

The Chastening of A White Liberal

A self-proclaimed Adventist “political activist” says government can’t restore moral values and racial harmony.

by *Reo M. Christenson*

IN LIGHT OF THE LOS ANGELES RIOTS AND SUBSEQUENT Reginald Denny trial—and the Monday morning quarterbacking these events produced—it seems a good time to reconsider the responsibilities of Adventists and their church toward the inner-city poor.

What happened in the Los Angeles riots can be seen, in part, as a hostile reaction to a pervasive racism evidenced by the beating administered by white police officers and the subsequent decision of a white jury—actions that appalled even the majority of whites. Similarly, the riots can be seen as an outlet for the resentment felt by some blacks toward Asian merchants in the South Central area. Mostly, though, it seems the riots were a chilling example of sheer opportunism—lawless individuals taking advantage of an overcharged atmosphere to revel in an orgy of destruction. If this was “righteous rage,” it

made no sense whatever to vent it on innocent black and Korean store owners, most of whom, no doubt, also disapproved of the beating and the verdict.

Racism, of course, is prevalent in America, as it is in every country where significant minorities exist. But the rioting in South Central seems to reveal more about the unrestrained hostility of the underclass than it does about the pervasive racism of the majority. Although commentators repeatedly urged that rioters be viewed with “sympathy and understanding,” common sense suggests that that is hardly the appropriate response to any group run rampant.

Growing Up Liberal

I should say, at this point, that liberal responses to the situation would, typically, have appealed to me. Although a moral conservative, I could be labeled an unorthodox political liberal. An academic for almost 40 years, at Miami University in Ohio, I have

Reo M. Christenson is an adjunct professor of political science at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. He is the author of a popular political science textbook, and his byline has appeared in the Christian Century and The New York Times.

taught a course on national issues and written extensively on the subject. I have been a political activist since the early 1940s, when, as a soldier in the Harbor Defenses of San Diego, I openly opposed concentration camps for the Nisei. Later, as a professor, I was an active opponent of McCarthyism, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the Vietnam War. I supported the Great Society program, and was involved in the so-called Mississippi Freedom project. I tend to vote Democratic for one major reason: Jesus identified with the poor, the lowly, and the oppressed, whereas the Republican party identifies with the comfortable and the rich.

I still believe that, historically, government enterprises have sometimes provided fruitful results. Food stamps are an example. Although it is undoubtedly true that some beneficiaries of food stamps waste their money on junk foods, soft drinks, and pastries, there is widespread agreement among students of poverty that there is much less hunger in America today than before food stamps arrived. Furthermore, almost half of those benefiting from food stamps are children.

Social Security, too, greatly lessens the sting of poverty in America by providing retirement benefits for millions who would never have been able, or willing, to save adequately for retirement without the program. (It should be noted that Social Security pays out far more than the elderly contributed.)

Similarly, Medicare prevents millions of elderly persons from falling into poverty, and Medicaid allows the poor access to health care. This, in particular, is important as physicians and hospitals are increasingly reluctant to serve non-paying patients. The "Thousand Points of Light" was a sound idea as far as it went, but one that had severe limitations in dealing with poverty in the inner city.

It would seem, then, that if the government seeks to provide greater equality, more justice, and better opportunities for realizing the

American Dream, the church should formally endorse governmental efforts toward that end and urge cooperation with them. Unfortunately, the issue is not that simple.

The Chastening

Despite my liberal inclinations over the years on many public issues, these days I am a chastened liberal. The repeated failure of federal programs designed to help the poor has dampened my enthusiasm for governmental initiatives, and, similarly, lessened my support for a more active supporting role for the church.

While I still do not subscribe to the "government is the problem, not the solution" school of thought, neither do I believe that government involvement is necessarily the cure for our social ills. Good intentions are not enough to ensure that governmental efforts to reduce poverty will work. Social scientists these days are painfully aware of the "unintended consequences" of governmental action, and study of recent history can have a sobering effect on idealistic reformers, including today's dwindling crop of liberals.

Slum clearance and urban renewal were all the rage in the 1950s. The theory was that by bulldozing the slums and replacing them with public housing, the morale boost to the poor would encourage them onward and upward. By now, most readers are probably familiar with the shambles that public housing has often become, and the drug trades that flourish there. Even in terms of housing supply, these programs resulted in fewer housing units available for low-income families than before.

