

Race Matters: In and Out of the Church

The implications of recent books by black intellectuals for Adventist race relations.

by Henry Felder

RECENT WRITINGS ABOUT RACE BY SEVERAL BLACK authors herald a difference among blacks that in some ways mirrors the disputes between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois in the early part of this century. In one such book, *Race Matters*, Cornel West tackles this dispute. In so doing, he provides a perspective on race that has important implications and parallels for race relations in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A major theme of *Race Matters* is that the dominant liberal and conservative views on race have ossified to the point of reinforcing "intellectual parochialism and political paralysis."¹

Despite significant differences, heterogeneity between liberals and conservatives among blacks mirrors similar heterogeneity among whites. Blacks, conservative and liberal, take

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as given the inherent equality between the races but differ in their approaches to economic injustice and social pathologies (crime and illegitimacy being the most prominent) regarding the disparities. Among whites, however, heterogeneity is defined by whether disparities exist because of an inherent inequality between blacks and whites. Failure to explicitly confront issues of disparate treatment in the matter of race relations has produced in the church a disquieting rage in some and a potential undertow of distrust that at its worst can render impossible a cohesive racial bonding between its black and white members.

This essay is designed to explore matters of race in the Adventist Church.² It integrates material from varied sources. First, some aspects of the economic status of blacks are explored. Second, the writings of Ellen G. White in *Testimonies*, volumes 7 and 9 will be used as an example of the polar positions in the perception of blacks by whites. Third, quotes from several recent books on race help define the range of views on appropriate

responses and actions by blacks and others. The essay concludes with a set of observations and synthesis of the article's implications for race matters in the church.

The Economic Status of Blacks in America

Few realities are as well known in the economic world as the relatively disadvantaged status of blacks when compared with whites in America.³ Two statements summarize that status:

By almost all aggregate statistical measures— income and living standards; health and life expectancy; educational, occupational, and residential opportunities; political and social participation—the well-being of both blacks and whites has advanced greatly over the past decades.

By almost all the same indicators, blacks remain substantially behind whites.⁴

On average, black men's earnings are 68 percent those of white men, while black women's earnings are 86 percent those of white women. Blacks (men or women) are twice as likely to be unemployed as are whites, more likely to suffer when recession hits,⁵ and less likely to have the wealth necessary to sustain long periods of unemployment. One-third of all blacks have incomes below the poverty line; in contrast, the same is true for only one out of nine whites.⁶ The income disparities that separate blacks and whites, after narrowing during the 1960s and 1970s, have stagnated. In some economic measures (especially the labor force participation of black men), the disparities have become greater.

The relative economic status of black Adventists cannot be independently observed; however, it is likely that it parallels and is not greatly differentiated from that of blacks nationwide.⁷ We know that black Adventists

comprise approximately 30 percent of the North American Division and return about \$130 million in tithe and offerings, 18 percent of the \$705 million received by the church in 1992.⁸ From this data, it appears that the relative economic status of blacks in the church is similar to that of blacks in the general population.

While these and other statistics paint a bleak picture of the economic status of blacks, they provide an incomplete picture of a complex situation. The black community is not homogeneous, and there is a wide distribution around the means suggested above. More than 40 percent of all blacks have middle-class earnings, careers, and aspirations.⁹ As some blacks have attained high-status occupations, incomes, education, and political position, the gap between them and more disadvantaged blacks has widened. The diverging experiences of upwardly mobile blacks and those on the economic fringe make a common resolution of racial alienation difficult, if not impossible.

Equality and the Dilemma of the Testimonies

The correlates of the economic disadvantage of blacks are both environmental and behavioral. The relative importance of each has been intensely debated. Myrdal, in *An American Dilemma*, calls it "nature and nurture," and suggests that "opinions on this question signify more than anything else where each of us stands on the scale between extreme conservatism and radicalism."¹⁰ He makes clear that the opinions that matter are those of whites:

Although the Negro problem is a moral issue both to Negroes and to whites in America, we shall in this book have to give *primary* [emphasis in original] attention to what goes on in the minds of white Americans.¹¹

He further states,

. . . [In regard to] the Negro problem, it became increasingly evident that little, if anything, could be scientifically explained in terms of the peculiarities of the Negroes themselves.¹²

Myrdal's position, and that of most white researchers, was that black attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs needed not be consulted.¹³

It should be made clear that the liberal versus conservative polarity exists along perpendicular lines that separately define for whites how they feel about and respond to blacks. For blacks, the polarity is not about their feelings toward whites; rather, it is the matter of the appropriate response to their environment and status. The polar extremes of the views of whites towards blacks are captured by the apparently conflicting views of Ellen G. White in several critical passages in the *Testimonies*.

