with this neat view. It denies a basic reality of human existence. Our lives do not fit into totally separate slots; we cannot always make clear-cut distinctions between social actions, or religious

actions, or political actions. All our actions are a result of what we believe, and flow from our convictions. One of Adventism's most important insights is that man is a unity, a whole being. The body cannot be divided from the soul. Saying that the church should preach the gospel and not be involved in politics is a way of saying that the church should not concern itself with a major part of the daily lives of men and women. It is impossible and undesirable.

This assumption also led to the idea that while it might be all right for individual church members to be involved in politics, it was certainly no business of the church organization.

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This meant that the church not only failed to give its members concrete guidance on difficult moral issues, it also abandoned its role as the ethical leader of society. Further, it naively failed to recognize that much of the evil in modern society is bound up with powerful forces and systems—institutions—and that the church as an institution must stand over against these powers if it wishes to be heard.

Its brand of noninvolvement meant that the Adventist Church ended up giving tacit endorsement to whatever rulers or policies prevailed. Because, when it comes to history, nobody can just stand on the sidelines. We are all in a concrete historical situation, in a particular time and place, for better or worse. We cannot be neutral in the struggles that go on around us. To say nothing in the face of evil is to condone it. We can only pretend to be neutral.

Garry Wills aptly describes the kind of church-state relationship that has evolved from these beliefs: "We have, therefore, a very one-sided arrangement, based on mutual aggrandizement—the state will leave the church alone, so long as the church never criticizes state. Such criticism would be 'politics,' in which the church

should not meddle. But agreeing with the state—to congratulate and celebrate it—is not ‘politics.’ Thus is religion trapped, frozen in its perpetual de facto accommodation of power. . . . Religion is invited in on sufferance, to praise our country, our rulers, our past and present, our goals and pretensions, under the polite fiction of praying for them all. That is what Americans quaintly call ‘freedom of religion,’ and what the Bible calls idolatry.”²

But enough for description of the problem. What should we be doing? The church and the state have vastly different aims, and surely the church would be in trouble if it tried to do the work of the state. Just how should we be involved in politics?

It is generally agreed that the church should not get tangled up in partisan politics.³ It should not endorse political candidates, and exclusively support their efforts, or urge members to vote for specific people. It need not take a position on every bill or issue that comes before a legislative body. But between our noninvolvement and total immersion, there is a wide range of possibilities. And we begin to find our proper place when we ask why we should be involved at all.

We cannot take the gospel seriously without being involved in politics. It is not a matter of picking an issue we like, choosing to take a stand, or choosing not to take a stand. It goes beyond preference or inclination. It is a matter of deciding whether we shall be fully faithful to Jesus or not. We become involved in politics because if we are true to the gospel we are forced into it. We cannot live our beliefs without being involved.

How can we care for a person and have no concern about the laws that affect the life of that person in society? How can we care for the victims of injustice without caring about the system that created the injustices? It is hypocrisy to feed and clothe the poor while participating silently in the systems that make and keep them poor. How can we care about man without caring about his politics?

Yet, that is what we seem to do. When an apartment building across from a church I used to attend burned down, the members made heroic, self-sacrificing efforts to provide for the homeless. They displayed true Christian concern

for the victims of this disaster. But the church showed little interest when it was learned that the owner of the building—a wealthy developer—had ignored the city fire codes, and these violations had led to the fire. There was no effort on the part of the members to help bring him to justice, no attempt to make the city enforce its fire laws more strictly. In short, nothing was done to prevent more needless apartment building fires.

It is not a question of whether we should use “worldly power” or God’s power to accomplish our aims. We do not become involved with the world, with politics, primarily because of what we hope to accomplish in that sphere; we do not become involved because we think we can turn this world into God’s kingdom. The goal is faithfulness, not effectiveness. We get involved because God cares, and He asks His children to become involved. If we identify ourselves with Jesus, we must also identify ourselves with the poor and lonely and oppressed.

We who would be shaped by Christ have let ourselves be shaped by those who do not know Him. When something is labelled political, we accept that definition. And then, we refuse to get involved. It would sidetrack us from our mission. We do not stop to ask how we can express a concern or be involved in the fear of the Lord and in faithfulness to the gospel.

What I am trying to say is that many issues are not only political issues. They may indeed have a political nature, be debated in legislative bodies, or argued about by public officials. But many issues have a more important dimension—the human dimension. They involve the lives and fates of human beings—God’s creatures. And so, whatever else they may be, they are, indeed, the legitimate concern of Christians.

A good example is the Civil Rights activities during the last decade. This was, indeed, a hotly debated political issue. And so, all during the serious struggle of black people to gain the rights proclaimed in our constitution, this church refused to take an official, public position. We weren’t to involve ourselves in politics. But what was at stake was whether or not black people in America would be treated as human beings; whether this country would be a land of equal opportunity and equal justice, or whether it would not. Through it all, we offered no moral leadership. We kept silent.

Probably, this sad past would not be worth repeating if we had learned our lesson. But there is much evidence that we have not. Yes, the church has made some advances. But we are never at the forefront of loving all God's children, and treating them all alike. More often, we have been near the rear. We have literally been forced into taking more humane, more Christian, positions.

The early Adventists didn't suffer from this distorted view. This church was young when it faced the tough question of slavery. It would be hard to find a more political issue in American history. But under the conviction of the gospel, the early Adventists saw that it went much deeper than that; it was primarily a human issue. Millions of people were daily being brutalized, oppressed, destroyed. Church leaders did

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not care that the world called it political. They saw it for what it was, and refused to quietly ignore the slavery problem, or claim it was not their business.