The "War on Poverty" was an ambitious and multi-faceted program. It included the Job Corps, still in operation (to provide young men and women with remedial education, vocational training, and minimum social skills);

the Neighborhood Youth Corps (to provide summer jobs to unemployed youth); VISTA (the domestic alternative to the Peace Corps); adult education; conventional job training; legal aid; consumer education; job information services; family planning; Upward Bound (to encourage and help the poor to attend college); and Operation Headstart (to help preschoolers from low-income families enter the first grade with a learning readiness equivalent to that of middle-class kids). The program, as a whole, was designed to help people become more self-supporting, not to make them comfortable on welfare.

But the "War on Poverty" was not very successful, for a number of complex reasons. Except for a few elements, it was gradually phased out—partly because the Vietnam War elbowed it aside, partly because of mismanagement in a number of cities, and partly because it couldn't cope with the deepest roots of poverty. These roots were fixed in family environments unfavorable to the development of young people with sound values and good personal habits.

It was suggested that busing poor black children into predominantly middle-class, white schools would expose these children to good teachers, good libraries, good facilities, and a good educational environment. The study habits, values, and behavior of middle-class children would rub off on their underclass counterparts. This, the theory went, was the way toward a truly integrated society, with racial prejudice fading as students of different color and class learned to reject stereotypes.

It was heart-breaking, but black students didn't raise their test scores, disciplinary problems increased, racial hostility rose, "tracking"

systems reproduced segregation within the schools, black self-esteem probably declined, and "white flight" began. Busing was more successful in some cities than others, but this idealistic reform never came close to meeting its proponents' expectations.

Because some states are less affluent than others, reformers urged federal educational aid on a large scale—including aid apportioned according to the number of children from lower-income families in school districts. It sounded sensible and fair, not to mention humanitarian, but educational test scores failed to respond, despite more equalized budgets. Indeed, no consistent correlation has ever

been found between per pupil spending and educational achievement.

The Small Business Administration was designed to help entrepreneurs, especially minorities, get an economic foothold in the business world through low-interest loans at rates lower than banks

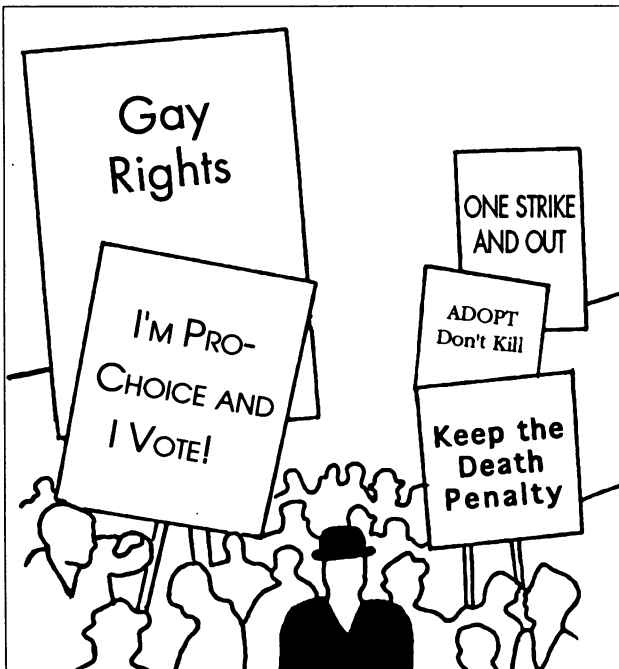
could offer and assuming risks that banks were unwilling to take. Almost all disinterested analyses, however, rate the program as a mixed blessing at best, with a high rate of loan defaults and mediocre results in general. The Small Business Administration has often been targeted for extinction by budget critics, but sympathy for potential black entrepreneurs has kept it alive, despite its dubious record.

Most job-training programs have been equally unimpressive. As with almost any program, first-class leadership has brought success, and these occasional successes have been cited as "proof" that the programs work. Unfortunately, first-class leadership is at a premium, and without it, the majority of

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results have been disappointing.

