
Toward an Adventist Ethic

by James Walters

Adventists often end their prayers with a plea for the hastening of Christ's return and the ending of life on this sinful world. Adventists, indeed, interpret nearly all their doctrines in terms of the Second Coming, and because of this, it is understandable that their ethic is also oriented toward the consummation of human history. This compelling sense of urgency has been so strong in Adventist history that the traditional Adventist ethic has understandably been: Act so as to promote the Second Coming.¹

Because Adventists keenly anticipate a soon-coming, perfect world, they are typically not so concerned with how persons ought to relate to one another here and now, but with how to reach future goals or ends. An ethic of ends, to which Adventists have traditionally adhered, is one of two dominant ethical theories. In judging the rightness or wrongness of an act, an ethic of ends, or teleology (derived from the Greek word *telos*, or end), emphasizes the intended goal or con-

sequence of the contemplated action. The major competing theory of ethics emphasizes present duty, or deontology (derived from the Greek word *deon*, or duty), regardless of the ends realized.

The traditional Adventist ethic is inadequate because it is not clear who should benefit from the fulfillment of the Second Coming, and because there has been inadequate reflection on the means proper to the promotion of the Second Coming. There are three potential human beneficiaries of the traditional Adventist ethic: The Adventist individual, the Adventist church, and the universal community. Of course, the three choices are not exclusive. An act can extend into increasingly wider concentric circles.

The person who lives his life by the first alternative chooses a view which is labeled, according to ethical theory, "ethical egoism." Even when the end sought is as commendable as the Second Coming, if a person has himself exclusively in mind as the beneficiary, he is an ethical egoist. I am reminded that one of my former parishioners once blurted out, "I'm in this thing for eternal life, and I will do anything it takes to get it." Such exclusive focus on self is contrary to the spirit of Christianity and to no less an

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authoritative voice within Adventism than Ellen White. The hearts of some people, she stated, “are not moved by any deep sense of the love of Christ, but they seek to perform the duties of the Christian life as that which God requires of them in order to gain heaven. Such religion is worth nothing.”²

A person who makes ethical decisions oriented only to the good of his “in-group” or denomination follows the second alternative, an ethic of corporate egoism. This form of egoism is more insidious because, in serving the ends of the group, one suffers little of the guilt associated with serving exclusively private interests. Reinhold Niebuhr quotes the Italian statesman Cavour as saying, “If we did for ourselves what we do for our country, what rascals we would be.”³ Just as a nation and its citizens can confuse national interests with those that are ultimate, so a denomination and its members have a temptation to mistake its interests for ultimate concerns.

Regrettably, the Adventist church has not been free from this temptation. For example, the Adventist interest in religious liberty originally came from concern about protecting our own religious interests, not from universal concern that human beings, by virtue of being human, have the inalienable right to autonomy of religious practice.⁴

If personal egoism and corporate egoism are inadequate, the answer must be found in the third alternative: enlarging the circle of concern to include everyone. Such a view is called ethical universalism. Surely the Adventist denomination has seen itself as ethically universal; as promoting the greatest good — eternal life — for the greatest number — the universal community of mankind.

Historically, Adventism has assumed a distinctly spiritual mission to prepare the “remnant” people for the second Advent. Consequently, the “end” of evangelism was so all-compelling and more thought was given to the efficiency than to the morality of the means. But in addition to the question of who should benefit from the realization of the Second Coming, there is the question of appropriate and inappropriate means to use in promotion of the “end.” The question is

whether the end justifies the means. In the minds of some Adventist thinkers, the traditional ends orientation has been found to be incomplete and is being supplemented by a duty-oriented emphasis.

This increased concern for not only the value of ends, but also for duties concerning means, can be illustrated by the denomination’s involvement in health care. Historically, Adventists undertook health care primarily because it was an effective entering wedge for Adventist evangelism.⁵ Today, Adventist health institutions are not creating the large numbers of converts envisioned by earlier Adventists. Nevertheless, Adventist hospitals are respected in their communities for exhibiting exemplary Christian attitudes in their caring for the sick. As one Adventist clergyman, now working in a denominational hospital ministry, put it, “I used to worry about being successful; now I am committed to being faithful.” Such a duty-oriented emphasis is not in opposition to the traditional key doctrines of the church, but it calls into question the sufficiency of the traditional Adventist ethic rooted so deeply in the promotion of the eschaton.

Whereas the traditional ends-oriented ethic is directed toward the Second Coming, an ethics of duty is concerned with respecting what the Sabbath celebrates — God’s creation — which He sustains here and now. The fundamental Christian conviction that God is creator makes Christian ethics possible. Adventism’s stress on the angel’s message in Revelation 14:7 provides a special mandate for deriving ethics from the order of God’s creation: “Worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water.”

In the original creation story, God looked over His creation and declared the created order “good” (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and finally “very good” (verse 31). At the end of creation week, God’s purposes for His creation had been realized — it existed in its own right and was good. God’s creation was an end in itself — not deriving goodness from some other, external source. The Sabbath, a particular emphasis of our denomination

within Christianity, is a celebration of the inherent goodness of God's creation, of its not merely being valued for achieving some other good end.

Certainly the culmination of creation was the Creator's calling into existence human beings with inherent worth and the freedom to choose for or against God. So sacred was the autonomy of humanity that God allowed the Fall rather than sacrifice the integrity of the elevated beings He had created. Achieving even laudable ends does not justify compromising our duty to respect human beings and their autonomy. God continued to regard human life after the Fall as so

free-floating and arbitrary, but part of a divine creation that places autonomous humanity at the apex of God's moral order.⁶ The Sabbath provides time for celebrating God's creation and remembering our duty to respect the creatures He has brought into existence.

