

Celebrating the Adventist Experience

by Roy Branson

Whether this period in the life of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination will be regarded as a time of disaster or renewal depends on the membership as a whole. Now, certainly, is a time when all members who care deeply about their church must come to its assistance. When Adventists emerged from the agonizing uncertainty and internal debate associated with the Great Disappointment, they flung themselves across continents and oceans, taking the gospel in the first half of this century to virtually every known nation. Now that these many decades later we find ourselves also in crisis, with both our structure and our doctrine undergoing searching reappraisal, we can emerge from it to unite in a cause equally great: demonstrating in the Adventist way of life the meaning of the gospel for our technological, urban culture. But if that is to happen, Adventists must fuse out of their present debates a new expression of Adventism that not only reinvigorates the movement itself, but kindles the mind and spirit of our time.

Recent developments have been shocking. Major newspapers report that most of the unions and several conferences in North America invested funds (including trust

monies) in a business venture that has now entered bankruptcy. Several leaders of these unions and conferences are reported to have concurrently invested their own private funds in the same company, and serious questions are being raised concerning conflicts of interest. No doubt the implications for greater accountability by church officials to the laity will have to be explored.

Division

Whatever prove to be the consequences for policy of these financial tangles, recent theological clashes have already had a major impact. The dismissals of Desmond Ford and Walter Rea, the resignation under fire of Smuts van Rooyen from the religion department of Andrews University, and the firings and resignations of a significant number of young pastors have been met by immediate reaction. Several writings have drawn an opposition between what is called “traditional Adventism” and “evangelical Adventism.” Evangelical Adventists have formed over forty congregations called Gospel Fellowships, which hire their own pastors and meet in separate Sabbath morning worship services. The loss of talent from the denomination is appalling, and those not

directly involved find it reasonable to think that such tragic consequences could have been avoided.

However, it must be acknowledged that these conflicts arise from a serious underlying question: What is the essence and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination? A certain logic has driven Adventists to consider the nature of the church. Those emphasizing Christ's sacrifice on the cross as sufficient for salvation find offensive any view of a heavenly, investigative judgment that implies that Christ's death was not a completed work of redemption, but had to be supplemented by activities within the sanctuary in 1844. These members believe that if Ellen White did not always have an accurate, biblical view of salvation, then her humanity and limited authority in interpreting Scripture must be acknowledged.

On the other hand, there are those who see activities that began in 1844, in a heavenly sanctuary, as events necessary to the plan of salvation. For these members, the whole purpose of Mrs. White's ministry and of the Adventist movement is to testify to those events. The salvation of the world depends on this community of believers' accepting the unique role of communicating to all nations and peoples the significance of the investigative judgment.

One group asks whether the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is genuinely Christian. The other, whether it is truly Adventist; whether Seventh-day Adventists are the hinge of history. There are voices on both sides who agree that if the church fully acknowledged the death and resurrection of Christ as the divine act sufficient for salvation, it would sound the death knell of Adventism. Some evangelical Adventists believe Adventism would merge into those Christians who have gained a renewed appreciation of the gospel. Their most outspoken opponents in the church agree. Without the traditional understanding of the investigative judgment beginning in 1844, Adventism would lose its reason for being a distinct denomination.

But what if Adventists did agree that

Christ's death and resurrection were the sufficient and necessary acts of God guaranteeing the salvation of mankind? Would it not still be possible to affirm a unique and important role for the Seventh-day Adventist church?

One of the reasons for the present impasse is that both groups contending within Adventism are preoccupied with a single doctrine — atonement. But atonement is only one activity of God, one article of faith, however central, within Christianity. Once a person acknowledges Christ's atoning work and is justified, there is still a lifetime of enjoying the fullness of the gospel.

Just as Adventists do not separate the spiritual from the physical in human nature, so they do not isolate God as Savior from God as Creator and Sustainer of all life. All true Christians proclaim Christ as their Savior, but how is salvation to be expressed in the rest of life? It is in describing what follows justification that Adventism is distinctive. Whatever other distinguishing marks Adventism may proclaim, a unique contribution is the Adventist experience; not a way to achieve salvation, but an overflowing of the gospel in a distinctive way of life — a life of both celebration and service.

Celebration

The festival of the Sabbath frees Adventists from efforts to order and sustain their lives. At the end of each week, they acknowledge that their whole lives are a gift; they know as concretely as in the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper that their entire existence is the result of God's grace. In Sabbath worship they reenact the mighty acts of God. By knowing Sabbath renewal, culminating their week with joy in the completed work of Christ on the cross, they gain assurance of the final restoration that will culminate salvation history.

Justification and grace become warm and human in the ceremonies of Sabbath fellowship: the intellectual companionship of the Sabbath school class, the relaxed humor of families and friends gathered for the prolonged midday meal, the moment of meditation at sundown worship, and even the burst of vitality and excitement of Saturday night recreation.

Steeped in the amazing world of trumpets, horses, and vivid colors that are Daniel and Revelation, Adventists can sense the grandeur and scope of God's grace. If Adventists went further, incorporating into every worship service Scripture readings from the songs and poetry of such apocalyptic literature of the Bible, the imagination of Christians and even nonbelievers would be drawn into an experience of the transcendent: worship would not separate them from the real world, but lead them through a glorious creation to the very presence of God.

Service

How we celebrate affects how we act. Truly experienced, Sabbath joy interrupts and frees us from preoccupation with ourselves and liberates us for concern about others. Week by week we are reminded that the Sabbath commandment extended freedom to servants, strangers, and cattle — to all God's creation.