Affirmative action, similarly, was supposed to ensure fair play and improve educational and economic opportunities for minorities—especially blacks. Whether it has been a constructive approach is furiously debated. Its benefits mostly go to promising women and minorities who don't need a break in today's climate. Ghetto blacks, for example, are rarely assisted, and it has left some successful minorities uneasily wondering if they have really earned coveted positions or whether they are the beneficiaries of a paternalistic policy. It denies equal opportunity to bright, hard-working Asian students—and many others—who seek admission to good colleges, and it is fostering a growing bitterness between the races. The jury is still out, perhaps, but those who prefer a policy based on equal treatment without regard to gender or ethnicity make a very respectable case. Champions of affirmative action should more readily admit that many thoughtful, intelligent men and women who care deeply about equality—including significant numbers of minority professionals—do not believe affirmative action is consistent with the Constitution or some of the



best American traditions.

Despite various poverty programs, the problems of the underclass are as severe as ever. Drug abuse is rampant, young black males commit almost half of the nation's reported blue-collar crimes, inner-city unemployment is high, educational progress has been minimal, welfare rolls have grown rather than shrunk, teenage sexual pathology has steadily worsened, single-parent families proliferate, and fathers increasingly refuse to accept responsibility for their children.

The Reagan-Bush years made substantial cuts in programs affecting the inner-city poor, but few respected students of the problem believe those cuts primarily account for the dismal condition of the inner cities.

In fact, the efforts of Reagan's most active lieutenant, Jack Kemp, secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, produced little of note. Kemp created some 600 urban enterprise zones in 38 states. He thought that if federal taxes in these downtown areas were reduced or eliminated, and other incentives were introduced, capital would "flood the inner city." But a reduction of taxes could not override what business perceives as disadvantages to inner-city investment. Namely:

- (1) It's cheaper to buy and develop unoccupied land in the suburbs than to level existing structures and build suitable facilities in the cramped space of the city;
- (2) anticipated levels of vandalism dictate high insurance rates;
- (3) management and employees will be reluctant to work in inner-city plants, particularly at night, because of the threat of crime in the area;
- (4) the available workforce is regarded as less educated, less skilled, and less reliable than in other locales (this explains why the Japanese do not invest in the inner city);
- (5) new or expanding corporations prefer to invest in the suburbs for aesthetic, as well as practical, reasons—pleasant settings,

less traffic congestion, more parking space, and spacious surroundings appeal to employer, employee, and customer alike. Although, in an ideal world, corporations would brush aside these concerns and invest because of a highly developed social conscience, they have not done so.

Keeping a New-Style, Liberal Faith

Conservatives might stop at this point, confident they had demonstrated that government is wasteful, ineffectual, and possibly even harmful when it administers social programs. But there is more to be said before drawing too many sweeping negative conclusions. I am chastened, but I am still a liberal who believes government can, and must, find ways to help the truly poor.

Homelessness has proved a baffling problem to several administrations, but some things can be done. Since more than three-fourths of the homeless are alcoholics, drug addicts, mentally or emotionally impaired, there is no doubt that some should be returned to institutional care. This is hardly a comprehensive solution, though. An estimated \$20 billion is needed to halt the deterioration of our 1.4 million public-housing units. Renovating these is much less costly than building new units, and it would preserve one component of low-income housing for which there is no ready substitute. Helping the residents manage, police, and maintain these units while gradually acquiring ownership might also be helpful, although no one knows how well this would work on a large scale. Continuing the policy of allowing the poor to select the housing of their choice, where adequate housing is available but unused, has considerable merit. And encouraging the construction of more privately built low-income housing, through low interest, federally secured loans

and reduction of red tape, is also recommended.

Operation Headstart isn't the panacea many reformers believe it to be, but it is still our best choice for dealing with the educational deficiencies of children from many underclass homes. It's the only way to expose these children to an educational environment similar to that of most middle-class families—one in which parents use proper English and pronunciation, patiently answer questions, read to children, give them educational games, and so on.

Since only about one-third of all children from underclass homes are enrolled in Headstart programs, raising enrollment will be costly. Since the average pay in a Headstart center is only about \$12,000, there will be additional expense for hiring competent teachers. An upgraded and expanded Headstart may be our best bet for helping the children of the poor.

Almost every student of poverty agrees that there should be better prenatal and postnatal care for low-income, pregnant women, and that this costs far less over the long run than withholding the money. More aggressive information campaigns are needed, though, to persuade pregnant women to take advantage of this care. France actually pays pregnant mothers \$34 per month if they make four prenatal visits to a physician.

More money for immunization programs is also needed. Far too many children from low-income homes are not receiving this protection, and both they and the taxpayer suffer from this shortsightedness.

