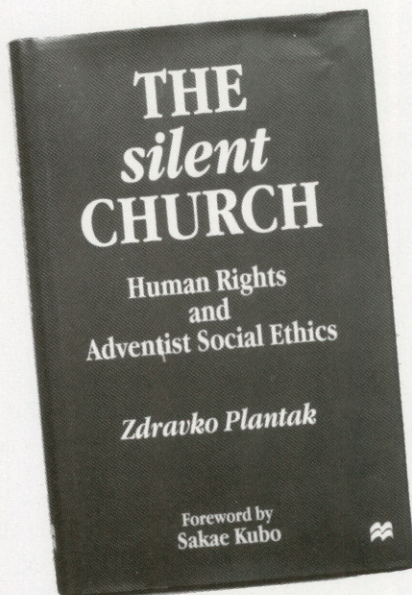


# Adventist Basis For Human Rights

An Excerpt from *The Silent Church*



By Zdravko Plantak

## Commandments-Keeping People

### The Decalogue

The moral law, as an expression of the character of God and as God's desire for human fulfillment, was always high on the agenda of Adventist theology.<sup>1</sup> Adventists regard the Decalogue as a great moral guideline binding upon all people who desire to live in perfect harmony with God and with other human beings in every age. It is not, and has never been, the means of salvation (Rom. 4:1-3; Heb. 11). However, the fruitage of salvation is obedience to these precepts that God himself gave to humanity (Exod. 31:18).

### Jesus and the Moral Law

For a complete understanding of what God means by his moral law, a Christian must turn to the God Incarnate. Jesus, in his most remarkable sermon about the law (some call the Sermon on the Mount the second Sinai),<sup>2</sup> claimed that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). He continued:

"... anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>3</sup>

When challenged to give an account of what he thought was the most important commandment, Jesus did not allow himself to be drawn into making the mistake of selecting one and overemphasizing it. Rather, he summed up the law and the prophets into a remarkably concise but powerful phrase borrowed from Deuteronomy: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>4</sup> Asked on another occasion the question "who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered eloquently in a parable that

#### Editor's Note

Answering the question "why" can be difficult. In his new book, *The Silent Church*, Zdravko Plantak lucidly explains why human rights are important to Christians—because human rights are the ultimate test on which a church stands or falls in its understanding of God's nature. Plantak deals with both the practice and theory of Adventist relations with human rights, focusing on the issues of wealth, race, and gender. We present here Chapter 10 from his book. In this section, Plantak turns to the theological insights that, in part, form Adventist identity and which contribute to a Christian theory of human rights, namely emphasis on the moral law, the concept and meaning of the Sabbath, the role of prophets and prophetic communities, and finally, the implications of belief in the Second Coming of Christ.

our neighbor is everyone who is in need, regardless of race, nationality, or caste (Luke 10:29-37).

## The Universality of the Moral Law

The universality of the Old Testament account of the moral law (Exod. 20:1-17, and Deut. 5:1-22) and Jesus' elaboration of it (Matt. 5-7) require from people respect for and protection of human rights. If God is interested in relationships between human beings, and he demonstrated the desire to regulate these relationships with the last six commandments of the Decalogue and with the numerous sayings of Jesus, his children should uplift these regulations and apply them to every situation in life.

## Applications for the "Commandments-Keeping People"

The commandments-keeping people, as Seventh-day Adventists desire to be seen, should be the first to foster good relations with their neighbors. Whenever there is a violation of the love-principle in the world they ought to be among the first to condemn it and to seek ways to eliminate injustice, inequality, bad relationships, and violation of human rights in general in order to be true to their calling of the people of the law.

# Sabbath<sup>5</sup>

## Its Importance

One of the very important commandments describing the Judeo-Christian God as the Creator of the Universe in a special way,<sup>6</sup> Seventh-day Adventists believe, has been sadly neglected by Christians. The fourth commandment calls people to "remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exod. 20:8). Seventh-day Adventists have thought this feature of their belief so important and distinguishable that they included it in their name. They are the Sabbath people.

However, most of the Adventist studies about the Sabbath have attempted to prove that the seventh day is the Sabbath and that the fourth commandment, as part of the moral law, is relevant to all people at all times. The meaning of the Sabbath and the relationship between the doctrine of Sabbath and social conscience had emerged only recently in Adventist writings.<sup>8</sup>

## Its Meaning

Sakae Kubo was among the first to point to the meaning of the Sabbath observance and its "relationship to our practical Christian life."<sup>9</sup> He raised several points worth noting. Using Philo's expression that the Sabbath is "the birthday of the world" and, consequently, a "festival, not of a single city or country, but of the universe,"<sup>10</sup> Kubo points to the universality of the Sabbath. And the universal Sabbath makes no distinction among people. Instead it makes all people equal before God.