In matters of race and the church, much of the debate is framed in terms of Mrs. White's seemingly contradictory statements in volumes 7 and 9 of the *Testimonies*.¹⁴ In these disparate statements, Mrs. White first endorses, then rejects greater cooperation between white workers and blacks in the South. In volume 7, Mrs. White holds out the idea of racial equality, and maintains that the environment was the basis for the status of the blacks of that time:

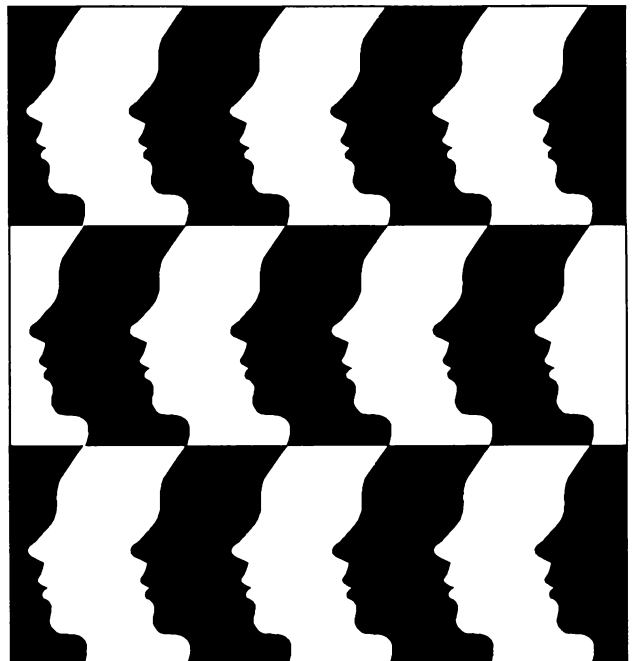
Christ came to this earth with a message of mercy and forgiveness. He laid the foundation for a religion by which Jew and Gentile, black and white, free and bond, are linked together in one common brotherhood, recognized as equal in the sight of God. . . . In each one He sees capacity for improvement. . . . Painstaking effort is to be put forth to develop their capabilities. . . . Through the grace of God the race that the enemy has for generations oppressed may rise to the dignity of God-given manhood and womanhood.¹⁵

Volume 9 abandoned the idea of equality as Mrs. White stated the following: "The colored people should not urge that they be placed on

an equality with white people."¹⁶ To some degree, many in the church have labored under the burden of that statement ever since, even though Ron Graybill, among others, has attempted to reconcile the two statements.¹⁷ The dilemma, of course, is whether statements so diametrically opposed can be both timeless and divinely inspired. The fundamental issue for white Adventists is whether they believe in the inherent, God-endowed equality between the races. It means placing the testimony of volume 9 in a strategic framework, not as a statement of ultimate reality.

Heterogeneity Among Black Voices on Race

Heterogeneity in matters of race exists among writings of contemporary black journalists, economists, sociologists, and other academics. The core issues have to do with racism, affirmative action, socially destructive behavior, and the direction that would best achieve the removal of economic, political,



and social disparities. The heterogeneity has polarized around easy labels of “liberal” and “conservative,” with all the baggage that each implies for different groups. This heterogeneity of views affects public policy at large and has implications for race relations within the Adventist Church.

Thomas Sowell’s *The Economics and Politics of Race*¹⁸ challenged the conventional wisdom regarding the role of race and racism on the economic condition of black Americans. “Blacks,” he asserted, “remain below the national average economically. But despite historically unique forms and degrees of discrimination and oppression, blacks are not today economically unique.”¹⁹ He suggests that group differences between black Americans and others result from complex cultural and other factors:

Precisely because race and ethnicity have often involved powerful emotions and sometimes dramatic and violent actions, there is a tendency to regard all inter-racial and inter-ethnic differences as due to race or racism.²⁰

In speaking of differences between blacks and whites he further argues:

All that is unique about our times is the extent to which we ignore earlier times and regard our racial or ethnic differences as unprecedented. In reality, today’s intergroup differences are not only smaller than in the past, but are continuing to narrow.²¹

Sowell’s was one of the first scholarly presentations of the dynamics of the relative status of blacks, as compared to other ethnic groups in America. His is a behavioristic-historic thesis, in which behavior dominates and historical trends are shared by many different groups. Sowell remains the most prominent of black theorists who espouse what has come to be called the “black conservative” movement. Like so many other labels, this one is not precise, but serves to anchor

one end of the polarity.

Other voices have joined the behaviorist view, including Stephen L. Carter, a Yale law professor,²² and Shelby Steele, an English professor at San Jose State University.²³ Both argue that it is time for black Americans to move on with the agenda of making it “without assistance”²⁴ from affirmative action or other types of outside support. Steele struggles with issues of affirmative action, calling them “problematic.”²⁵

These views are strongly contrasted with those of Derrick Bell,²⁶ who suggests that blacks have a unique perspective because of their history of slavery.