God not only created a humanity that continues to have inherent worth in God's eyes, but He sustains a consistent moral sensibility among human beings.⁷ The revelation of the Bible and human reflection on life both establish that humanity consistently exhibits the following moral sensibilities: 1) we ought to promote societal well-being or happiness; 2) we ought to act according to basic societal justice; 3) we ought to recognize each person's autonomy. These can be described as "near absolute" moral duties of, respectively, beneficence, justice and autonomy.

It is wrong to violate these duties because they emerge from the nature of human existence as God created it. Of course, how those moral duties are applied in specific times and places will vary. But that variation need not and should not ignore the sense of duty God has implanted in his human creation.

Duty-oriented ethical considerations must be given their full due. Human beings, even after the Fall, have a sense of oughtness. If they did not, humanity would be beyond the realm of responsibility, and hence of being able to be judged. A duty-oriented creation ethic, then, is necessary. However, this in itself is not sufficient for a complete ethic within the Adventist church.

Both duty and ends-oriented moral reasoning are needed, since both emphases are valid. Seventh-day Adventists must not abandon the ends-oriented element in ethical thinking. Our God's desires for His creation are only served as "[His] will is done on earth as it is in heaven," and that will cannot be fully realized until the kingdom comes. Our actions must continue to be made with one eye fixed on that goal of the Kingdom. But not exclusively.

A duty ethic and an ends ethic can be drawn together in the life of the Seventh-day Adventist church. We believe that the kingdom of God is not only a goal where the redeemed receive all the blessings they have

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See 2 Great Principles, p. 10.

inherently worthy that He sacrificed Himself for its sake.

Because Jesus was in accord with this elevated view of personhood, He saw the Sabbath as important, but even that was not an end in itself. When Jesus was queried by the Pharisees about His disciples' Sabbathbreaking, He talked about the Sabbath, and by extension all law, as conveying respect for persons as ends in themselves, not to be used as instruments to achieve some other, greater good.

The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, and he and those with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:24-27).

Christian norms and directives are not

hoped for.⁸ It is also a community where God's creatures forever maintain their moral autonomy to decide for or against Him;

where the actions of all continue to be governed by the duty to treat others justly and with respect.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In putting forward this end-oriented ethical model, I do not mean to deny other ethical elements in traditional Adventism. David Johnson, writing in the *Collegiate Quarterly* (vol. 4, no. 2, April-June 1981, pp. 50, 51), adequately documents the keen moral concern over slavery shown by Adventist pioneers Ellen and James White, Uriah Smith and J. N. Andrews. The second section of this essay will argue that, in addition to the focus on consequences, Adventism should foster an emphasis on intrinsically right actions. However laudable the latter is, it has not been determinative in Adventist history.

2. *Steps to Christ*, p. 44. A more enlightened form of ethical egoism could be argued. The rationale would focus on the psychological observation that every act one performs is, at its basis, self-interested. Regardless of whatever one may accomplish for others — or even God Himself — all persons act with the interest of self-benefit. Bishop Butler conclusively answered this sophisticated form of egoism 250 years ago by demonstrating from human experience that there are at least some actions which are done by the agent whose object is not the benefit of oneself. Nevertheless, Butler agrees that self-concern is a strong component of human existence, and he saw it as a *healthy* concern. He argued, “the thing to be lamented is not that men have so great regard for their own good or interest in the present world, for they have not enough; but, that they have so little to the good of others.” *Fifteen Sermons*, published at the Rolls Chapel (London 1926, from the preface).

3. *Nature and Destiny of Man*. (New York: Charles Sons, 1964), New York, I, 209.

4. The church's religious liberty interest is considerably more “mature” (less egocentric?) today. The Adventist appeal to the courts in behalf of the Amish people's right to their distinctive lifestyle is well known. In an editorial in *Liberty*, Roland Hegstad mentions a

“sad” story about the Idaho state penitentiary. Roman Catholic priests and Jewish rabbis were ordered to stop giving inmates wine as part of holy communion and passover services, respectively. The editorial concludes: “might as well confess that we're advocates of unfermented-grape-juice-for-communion brigade. And childhood temperance pledges of total abstinence exert a strong pull. But so do our matured concepts of religious liberty (what about it, you *Listen* staffers — in this case wouldn't a little wine be good for the conscience's sake?).” *Liberty*, vol. 74, no. 4 (July-Aug. 1979), italics added.

5. See Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1963), pp. 25-28.

6. In *Eschatology and Ethics*, Carl Braaten argues for an eschatological ethics which has *agape* for its contents. Although Braaten never refers to creation, his ethic is quite this-worldly and does assume what I have argued is the basic meaning of creation for Christian ethics: “the power of this future (ethic) does not seduce those who love it to leave the world; rather, it invites them to direct their love of God back into the world, to care for the earth and all His living creatures” (p. 12).

7. The Apostle Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and a host of other thinkers in the Christian tradition have appealed to a basic moral continuity in human existence. Contemporary theological ethicist James Gustafson has especially influenced me.

8. It could be argued that the content I have developed as a creation ethic might just as well have been developed as a kingdom ethic, with the added benefit that the traditional Adventist pure teologic emphasis is left intact. This reasoning could not hold because the normative content ascribed to mice in the kingdom is not theological in character but rather duty-oriented, having its foundation in the created order of reality.