God's presence is not limited to any special place or country, building or people. God selected nothing within space to be his medium through which he could be in contact with his created beings.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, if he had appointed a place or a building to be his holy special place, this would have favored only people living nearby. Instead, God chose a segment of time to come closer to people. Time is universal, and therefore no person stands in a place of advantage. "With time all are equal. The Sabbath becomes a worldwide blessing."<sup>12</sup> And if people worldwide are equal because of their identical access to the Sabbath rest, God points towards the ideal social structure in which all human beings share the same status regardless of their origin, economic status, or gender. The Sabbath, in such a way, presumes human rights, and promotes them on a regular weekly basis in a very powerful and meaningful way.

## Its Social Application in the Context of Human Rights

But the Sabbath doctrine does not involve only the Sabbath day; it concerns the other six days of the week as well. The atmosphere and the principles of the Sabbath will not only "extend beyond the worship service to the dinner table and the living room"<sup>13</sup> on the seventh day, but they would also become a part of the Sabbath attitude that ought to be practiced throughout the week. In the words of Jack Provonsha,

"True Sabbath-keeping touches the whole of life. The Sabbath sanctifies the week. One cannot be dishonest on Monday and truly keep the Sabbath, because the Sabbath keeping is essentially a posture toward God that is not a one-day-in-seven kind of activity."<sup>14</sup>

The concern for other people, which the Christian should have on the Sabbath, must be extended to a way of life that the Christian should exercise daily. The Sabbatical concern, which extends from the weekly

Sabbaths to sabbatical years also, was to teach the Jews about the needs of the less fortunate, the poor, the widows and the orphans (Exod. 35:12-33). In the similar way, Christians should develop a greater "Sabbatical" conscience for the poor, the unfortunate, the unemployed, and the powerless, whose basic human rights are denied.

### *Jesus and the Sabbath*

Jesus is again the supreme example of the way God desired to have fellowship with humanity and how he intended the Sabbath to bring meaning to the wor-

shipping community. As "the Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28), Jesus took pains to clarify the true meaning of the Sabbath. At the time of Jesus, the Sabbath had become a legalistic exercise of self-righteousness on behalf of different groups of believers who wanted to prove their perfection. Jesus, however, pointed out to the almost forgotten humanitarian function of the fourth commandment. As Samuele Bacchiocchi rightly notes,

"To counteract prevailing legal interpretations which restricted humanitarian service on the Sabbath to emergency situations only, Jesus intentionally ministered on this day to persons who were not critically but



The Mothers (*Mütter*), 1919. Lithograph by Käthe Kollwitz

chronically ill.”<sup>15</sup>

In such a way Jesus pressed the Sabbath into salvation history, making it a day intended for the benefit of humankind (Mark 2:27).

### *Equality and the Sabbath*

The Sabbath points to equality among all human beings. It is a memorial to God the Creator. Remembering weekly that God is our Creator, and that all human beings are only creatures among whom the differences are really nonessential, should encourage Sabbath observers to accept and respect others regardless of their occupation, ethnic or economic background or educational level. Richard Rice observed that on the Sabbath day,

“... differences of occupation and education lose their significance. We realize that what we have in common before the Lord is more important than the various structures that distinguish us during the week, so we can associate with each other as equals and enjoy each other’s company as brothers and sisters in Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

Rice extends his idea a step further when he asserts that the basic concept of the Sabbath must bring forth the idea of freedom. After all, claims Rice, “the Sabbath is a day of freedom,” and as such,

“... the freedom from labor means freedom from bondage to other people. According to the fourth commandment, servants are not to work on the Sabbath. Since no one is subordinate to another on Sabbath, each person stands before God in his individual identity and dignity.”<sup>17</sup>

So the Sabbath becomes the true means of liberation for humanity. It celebrates God’s merciful act of liberation and deliverance from the bondage of Egypt (Deut. 5:15), but it also points to the ultimate liberation from sin and all its consequences that Jesus proclaimed and exercised both on the Sabbath and at all other times (Luke 4:18; 13:16).

### *Liberation and the Sabbath*

As Charles Bradford remarks in his treatise on “The Sabbath and Liberation,” the Sabbath lay at the very heart of the first great freedom movement. Moses delivered God’s message to Pharaoh: “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me” (Exod. 7:16). This was a direct appeal to Pharaoh to allow the enslaved people to observe the Sabbath rest. Later, God reestablished the Sabbath as a sign of their liberation (Deut. 5:15). However, Bradford continues, this arrangement was to be permanent because Sabbath rest and

Sabbath observance have something to do with human dignity and freedom. Yahweh never intended for one human being to tyrannize another, or for one nation to subjugate another nation.<sup>18</sup>

Bradford calls Isaiah’s description of the Sabbath attitude in Isaiah 56:1-7, “Yahweh’s manifesto,” or God’s sign of freedom, independence, and liberation.<sup>19</sup> And “Yahweh’s manifesto” is relevant and applicable to the whole human family, especially to the outcasts—the poor, the powerless, foreigners (e.g. refugees), and eunuchs (politically and economically impotent). Bradford adds:

“The Sabbath is a sign in perpetuity and a constant reminder of the relationships that exist between human beings and their God and between human beings and their fellow humans—their brothers and sisters.”<sup>20</sup>

Bradford, as a black Seventh-day Adventist, identifies with the theme of liberation taken up by African-American and Third World theologians. He understands that “they are closer to those parts of the world where the misery index is highest” and remind us “that God is on the side of the poor” and, as a result, why they “send out a ringing call for justice and equality.”<sup>21</sup> But Bradford cannot accommodate the idea of calling exclusively for secular, political solutions to human problems. In this respect Bradford sees liberation theology as not sufficiently radical—radical, in Bradford’s definition meaning “getting at the root of a matter.” He remarks:

“Political solutions are not the final end. They cannot possibly get to the root of the human dilemma—sin, rebellion against God. Political revolutions only throw out one group of robbers to be succeeded by another gang.”<sup>22</sup>

However, there is an authentic theology of liberation that Jesus came to preach. It was Jesus who promised freedom to the nations—total freedom. His inaugural message is both radical and revolutionary. And Jesus’ message “makes the Sabbath the sign of liberation and independence.”<sup>23</sup> To support this point Bradford quotes, for example, from the book of Ezekiel:

“Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the desert. I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy. . . . Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know I am the Lord your God.”<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, Bradford concludes, God is for

freedom, liberty, dignity, and for the empowerment of all people. Hence, now is the time for all people to make God's sign of liberation their banner.<sup>25</sup>

Kubo similarly believes that the theme of freedom not only reminds us of our deliverance and liberation, but it also "commands us to extend the blessing to those under oppression or servitude."<sup>26</sup> It is not enough to enjoy one's own benefits of redemption. One must also work with God in bringing liberty "to the captives, and recovering the sight of the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18). Kubo rightly judges that:

"Sabbath observance has integral social and humanitarian aspects that we dare not forget. The Sabbath as sign of redemption points in two directions—to our own redemption and to that of the oppressed. We must bring rest to those who live in servitude."<sup>27</sup>

Ironically, Seventh-day Adventists have many times failed to recognize that Sabbath observance should initiate liberation beyond their own community. Even within the church, the principle of equality was not always practiced rigorously. But, as Kubo concludes, if Adventists "fail to practice true fellowship and genuine equality, they betray a lack of understanding of the Sabbath as a sign of fellowship and equality."<sup>28</sup>

### *Human Rights and the Sabbatical Year*

The extensions of the Sabbath idea found in the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee emphasizes almost exclusively humanitarian aspects. From a week of days to a week of years God's desire for the poor and the oppressed to be liberated is the prime concern of the true Sabbath principle (Exod. 23:11, and Lev. 25:10). The idea of the land resting (lying "unploughed and unused") on the seventh year focuses on the concern for the poor, the slave, the underdog, as well as the rights that go beyond mere human rights.<sup>29</sup> If one truly observes the Sabbath, one cannot remain satisfied only with one's own redemption, restoration, and liberation. One must show concern for one's neighbor, not only spiritually but also physically,—and the Sabbath provides adequate opportunity for this.

## Conclusion

The Sabbath, described in Hebrews 4:3-10 as "entering God's rest," is not imposed on human beings by their Creator. It is a voluntary time that people have

freedom to receive or reject. The fourth commandment begins with "remember," suggesting that the Sabbath is God's gift to people and not something he wants to impose on them or demand from them. The basic principle of human rights is, therefore, uplifted and encouraged through the commandment about the Sabbath.

As a day of freedom, the Sabbath has important social implications. As Rice rightly concludes,

"It attaches such value to human beings that no person can ever be merely the property of another. A real appreciation for the Sabbath would therefore make slavery impossible. The Sabbath speaks against every practice that deprives human beings of their sense of worth and dignity. Oppressive economic and social structures, which make it impossible for people to provide for themselves, contradict the message of the Sabbath. Those who appreciate the meaning of the Sabbath will seek to eliminate such things."<sup>30</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists, believing themselves to be the true Sabbath keepers, should be among the first to advance the ideas of justice, equality, and freedom among all people within as well as outside of their community. If they fail to do that, the letter of the law would be observed but the spirit of the Sabbath commandment would be totally lost.

## The Role of the Prophets and Prophetic Communities

Adventist understanding of the role of prophets and prophecies is primarily of a futuristic and apocalyptic nature. However, predicting the future and eschatological emphasis is only a secondary role of the prophets of ancient Judaism. Their primary role is socio-ethical. Since the Seventh-day Adventist church believes itself to constitute the prophetic minority at the end of world's history,<sup>31</sup> their role should be comparable to the role of the prophets in Jewish society. Hence the importance of examining that role, which by most Adventists is assumed to be almost exclusively eschatologically futuristic.