More resources must be provided for educating the underclass on how to spend their grocery money: fewer soft drinks and junk foods, cooked rather than packaged cereals, more vegetables and less meat. Good, practical health habits in general should be taught. (Adventist churches might launch a major health-education program in the inner cities, a

valuable initiative for which they are uniquely fitted.)

Judging by what we've learned from European experience, apprenticeships are more effective than conventional job-training programs. Federal assistance for apprenticeship programs can stimulate business cooperation. Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, both to make work more attractive than welfare and to help more low-income working families escape poverty is a measure that is approved by both liberals and conservatives, even though it costs money.

Finally, almost everyone agrees that those on welfare, if able-bodied, should work rather than accept handouts.

In many cases, though, jobs simply aren't available for the inner-city unemployed. This is not a temporary but a permanent phenomenon. Accepting this, there seems no workable alternative to having government provide public-service jobs for the unemployed.

Unfortunately, it costs significantly more to provide work for able-bodied persons on welfare than it does to simply fork over cash. Hiring competent supervisors, purchasing supplies, arranging transportation and daycare as necessary, are all expensive. But the nation would be getting something worthwhile for its money if the unemployed were busy repairing streets and sidewalks, removing graffiti, assisting the elderly, keeping our cities as clean as some European cities, helping renovate public housing, and so on. This sort of involvement would also boost self-respect in the unemployed, and provide practical work experience and preparation for paying jobs later on.

These various proposals would require more taxes, but it is my conviction that Christians should not object to paying them. There is, I find, a major role for government to play in dealing with poverty in general, particularly that in the inner city, and this will be costly.

But no matter how generously or wisely Americans in the Clinton era devise programs for the poor, none will be adequate unless we deal with the erosion of moral values that has occurred in the past few decades. This is where today's conservatives and liberals can agree. A decline in moral values in the inner city but elsewhere as well, has cost our nation dearly.

Its consequences are glaringly evident: teenagers and others are fornicating on an appalling scale; the majority of black children are born to unwed mothers and raised in single-parent homes; and a majority of absent fathers (black and white) refuse to assume any responsibility for the children they father, either by marrying the mothers or paying child support.

Beyond this, an article in *Time* (March 16, 1992) focused on another wound to the underclass, this one self-inflicted. Black students ridicule as "uppity" or "acting white" those who study hard, get good grades, speak standard English, or take an interest in activities other than sports. Minorities in the inner city are largely shaped by a street culture that abounds with gambling, drugs, easy sex, gang activity, and various kinds of crime. Children reared in this culture are unlikely to become responsible, law-abiding citizens, regardless of the government programs put in place to help them. As

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these children grow up to commit the majority of blue-collar crime in the nation, negative attitudes toward minorities can only be reinforced.

The L.A. rioters worsened race relations for years to come. They also performed a grave disservice to the majority of decent, law-abiding minorities—particularly blacks. What the underclass most needs is encouragement to behave responsibly and take full advantage of educational and economic opportunities. An older generation of blacks, along with a growing black middle class, daily manifest the characteristics of hard work and responsible behavior typical of productive citizens. If young males followed their example and heeded their counsel, their own prospects would be vastly improved.

Recapturing the Old-Time Religion

Is religion the real answer? Assuredly. People who have accepted Jesus as their Savior and understand what Christianity means are unlikely to become social problems. Insofar as we can help others accept Jesus and his message, we will have done the most that can

ever be done for individuals.

Both black and white churches have failed to stress the need for premarital sexual abstinence. This is something the Bible requires and modern experience eloquently affirms. Premarital sex, along with extramarital sex and alcohol (and their attendant consequences), cause far more human suffering than does war. The evidence is conclusive. The church must teach, from early childhood, that sex outside of marriage is an evil just as great as theft and perjury and wanton violence. The tragic and unchallengeable statistical consequences of ignoring this can be sobering, even for youth.

So where does this leave us? Conservatives and liberals can surely agree that that local churches should help with local anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs that are intelligently planned and administered. Churches are already active in distributing furniture, bedding, clothing, household articles, and even emergency cash assistance. These may be palliatives rather than cures, but they are surely worth doing.

Surely Adventists—whether conservative or liberal—can agree that both on an individual and church-wide bases, the injunction all of us should follow is *do something*.