Because Adventists live in an apocalyptic world, resounding with the clash of powers, nations, and civilization, we celebrate a cosmic Redeemer and serve nothing less than the whole world. Because Adventists worship a God who will resurrect us individual and whole, we appreciate the body and commit ourselves to preserving its health. The future is as real and concrete as the skin we touch. In the Adventist experience the Christian hope is made flesh.

Early Adventists had an expansive understanding of the gospel and the Christian life. So, the entire United States developed an appetite for wholesome grains made into wheat and corn flakes, and defied years of habit to adopt lighter, more nutritious breakfasts. Millions nearly addicted themselves to the protein-rich peanut butter developed in Battle Creek.

A community whose imagination was formed by the images and beasts of Daniel and Revelation kept lively the conviction that Christ is not only Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the world, but is also its Judge. The founders of Adventism demanded that the government of the United States free the slaves, even at the cost of bloodshed. Later, Adventists attacked liquor interests for dev-

astating the lives of the weak.

Adventists, with the urging of Ellen White, showed the strength of their conviction that the gospel affects all life by establishing institutions to demonstrate its power. Since the turn of the century, Adventists have created the largest Protestant parochial school system in the world, and the largest Protestant healthcare system in the United States. Adventists send more physicians from the United States to other countries than do the next thirteen most active Protestant denominations and Catholic orders combined.

The health food industries started in Battle Creek are now worldwide. In Australia, the Sanitarium Health Food Company is second

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only to Kellogg's in breakfast cereal sales, and is using its profits to develop inexpensive, nutritious foods for people in poorer countries. Food is also the focus of the \$15 million annual budget of Adventist World Service (SAWS). Agricultural demonstration projects in Chad, Haiti, and Zimbabwe show government ministries how crops can be grown on previously barren land.

In the conflicts now dividing the church, Adventist institutions are often caught in the crossfire, condemned by both traditional and evangelical Adventists. Institutions are considered stubbornly irrelevant to atonement, the preoccupation of both groups. Certainly, salvation does not come from institutionalization. But Adventist institutions do reflect the fact that Adventists have attempted a distinctive way of expressing their salvation. Rather than condemnation, Adventist institutions deserve praise for nurturing and sustaining a community committed to service, as an essential part of the

Adventist experience. Properly understood, they can be launching stations from which Adventists penetrate the world around them.

Renewal

The reservoir of committed and trained talent, in both Adventist and secular institutions, is the denomination's greatest resource. The most serious cost of the debates currently absorbing Adventists is the lay professional who turns from questions to despairing withdrawal, and the persons in church institutions whose creativity withers into devising strategies for survival.

Consider what would happen if Adventists turned their talent and superb training from debating whether or not the sanctuary doctrine established that Adventism is the only true church, to making the Adventist experience not only reasonable, but memorable. Imagine the change within the church if Adventist scholarship and writing altered contemporary patterns of thought. Think how we would feel if musicians and artists, inspired by the Sabbath and the Apocalypse, created symphonies, paintings, and sculptures that moved whole cultures to experience the grandeur of God. If only we had writers who could inflame the imagination of the listless and bored in society with the drama of the Adventist experience. Within Adventism entire worlds collide: American Protestantism and world religions; constancy of conviction and revolutionary change; the transcendent and the immediate; the present, the past and the future. Adventism is an unexplored opportunity for authors able to recognize in the interior life of this peculiar people universal truth. Nikos Kazantzakis, finding the passion of Christ reflected in the Greek Orthodox community of tiny Crete, or Chaim Potok discovering the enduring value of tradition in the Hasidic Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn, should indicate to some Adventist genius the possibilities that are waiting in the life of Adventism.

Could not a generation of Adventists, despite the financial mishaps and theological brittleness of their elders, feel that God was

using the Seventh-day Adventist church if its members were involved in new, effective forms of service to the whole person? Would Adventists not be proud to be part of a movement that gave itself utterly for the fragile, the weak among God's creatures, even if it meant challenging principalities and powers?

For example, what if groups within Adventism cared enough about their fellow human beings in the United States to challenge a powerful industry that year after year insures that federal tax revenues will subsidize the cultivation of tobacco while at the same time the federal government cuts by two-thirds the funds for established programs informing the public about the direct links between smoking and 300,000 deaths each year in the United States from heart attacks (200,000), lung cancer (80,000), and other lung disease (34,000). Certainly our Adventist forefathers, who fought the slavery and alcohol interests, would be proud if their spiritual heirs helped break the power of forces systematically contributing to a third of a million fatalities from what the Surgeon General calls "the single most preventable cause of death" in America.

The besetting sin of Adventism today is preoccupation with itself. Some Adventists speak from within Adventism to other Adventists in order to preserve the purity of the denomination. Other Adventists adopt terminology from outside Adventism to make Adventism Christian. Perhaps both have their place. But what is desperately needed are people who speak distinctively and movingly from within Adventism to the larger community; voices who, from the core of Adventist particularity, express a universal message for our time; people who allow the power of the gospel to challenge those who oppress the vulnerable.

We believe the Seventh-day Adventist community is an instrument by which God loves humanity, and that He will be able to use it even more powerfully in the future than He has in the past. But first, we will all have to recognize that who wins the battle to lead the church is not as important as whether, through its embodiment of the gospel, the church leads the world.