The Hebrew term *Nabi* is first used in connection with Abraham.<sup>32</sup> However it becomes a popular term with the "historic" Moses.<sup>33</sup> Moses, as provider of the moral law, becomes a standard of comparison for all other prophets.<sup>34</sup> The Old Testament prophets had several important roles: they were political and religious

leaders who proclaimed the law, guarded the spiritual life of the nation, mediated between the people and their God, and predicted future judgement. They were interested in international affairs and the future in the same breath as they counseled and influenced social structures of their own generation in their own locality. They could be therefore described as theological reformers.

## Four Elements of Prophetic Teaching<sup>35</sup>

Four essential elements emerge from prophetic teachings. First, the warnings that prophets bring are always a matter of life and death. Every warning, if not taken seriously, is followed by long-lasting consequences. The prophets called Israel to reject evil and death and choose God, moral behavior, and, consequently, life.<sup>36</sup>

The second element in prophetic teaching deals with God's care for those who are without proper protection within the existing social structures (i.e. slaves, widows, orphans, debtors, the homeless, strangers, etc.). The law requires<sup>37</sup> that there should be no unjust differences between people. But in real life this becomes perverted. Therefore, God promises to be a support and help to those who do not have anybody: he hears their cries, sees their suffering, and brings help when his human agents fail to do so. The prophets talk about alienation of those who grab land and "add house to house and join field to field" until they are alone in the land. This process of materialism,<sup>38</sup> mirrored in our own time and expressed in the accumulation of material goods beyond the point of realistic needs, ends in isolation and in the loss of any meaningful human existence and relationship among people.

Thirdly, God seeks obedience and justice rather than a formal worship or sacrifice. The sacrificial system and religious festivals were important; but ethical behavior springing from right motives was even more important ("doing the truth" instead of only "having the truth"). And the basic motive was love that responds to God's love, his choice and his call.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the motive for ethical behavior is a response to God's love, which he expressed in the covenant relationship with human beings.<sup>40</sup>

The fourth aspect of the prophetic role is



Laborer Seated (*Sitzender Arbeiter*), 1925.  
Lithograph by Käthe Kollwitz

eschatological-apocalyptic. In this element of prophetic teaching the prophet goes outside his immediate domain and speaks about the global picture of human history. At its center, prophetic eschatology is an affirmation that God will succeed in his desire for his creation, that he shall win the battle between good and evil, and inevitably bring salvation to his people.

Adventists have usually emphasized the fourth aspect of the prophetic role. In its self-understanding as a "prophetic movement," Seventh-day Adventism was usually thought of as "a movement preoccupied with making predictions" as well as "a movement with a special interest in studying and interpreting predictive prophecy."<sup>41</sup> But, as Provonsha recently pointed out,

"Adventism as a prophetic movement should be defined more in terms of function and role, i.e. a people with a mission to the world."<sup>42</sup> However, Adventists should also consider other aspects of prophetic ministry if they desire to be faithful to their prophetic calling. One of these aspects, and perhaps the first, is the social role of prophets.

## Examples of the Primary (Social) Role of Prophets in Jewish Society

The prophets of the Old Testament did not invent new social, economic, or moral responsibilities. They believed and affirmed that the ideal for Jewish society as a whole, and its people as individuals, was set in the legislation of the covenant between God and Israel. Justice, as a basis of the law and the pillar of society, was regarded by the prophets as binding for all ages. The guidance that the prophets gave to Israel regarding social, ethical, and economic relationships was clearly based on the Mosaic Law as expressed in the Ten Commandments. Of other prophets dealing with social ethics,<sup>43</sup> Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah are typical examples of this.<sup>44</sup>

## The Role of the New Testaments Prophets

The role of the prophets in the New Testament was not very different from that in the Old Testament. John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest prophet of all times (Matt. 11:9-11), invited the people of Israel to repent and to produce good fruit (Matt. 3:2-10). After querying whether Jesus was the Messiah, he received a message from Jesus that he could understand, appreciate, and identify with. Jesus said: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."<sup>45</sup> This was a powerful testimony to the prophet's concerns. There is little doubt that only a true prophet would recognize the Messiah in such a description. That is why Jesus used this approach in explaining his mission to the imprisoned prophet.