The fact of slavery refuses to fade, along with the deeply embedded personal attitudes and public policy assumptions that supported it for so long. Indeed, the racism that made slavery feasible is far from dead in the last decade of twentieth-century America; and the civil rights gains, so hard won, are being steadily eroded. Despite undeniable progress for many, no African Americans are insulated from incidents of racial discrimination.²⁷

The idea that black Americans are indeed unique in the way they are perceived relative to other groups is also sounded by Ellis Cose,²⁸ who suggests that “. . . even in the most enlightened of places, black people regularly encounter attitudes that make even the most thick-skinned cringe.”²⁹ Andrew Hacker³⁰ states in penetrating terms the issue of race in America:

That Americans of African origin once wore the chains of chattels remains alive in the memory of both races and continues to separate them. . . . [I]n most significant respects, the separation is pervasive and penetrating. As a social and human division, it surpasses all others—even gender—in intensity and subordination.³¹

The conservative view of Sowell, Carter, and Steele stand in sharp contrast with the liberal perspective of Bell, Cose, and Hacker.

The conservatives focus on individual behavior—the core concept that America today is more than ever the opportunity society, without much regard to race and history; that individual decisions matter decisively. The liberals stress the structure of an American society that is racist; a society ultimately not comfortable with unequivocal equality and access; a society still defining opportunity according to race and thereby relegating a significant subset of its population to an inferior role.

A reconciliation of these disparate views is provided by West, who suggests a new prophetic vision of race in America. He rejects both the conclusions and approaches fostered by the conservative behaviorist and liberal structuralist. He advances four problems with the liberal, structuralist mindset: (1) the notion of more government programs is simplistic, as it focuses only on the economic dimension;³² (2) it ignores the behavioristic and often destructive conduct of the oppressed;³³ (3) it fails to talk about values;³⁴ and (4) it over-relies on affirmative action as a solution to poverty and a sufficient means to equality.³⁵

However, West reserves his harshest judgments for the conservative, behaviorist approach, for it: (1) ignores the immoral circumstances that haunt poor, black urban dwellers; (2) insists that good behavior on the part of black Americans will gain for them acceptance by the larger white society, especially their peers. Therefore, black liberalism is inadequate; black conservatism is unacceptable.³⁶

In his discussion of some of the pitfalls of reasoning among blacks, West suggests that there should be a new prophetic framework—one based on moral reasoning, coalition strategy, and cultural democracy. Instead of appealing to black authenticity, black Americans should express mature self-love “and self-respect on the moral quality of black responses to undeniable racist degradation in the American past and present.”³⁷

West implies that the black urban poor identify with the liberal approach, in part because they are more in need, more likely to have lives filled with meaninglessness, hope-

lessness, and lovelessness. Black conservatives, who are generally more affluent, appeal to individual behavior, since they view their own good choices as the primary reason for their successes. West takes the high ground, beyond liberals and conservatives, by raising the stakes to one of existence. He contends that the most basic issue now facing black America is nothing less than “*the nihilistic threat to its very*

existence” [emphasis in original].³⁸ He declares that for America to survive, it must move beyond its racial hierarchy and racial spoils system to a moral sense of community.

Implications for the Adventist Church

The Adventist Church today also has many of the polarities listed above—among whites regarding their views of blacks and

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among blacks regarding how to achieve full equality and acceptance. At the same time, certain behaviors and responses clearly reveal the existence of a racial spoils system that is not based on love and the specifics of the gospel mission. Integration within the church exists almost exclusively in one direction—blacks integrating predominately white churches and institutions. Of the approximately 260,000 black Adventists, as many as 60,000 hold memberships in predominately white churches. Among the more than 500,000 white Adventists, few have memberships in black churches. Indeed, in many instances when black membership exceeds a critical mass (called a “tipping point”), white flight occurs.³⁹ In the Pacific Union, white flight has led to schools and churches being turned over completely to the black constituency, rather than continuing as integrated entities. In the rest of the country, white flight has led to churches becoming black, but remaining within the host conference.

Indeed, except for the highest administrative levels (union conference and General Conference levels), white Adventists have shown an almost unbending, inflexible, and uncompromising refusal to be under the leadership of black Adventists. In this regard, the counsel of volume 9 of the *Testimonies* is followed consistently. By their actions, a significant number of white Adventists have demonstrated that they do not feel that blacks should lead out in “their” work. The absence of meaningful leadership participation by blacks in many of the educational, medical, publishing, and ancillary activities of the church speak to this reluctance. Left unresolved, of course, is how to define *meaningful*.