It even became a church issue. No one could be an Adventist who held slaves, and we lost some members. Ellen White called slavery a “high crime,” and “a sin of the darkest dye.”⁴ She urged members to disobey the Fugitive Slave Laws, which required citizens to turn runaway slaves back to their masters.⁵ Her primary concern was to do what was right, to be faithful; not to be careful, noncontroversial and socially acceptable.⁶

The early Adventists did not spiritualize away Christ's proclamation of freedom to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those that are bound. They made it real, concrete.

We have lost this courage and understanding. We cannot see that part of the church's mission is to spend and risk for others, to identify with the victims of injustice and greed, to place the power and wealth of the church at the disposal of the poor and needy; or that in so doing we follow the example of our Lord, who poured out His life for the world although none were worthy.

Our present policy is that unless we are directly threatened as a church, we have nothing to say to government. We have sat quietly through wars, struggles for equality, mass starvation and torture, corruption and immorality in government—all under the guise of “not being involved in politics.” We are too busy “preaching the gospel.”

And our noninvolvement goes on. Consider the problem of torture, particularly torture of political prisoners. This is practiced extensively in China, the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, and in such diverse places as Chile, Uruguay, the Philippines, Indonesia, South Africa and Uganda. But in those countries where the Seventh-day Adventist Church is allowed to preach freely, and carry on its work, we have nothing to say about the denial of human rights and the systematic degradation of other human beings. Such actions would be meddling in politics, and might jeopardize our work. After all, Christians have been expelled from South Korea, and from Brazil (countries where we have very active churches), for daring to criticize the sins of the ruling powers.

But the question we have not faced is this: after we have silently acquiesced to the torture and death of innocent human beings, what gospel do we have left to preach? If we ignore the cries of the oppressed, the pleas of innocent victims, what does our good news mean?⁷ If the church does not have the courage of its convictions, if it cannot be Christian, what is the point of its existence?

John the Baptist's life and ministry stand in judgment on our silence. He was the forerunner of Christ, and a type of those who will prepare the way for the second advent. He had a very successful ministry. But he met an untimely end—he was beheaded—because he would not keep quiet about the political problems of his day.⁸ He could have reasoned that it was not his job to suggest a redistribution of goods, or to

point out specific immorality and wickedness in high places. He could have pointed out that it would jeopardize his work, which it certainly did. He could have said it would be just meddling in politics. But John understood the demands of the gospel, and he spoke out.

What I have been saying about being involved in politics for the sake of the gospel, and for the sake of others, is not radical. That it seems radical is a measure of how little understanding we have. America has successfully convinced us that government is basically good and benevolent that we need not—indeed, should not—have a concern for its activities.⁹

Ironically, the usual claim that the Adventist Church is not involved in politics is a false claim. We are involved in politics, but it is a highly selective involvement. There are two areas of concern: temperance and religious liberty. And both are sectarian issues. They show a primary concern for ourselves and our standards, rather than a concern for others.

It is unfortunate that this limited involvement is not seen as an outworking of the principle of concern for the lives of others. If it were, we

could then discuss particular issues, and whether they were legitimate concerns of the church or not. But we have opted to view the situation in a completely different way. These political activities are seen as *exceptions* to the ideal of noninvolvement. And noninvolvement remains the guiding principle.

If it is true that the gospel is continually at war with the world, that its aims and ideals and principles are contrary, we would expect to find a great tension between the church and surrounding society. In every sphere of life—economic, social, political—we would expect to find Seventh-day Adventist Christians questioning, opposing, showing new ways. But no, we find ourselves fitting in, going along, nodding our heads. We are fond of talking about how wicked the world is; we seldom wonder why we fit in so well.

It is time to reexamine our close and adoring relationship to the American state, and to ask whether a gospel that turns away from the concrete political situations of human beings and refuses to address them is any gospel at all. We can continue to ignore the world, using the self-righteous claim that we must “not be involved in politics.” But, at least, we should not be surprised that the world ignores us.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Jonathan Butler, *The Rise of Adventism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 173-206; and Ronald D. Graybill, *Insight*, November 30, 1971.

2. Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs*, (New York: Doubleday and Co. 1971), p. 260.

3. It is possible for the church to arouse needless controversy by being involved in partisan activities. We are a world church, and should not take the side of one country against another. But this does not free us from taking public stands on important moral issues; sooner or later we are bound to offend every earthly government if we do. The fact that we are a world church gives us an even better reason to take stands: we can be the salt of the earth everywhere.

4. See *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 1*, 264, 358 ff.

5. See *Testimonies for the Church, Volume 1*, p. 202.

6. On this issue, and other moral issues, Ellen White urged members to be involved. But she raised some questions about voting for political parties or individuals. (See FCE 475 ff.; 2SM pp. 336, 337) Today we tend to do the opposite; vote for individuals but not get involved with issues.

7. It is also worth asking if, after we have kept silence over the suffering of others, anyone will protest when we become the sufferers.

8. John's message was much more than a simple “Repent.” When he preached, and the people came and asked, “What should we do?”, he answered: “The man who has two shirts must share with him who has none, and anyone who has food must do the same.” (Luke 3:11, NEB) and John's judgment on Herod's adultery was a reminder that Herod's action had brought on war with his first wife's father, Aretas IV of Nabatea. According to Josephus, John was in prison because Herod feared he would start an insurrection. (*Antiquities*, xviii, 5.2.)

9. Another whole aspect of this problem is that our positive view of the state has served us badly in other countries. One article in this issue discusses the relationship of the German Adventists to the Nazi government during World War II. Having been taught an unquestioning acceptance of the powers that be, how could we expect our German members to see what was happening, and to suddenly stand up against the state?