John the Revelator was concerned about social as well as eschatological matters. Writing both about and to the minority of Christians in a society that did not favor them a great deal,<sup>46</sup> the writer of the book of Revelation was concerned for their safety, their well-being, and their rights, which were being violated through persecution.<sup>47</sup>

Jesus of Nazareth was greatly concerned with the social and economic justice of his time. He came to

proclaim freedom to the captives, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.<sup>48</sup> However, Jesus did not only preach about issues of social concern, he also practiced his social beliefs.<sup>49</sup> He proved through his ministry that virtually nobody was outside of his interest. And he demanded nothing less from his followers. Even in the most famous of his eschatological discourses, when his closest followers asked him when he would establish his parousia, Jesus not only answered in terms of the outside events but also in terms of what his followers must do (Matt. 24:1-25:46). Parallel to proclaiming the gospel, the task of the church was to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, be hospitable to the stranger, clothe the poor, visit the prisoner, and look after the sick. The social concern thus expressed was to be one of the primary tasks of the community awaiting the final realization of the Kingdom of Jesus.



Woman with Sleeping Child (*Arbeiterfrau mit schlafendem Jungen*), 1927. Lithograph by Käthe Kollwitz

## Applications to a Modern Prophetic Community

In short, there are several different roles that the prophets in Jewish society were called upon to fulfill. Most of the time Adventists concentrate on the prophets' eschatological role. However, in reality, this part of prophetic ministry was secondary to their role of calling the people back to the God-given socio-economic and ethical principles enshrined in the Ten Commandments and Jesus' elaboration (Matt. 5:17-48) and summary (Luke 10:27) of them. As a "prophetic movement," which Seventh-day Adventists believe themselves to be, the church should balance the proclamations about future events and eschatological predictions with calling people back to God-given principles of socio-economic justice, Christian ethics and human rights based on the moral law of the Old Testament and the explanation of it by the greatest of all Jewish prophets and founder of the Christian church—Jesus Christ. As Patrick J. O'Mahony rightly observed: "In biblical times justice needed a prophet. Today, as ever, prophets are needed. From its very beginnings, the Christian community had a prophetic role."<sup>50</sup> Seventh-day Adventists, as well as all other Christians, are called to fulfil this role in the modern world.

## Second Coming of Christ Relevance of Belief in the Second Coming

Until recently only religious people talked about the "end of the world." More recently it has become a concern of many thinking people. Today, more than ever, one can see the living relevance of Christian eschatology, and especially its crown, the Second Coming of Christ. Christian eschatology speaks directly to the present, as one observes such phenomena of the modern world as the possibility of nuclear annihilation, the real possibility of environmental disaster, overpopulation, and prospects of starving to death or poisoning ourselves with pollution. As one Adventist commented, "The doctrine of last things doesn't deal with the far-off future. It speaks to the present. It is as timely as the morning paper and the hourly newscast."<sup>51</sup>

Although in the traditional arrangement of Christian theology the doctrine of the second coming comes at the end, it is not a footnote or an afterthought.

Instead, the Second Coming becomes the climax to which all the rest leads, or as Rice framed it, "the ringing conclusion of all that Christians have to say."<sup>52</sup> Many biblical scholars hold that eschatology not only applies to part of what Christians believe, but to all of it. John T. Robinson, a well-known British theologian, is an example:

"... all statements about the End ... are fundamentally affirmations about God, [and] every statement about God is ipso facto an assertion about the end, a truth about eschatology."<sup>53</sup>

Rice's conclusion is that the Second Coming is a part of the process of human history. Actually it becomes the climax of this process. In his words, "Christian faith interprets human history as a whole, not just its final segment. It views all of history in the light of God's saving activity, and it sees the end of history as the climax of the process."<sup>54</sup>

## Possible Negative Effects of Belief in the Second Coming

### *Overexcitement*

Seventh-day Adventists, alongside some other Christians, believe in the Second Advent. The effects of this belief are important within our study of social ethics. As Samuele Bacchiocchi pointed out, in living the Advent hope two dangers exist: overexcitement and indifference. "There have been Christians in every age who became so excited at the thought of Christ's imminent Coming that they gave up all efforts to work for their personal future or for that of the society in which they lived."<sup>55</sup> Bacchiocchi illustrated his point with a simile of the sinking ship:

"[Some Christians today] view the present world as a sinking ship and so they see no value in setting the course, polishing the brass or mending the sails. Rather than working on the ship, they spend their time on lifeboats, warning from a distance the passengers on the ship of its impending doom. They regard any attempt to improve social conditions as futile and unnecessary, since Christ at His Coming will destroy the present sinful world-order."<sup>56</sup>

Sakae Kubo, when expressing the charge that is made against a believer in the Second Coming, put it in similar terms:

"... the person who really believes in the Second Coming of Christ and the end of our world is not alert to and cannot have any concern about improving human social conditions. He is so otherworldly that he



loses all sense of involvement in our world. Wrapped up only in his own individual salvation, he feels nothing for his neighbor and his plight.<sup>57</sup>

This charge of isolationism and non-involvement was exposed head on by a non-Adventist theologian, Max Warren, when he said that