The polarities among blacks have more to do with how to achieve racial amity within an integrated church structure or whether it is even desired. The existence of a racial hierar-

chy leaves black Adventists with few choices—they cannot and will not abdicate cultural and leadership bases as long as full sharing and equality are not present. For some blacks, separate structures are an acceptance of an inevitable status quo and not a matter of major concern. What does matter are the 25 percent or so of blacks who attend predominately white churches and the extent that they disrupt the idea of racial solidarity.

Blacks who attend such churches are often not viewed as “authentic” blacks. They are criticized for taking their tithe, offerings, and talents to a group that has these in abundance and is less interested in them specifically. Racial solidarity often manifests itself in the “dismissing” of pastors or members who are not part of the accepted places to pastor or be members. For some pastors, to work in a predominately white conference means isolation and the likelihood of not being able to return to the black fold. While the reasons for black participation in predominately white churches are many—location, convenience, style—they also include factors not often discussed, such as lack of friendliness and self-loathing.

The racial hierarchy that dominates the church exacts a high price in redundancy, inefficiency, and the image that is presented to the world. While a demonstration of love and full equality in all aspects of church life offers an effective demonstration of the gospel, few believe that it will ever be achieved. A few voices in the Adventist Church, like West’s, are calling for a new prophetic vision of race. We must move beyond the tipping point, white flight, the absence of sharing—both administratively and personally—and the self-defeating definition of who is truly black and who is not. The message of Jesus Christ calls us to harmony, not hegemony; dialogue, not diatribe; reconciliation, not retribution; community, not conflict. A remnant church can do no less.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), p. 2.
2. This exploration is limited by an absence of Adventist-specific data on black-white disparities, the absence of Adventist writers who have addressed this issue, and the need to rely on anecdotal and impressionistic observations.
3. The literature on black economic development and status is extensive. *A Common Destiny: Black and American Society*, Gerald David Jaynes and Robin M. Williams, eds. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989), contains some of the most comprehensive analysis available.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. Table 2, "Usual Weekly Earnings of Wage and Salary Workers: Fourth Quarter 1993" and Table A-1, "The Employment Situation, 1994," Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor.
6. Half of all white families in 1989 had a net worth greater than \$58,000, while half of all black families had a net worth of less than \$4,000. (For other statistics see: *Overview of Entitlement Programs* [U.S. House of Representatives, July 7, 1993], pp. 1309, 1558.)
7. There are social and other disparities—such as health, life expectancy, crime, and rates of out-of-wedlock childbirth—that are unfavorable to blacks. The economic focus is made primary on the assumption that it may be causal relative to these other disparities.
8. Data on tithes and offerings come from the 130th Annual Statistical Report of the General Conference and the Cumulative Report for the 4th quarter, 1991, Pacific Union Conference. Black membership is defined as the total membership of black conferences and the black churches of the Pacific and Northern Pacific Unions. It is estimated that as many as 60,000 blacks attend churches that do not meet this criteria. To determine total black tithes and offerings, the per capita tithes and offerings of the black churches are imputed to the 60,000 blacks who do not attend black churches. This total is then added to the published totals for blacks.
9. There is no rigorous definition of what constitutes middle-class income. Forty percent of all blacks have incomes that exceed the mean of the distribution (\$35,000 in 1992).
10. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Pantheon, 1962), p. 83
11. *Ibid.*, p. LXXIII.
12. *Ibid.*
13. This idea is expanded on in Jaynes and Williams, eds., p. 115, who point out that some of the earliest surveys on racial attitudes excluded blacks altogether. They rationalize the exclusion by noting that whites, being in the majority and having the power to effect change, are the groups whose attitudes need to be charted.
14. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), Vol. 7, pp. 220-230; Vol. 9, pp. 213-226.
15. *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp. 225, 228, and 229.
16. *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, p. 214.
17. Ronald Graybill, *Ellen G. White and Church Race Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1970). He attributes the different statements to the introduction of Jim Crow laws in the South and the difficulty of working for equality under those conditions. See especially pp. 41, 42, and 60, where he cites the evolving violence in Mississippi as cause for these writings.
18. Thomas Sowell, *The Economics and Politics of Race* (New York: Quill, 1983).
19. Sowell, p. 132.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
22. See Carter's book, *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
23. See Steele's book, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: Harper, 1990).
24. Carter, p. 223.
25. Steele, p. 121.
26. Derrick Bell was a law professor at Harvard Law School who gave up a tenured position because of Harvard's failure to hire and promote a black woman to a tenured law position. See Bell's book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
27. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
28. See Cose's book, *The Rage of a Privileged Class: Why are Middle-Class Blacks Angry?* (New York: Harper, 1993).
29. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
30. See Hacker's book, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribner's, 1992).
31. *Ibid.*, p. 3. (Hacker is white).
32. West, p. 2.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
39. Hacker.