
Renewing the Adventist Social Vision

by Gerald Winslow

A religious movement that grows beyond sectarian seclusion but fails to find a modern, prophetic vision is doomed to worldliness. Seventh-day Adventism is facing this prospect.¹

Today society needs prophets and prophetic movements to challenge those who oppress others. As in the time of the Good Samaritan, bandits of all sorts exploit our society. They discriminate unfairly and rob people not only of material goods, but also of their sense of self-worth. They enrich themselves at the expense of those who are ill, weak or vulnerable. The exploitative practices of the tobacco industry and its political allies, described by other authors in this issue of *Spectrum*, constitute an especially destructive example of social irresponsibility. Adventists who wish to maintain their prophetic identity should be eager to join others who oppose such social injustice.

Early on, Adventists struggled against slavery and for temperance.² Adventist stands for religious liberty and against mandatory labor union membership are well known. And Adventist non-combatancy, though far from consistent, has at times been heroic. Adventism's traditional commitments to freedom of conscience appear laudable and worthy of further affirmation.

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But relatively few issues have prompted Adventists to seek change in social institutions. Moreover, evidence of Adventism's commitment to human equality is often lacking. Indeed, it might even be charged that the church's selection of social issues in recent decades says more about the particular needs and interests of Adventists themselves than it does about a principled vision of a more humane, equitable and peaceable society. What is worse, on some issues such as racial and sexual justice and

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economic responsibility, the church seems to have waited for the prodding of secular institutions, including courts, before adopting positions it should have taken on principle. As Tom Dybdahl has said, Adventism is "never at the forefront of loving all of 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."³

To the extent that this indictment is correct, it illustrates more than a failure to make Adventist theology practical. It reveals a desperate need to develop a coherent social ethic within Adventism.

The church's social vision is shaped by its interpretation of founding documents, including, for Adventists, the Bible and the works of Ellen White. Other forces are also important. Unfortunately, one such influence for a large proportion of the membership (at least in North America) is political conservatism. There is no logical necessity requiring the identification of a conservative Adventist theology with conservative political, social and economic views. Nevertheless, it would appear that strong psychological and sociological forces tend to produce just such an identification. Even among Adventists who consider themselves progressive on religious issues, one often encounters a pervasive political conservatism that resists changes furthering social and economic justice.

If we are to avoid a slide into secular

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accommodation, our social ethic must be rooted in Scripture. And the Bible leaves no doubt that the fundamental source and shape of Christian ethics is Jesus Christ and how he has made God's love real to us. For Christians, morality does not begin with one or more normative statements, however general or specific. Rather, Christian morality begins with a personal, saving relationship with the incarnate God. Of the many biblical references to this foundation, none is clearer than these seven words: "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).⁴ The good news of God's gift of love and for-

givenness should precede all teachings of obligation or calls to virtue. With the gospel accepted, our love is prepared to follow the pattern of God's love for us. As Paul puts it: "Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:1, 2).

The reality of God's love awakens us to a vision of social responsibility as soon as we understand that this love is limited neither to ourselves nor to some special few. In God's love, every person counts. The impartiality of God's care is one of the central themes of Scripture. The God of the Bible shows no partiality:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

If each Christian related to only one neighbor at a time, the concept of impartiality would be of limited importance. But love must find expression within the fabric of social relationships. And in the setting of social institutions, we must assess the competing claims of many neighbors. Thus, the social actions of impartial love are best understood as acts of justice or fairness. In the words of theologian Paul Ramsey, justice is "what love does when it is confronted by two or more neighbors."⁵

Perfectly just solutions for the problems of conflicting human claims can be difficult, often impossible to specify. However, biblical justice always motivates us to meet human needs on the basis of human equality. Even when we do not know how to accomplish perfect justice, we should be able to discern and oppose patently unjust and destructive systems. In the millenium, we may expect perfect justice. Meanwhile, we must work against the most obvious injustices. If we see thousands of people

maimed or killed because others drive drunk, if we see people die of cancer or heart disease because tobacco conglomerates promote smoking, our sense of justice should be offended. Even if we cannot set forth completely just solutions, we should know, at least, the direction in which biblical justice points. That direction is toward human equality. Every person's well-being is as important as every other's. All unjustified partiality should be opposed.