“the real reason for the failure of Second Adventism to win support lies in the fact that it affronts the moral conscience of the Church by its virtual abandonment of responsibility for the things of this world in deference to its preoccupation with the imminent return of the Lord and the end of history. Human life, in so far as it is involved in the life of society, is held to lie so completely in “the evil one” that the only safe action is for the Christian to wash his hands of it. On this view the salvation is salvation of the soul alone. No serious attempt is made to consider the soul’s environment.”<sup>58</sup>

### *Indifference*

Another danger to which Christians who wait for Christ’s imminent return are exposed is indifference. In Bacchiocchi’s opinion the vast majority of Christians have become neglectful, even indifferent toward Christ’s Coming. They have made the present world the ultimate reality to live and work for. “For these,” Bacchiocchi continued, “the present world is not a waiting room to the world to come, but a living room in which to live as comfortably and as relaxed as possible.”<sup>59</sup>

Kubo used the idea of the “problem of delay,” a prominent theme in modern Adventism, to explain how the prolonged delay between the proclamation of the “soon” Second Coming and parousia can affect the Advent believers. On one side crying “wolf” too many times, argued Kubo, “can lead to a complete lack of response.” The opposite pole of this reasoning, however, “concludes that if one does not expect an impending return, he can relax and live a careless Christian life.”<sup>60</sup> He resolves:

“The latter kind of reasoning controlled the servant who said to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and began ‘to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk’ (Luke 12:45); and this relaxing is a real danger to those taught that only a sense of Christ’s immediate return can instill the urgency necessary for a fervent Christian life.<sup>61</sup> It is therefore not the timing or the sequence of the Second Coming that should motive the Christian to moral behavior but, instead, the certainty of his coming.”<sup>62</sup>

It is interesting to notice that motivation for ethical behavior, in the context of the servant of Luke

12, was the coming of the Lord. So, contrary to the opinion that the Second Coming is a brake in Christian social involvement, it is rightly portrayed in Luke 12 as the motivating factor. Nevertheless, it is obvious from Christ’s parable and Kubo’s comments on it, that the imminence of the Second Coming should not be the only motivating factor in Christian ethics.

Bacchiocchi rightly called for balance between the two extremes of practical living of the Advent Hope. To be an “adventist,” a Christian who lives in the expectancy of Christ’s Coming, concluded Bacchiocchi, “. . . means to avoid both the overexcitement which writes off the present world as doomed, and the indifference which makes the present world the ultimate reality for which to live and work. It means ‘to live sober, upright and godly lives’ (Titus 2:12), maintaining the delicate balance between being concretely involved in the salvation of this world, and not becoming so entangled in its affairs as to lose sight of the world to come.”<sup>63</sup>

## Positive Effects of the Certainty of the Coming

The need to explore the meaning of the doctrine of the Second Coming, especially in relationship to the Adventist social ethic, was met most eloquently by Kubo. He raised a number of aspects of the doctrine of the Second Coming that one would do well to examine. The question for Kubo is not “if” but “when” will Jesus Christ come? Jesus’ return is guaranteed by his death, resurrection, and ascension. Since these are accomplished facts, his coming is an absolute certainty.<sup>64</sup> Kubo used Berkouwer’s sentence, “The believer is called to an attitude that does not reckon but constantly reckons with the coming of the Lord.”<sup>65</sup>

Mistakenly, Adventists’ emphasis on reckoning the possible time of Christ’s Coming (captured in a prominent phrase “in our lifetime”) led generation after generation of believers into disappointment at not yet seeing their Lord. However, the most important factor of the Second Coming need not be the imminence of Christ’s return but its reality in our own experience. After all, Kubo suggested, “the instant of [a person’s] death is in effect for him the moment of Christ’s coming. Thus in a real sense, Christ returns for everyone in his lifetime. The urgency of Christian living must center around that point. The actual time of Christ’s coming is not significant—only the fact of it.”<sup>66</sup>

The effect that this kind of understanding of

the Second Coming would have on a believer is inescapable. Even if the Lord returns in “our” time, as generations of Adventists believed—this may be seven or seventy years—there is no room for complacency. The imminence of Christ’s Second Advent is in such a case a reality in every period of the church’s history, from the time of the apostles to the present.

If Christians connect the actual Second Coming with “the necessity to give more generously and to live more fervently,” in other words to be concerned for their fellow human beings because of the nearness of Jesus’ Advent, they will create the impression that only if they feel its approach, need they show concern to live urgently. And this was a trap that the servant in Luke 12 fell into. By implication it would mean that if Jesus’ Coming is not soon,

“ . . . we are justified in living less fervently, less urgently, perhaps even carelessly. In fact, that was the attitude of the servant who, because he felt that his master was delaying, began to beat his workers, to eat and drink and get drunk. But whether Christ’s coming is a thousand years from now should not make one iota of difference in the way we live. That he will come should provide sufficient motive for a dedicated Christian life.”<sup>67</sup>

## The Future Determines the Present

While Rice argued<sup>68</sup> that the hope in the Second Coming sees the future in direct relation to the present to the point of the future actually impinging on the present, threatening to break in at any time, Kubo went beyond this understanding in suggesting that the future actually determines the present and the past.<sup>69</sup> He argued that “before the incarnation of Christ, one’s past determined the future and present.”<sup>70</sup> In Adam all die,<sup>71</sup> was the judgement on all apart from Christ. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”<sup>72</sup> the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans. And since sin was our past and is our present in salvation history, it determined our future—death.<sup>73</sup> However, the Christ event reversed the whole process.

The future does not only impinge on the present, or threaten to break in, but, Kubo argued, it enters the present and affects it.

## YOU WOULD LIKE TO BELIEVE

that they have simply shed their shining skins  
in favor of less brilliance, to dwell  
outside the visible spectrum of light  
and the sweep of our senses, but still do their work

around us among us between us, but the truth is  
that you never actually saw angels at all,  
except in paintings made in a past  
when people still counted on holiness.

Your memory’s museum is lined with their outdated pictures,  
the caption WHERE ARE THEY NOW?  
beneath scenes of human tragedy, averted  
by their protective gestures, by their

stalwart wings of feathers sculpted from light,  
their immaculate robes—all of it, substantial enough  
for Jacob to wrestle, incarnate enough  
to fend the crouching lion’s pounce,

to guide children lost in a storm  
away from the hungry precipice  
waiting to claim them. Does the dream  
need dreamers in order to exist

or take form? Do angels believe in us, still?

How would you know, except for the way  
crickets sometimes fall silent and the cat  
asleep at your feet raises her head to listen;  
how else would you know they are out there

right now, fugitive colors taking shape,  
making camp, sharpening swords of invisible light,  
scanning your darkness outside their circle,  
the burning ring of their presence

here on earth, in spite of your blindness.  
You want to believe that right now  
they are pitching their tents  
around you and the people whose bodies  
you hold as dear as your own, whose heads  
rest heavy beside you on pillows  
filled with the leavings of wings.

—Pat Cason

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"Eternal life, the Holy Spirit, and justification we experience now, yet they are of the age to come. The ultimate certainty of the future blessings effected through the coming of the second Adam makes it possible to bring the future into the present."<sup>74</sup>

The future, for some Christians, indeed becomes "opium for masses." They falsely think of the parousia as a compensation for their various lacks in the present life. Hope, in such reasoning, becomes only a wish projection of the deprived. The Second Coming, and what it will bring, becomes mere wishful thinking, a hope which is but a compensation for what people do not or cannot have here and now. Kubo's thesis, however, is that the parousia is not "the promise of what we need or would like, but a fulfillment of what we even now experience."<sup>75</sup> Kubo reasoned:

"And those who look to Christian hope as a compensation have a fragile hope because it depends on human circumstances. . . . We grow beyond such hope when we become better educated and better employed. Our earthly mansions can take the place of the heavenly, our Cadillacs for the heavenly chariots, our stylish wardrobes for the white robe of righteousness, our table delicacies for the tree of life. Because so many Christians view hope in such manner, their hope diminishes as their bank account increases."<sup>76</sup>

On the other hand, Christians should not long for the parousia to the extent of forgetting the present. The parousia must not be a compensation, but a consummation. In the words of J. Fison, "Present presence and future parousia do not disappear or coalesce in a timeless eternity. They are two inseparable but irreducible elements in that single reality of love, of which the more you have in the present the more you know awaits you in the future."<sup>77</sup>

Fison pointed out that "Without faith in the real presence, belief in the real parousia . . . is phantasy: without faith in the real parousia, belief in the real presence is idolatry."<sup>78</sup> Fison's influence on Kubo is apparent. The present hope, although not identical with the future realization, is nevertheless closely related. The parousia, as Kubo understood, is the fulfillment of the present experience. Kubo quoted Emil H. Brunner: "The hope which springs from faith is so much a part of the life of faith that one must say: the future, for which it hopes, is the present in which the believer lives."<sup>79</sup> The consequences of such a view for social ethics are obvious. If the believer lives out now the hope of the future, such hope will inevitably penetrate the sphere of human rights. In other words, the justice and equality that the believer expects God to establish at the time of Christ's

Coming must be the same justice and equality that encompass the present life of the believer.