Because this concept of justice emphasizes meeting human needs, it requires a strategic concern for the poor, the weak and the vulnerable—not because God loves the poor more, but because they are the least likely in any society to receive justice. Thus, the priority given the poor and oppressed is not a denial of human equality but its affirmation. The justness of any society can be

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measured by the way it treats those whose vulnerability make them the most likely victims of unfair treatment.

Christian opposition to social injustice is not optional. Indeed, so important is the work of fighting oppression and seeking justice, that God finds worship and sacrifice unaccompanied by such work to be an abomination.

When you spread forth your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression
defend the fatherless,
plead for the widow

(Isaiah 1:15-17).

Caring for the needs of individuals includes reform of the social conditions and institutions that cause those needs. Christian love for the unemployed neighbor, for example, must include efforts to change the social structures that may keep that person jobless. And true compassion for the person who develops lung cancer as the result of smoking cigarettes should inspire a willingness to challenge those social institutions that, for economic gain or political favor, use powerful tactics to entice people to smoke. Care for individuals simply cannot be isolated from concern for the social environment. Theologian Stephen Charles Mott aptly illustrates the point with his question: "If every time the Good Samaritan went down that road from Jerusalem to Jericho, he found people wounded and did nothing about the bandits, would his love be perfect?"⁶

Adventism has a mission to oppose the bandits that prey on the vulnerable. Its message was not designed for worldly compromise. For a "remnant" people, acceptance of the gospel in its fullness will include working against the injustices of the present social order. Work for justice inevitably will take the followers of Jesus into many realms of social life, including such social institutions as health care systems, courts, schools and legislatures; it will sometimes take us into active campaigns to restrain the oppressor. In these settings, we as a prophetic people must pray for, speak for, vote for and often protest for social justice. In light of the imperatives of Isaiah 1, we cannot do less.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Many observers, including some Adventist leaders, have commented on the dangers Adventism faces as it gradually moves away from sectarianism. Such concern was expressed, for example, by Robert Pierson in his last official address as president of the General Conference. After outlining the initial phases of typical sectarian development, Pierson offered this description of what is likely in the sect's fourth generation: "[T]here is much machinery; the number of administrators increases while the number of workers at the grass-roots level becomes proportionately less. Great church councils are held to define doctrine. More schools, universities, and seminaries are established. These go to the world for accreditation and tend to become secularized. . . . Attention is given to contemporary culture, with an interest in the arts: music, architecture, literature. . . . The group enjoys complete acceptance by the world. The sect has become a church!" Pierson followed this analysis with what may seem a surprising appeal: "Brethren and sisters, this must never happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church! This will not happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church." Though he seemed to affirm that only the subtle first steps had been taken, Pierson apparently considered the Adventist evolution away from sectarian characteristics and toward cultural accommodation to be both regrettable and preventable. Robert H. Pierson, "An Earnest Appeal From the Retiring President of the General Conference," *Review and Herald*, 155 (October 26, 1978), p. 10.

For a scholarly discussion of the sectarian development of Adventism see Bryan Wilson, "Sect or Denomination: Can Adventism Maintain Its Identity?" *Spectrum*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1975), pp. 34-43. See also Charles Teel, Jr., "Withdrawing Sect, Accommodating Church, Prophesying Remnant: Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Adventism," unpublished paper presented to the Theological Consultation for Seventh-day Adventist Administrators and Religion Scholars, Glacier View, Colorado, August 1980.

2. For a description of early Adventist social involvement see Jonathan Butler, "Adventism and the American Experience," in Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism*, pp. 173-206. See also Roy Branson, "Ellen G. White—Racist or Champion of Equality?" *Review and Herald*, 147 (April 9, 1970), pp. 2, 3; "Slavery and Prophecy," *Review and Herald*, 147 (April 16, 1970), pp. 7-9; "The Crisis of the Nineties," *Review and Herald*, 147 (April 23, 1970), pp. 4, 5.

3. Tom Dybdahl, "We SHOULD Be Involved in Politics," *Spectrum*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (March 1977), p. 36.

4. Bible texts in this article are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

5. Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950; reprinted ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 243.

6. Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 58.