## The Paradox of the Eschatological Motif

C. S. Lewis has been credited with the thought that "only since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world have they become so ineffective in this. The rule seems to be that if you aim at heaven, you get earth 'thrown in.' Aim at earth and you will get neither."<sup>80</sup> Paradoxically, it is suggested, only a person who lives with a vision of the Second Coming can truly feel the concern for the present world. On the other hand, a person whose vision is limited to the present world cannot logically worry about love, right, justice, and truth—about others. Kubo, in support of this view, quotes Robert McAfee Brown:

"Among the New Testament Christians, the fact of the matter is that eschatology did not lead to irresponsibility or neglect of this world. On the contrary, their concern with the "age to come" made them live more responsibly in the present age. This is the fact which can be documented."<sup>81</sup>

It is true that the first Christian church did not attempt to change the social order from the outside by revolution. Rather it worked from within by conversion. But the changes of its influence were nevertheless far-reaching. Paul, for example, by spreading the good news about the God made without hands touched the vested interests of the Artemis cult in Ephesus, by freeing the slave girl with the spirit of divination challenged her and other owners of such girls, and by treating Onesimus in a new way dealt a mortal blow to those businesses which depended on people's ignorance (cf. Acts 19:23-41; Phil. 1:8-16). And finally, the yeast of the early Christian era worked its way to the point, even if only unintentionally, to the establishment of a Christian state.

Kubo summed up the point about the paradox of the eschatological motif in social ethics in an illustration about the sinking ship:

"Nevertheless, the decent person is one who, though he knows that he is on a floundering ship doomed to a watery burial, refuses simply to think of saving himself by secretly escaping alone on a lifeboat. He ministers to the needy and for the welfare of all concerned, even though he may well realize that no hope remains for any of them. The Christian cannot do any less, and paradoxically the eschatological motive with its implication that there exists a righteous loving God in

control of all things intensifies his desire to act in the way of his Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself not only for His friends but for His enemies.”<sup>82</sup>

The argument, therefore, that a believer expecting the Coming of the Lord and believing that our present world will vanish has no interest in people, their rights, and their environment collapses. To the contrary, the believer with an insight of biblical eschatology knows that the God of love, justice, rightness, truth, and morality is in control of history, and this motivates the believer to live all the more responsibly, upholding and promoting the human rights of all people.

Also, the certainty of the Second Coming of Christ helps him create the right perspective and balance in prioritizing his time and energy. The eschatological orientation helps him to see which things are really important. It brings priorities into the right focus. In expecting the end of the present age, some things become more vital than others. The life of the eschatological Christian must be dedicated to God in service for others. Just as in the parable of the sheep and the goat, which occurs in the context of the discourse on the Second Coming,<sup>83</sup> the Christian knows that his service to Christ now is expressed in the person of the poor, the prisoner, the disadvantaged, the needy, and miserable.

## Eschatology—an Additional Motif

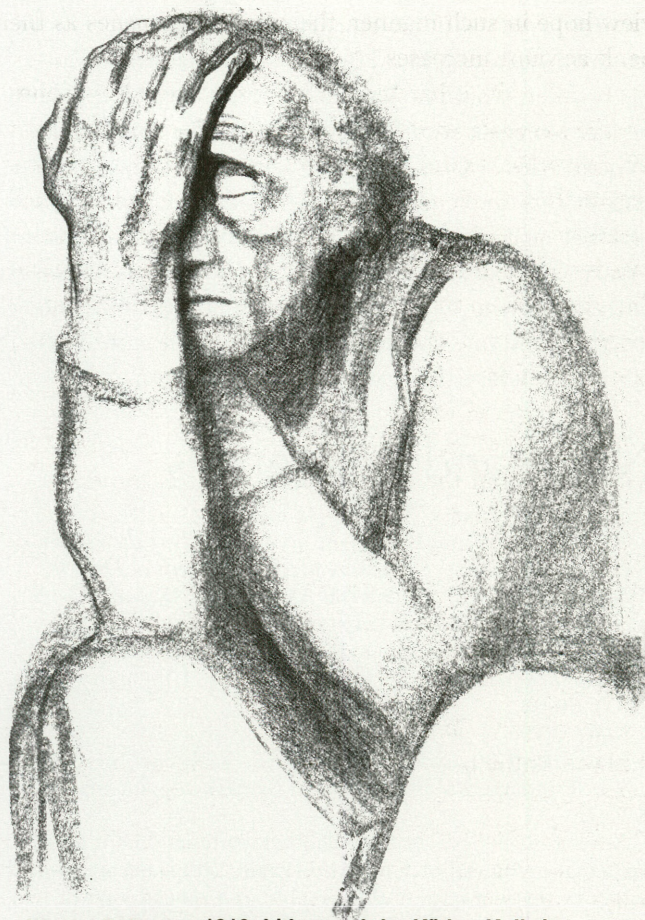
Lastly, as Kubo observed, Christian social ethics does not rest directly and fundamentally on eschatology.<sup>84</sup> Godlikeness and the commandment of love are, in his opinion, the basic warrant for social action. Jesus did not allow his predictions of the future to affect the content of his moral teaching. His teaching is directed toward the need of the neighbor and not toward eschatology. The story of the Good Samaritan, for example, lacks an eschatological motive. Jesus’ command is simply, “Go and do likewise.”<sup>85</sup>

However, the eschatological motif is not entirely absent either. Although not as the primary reason, Kubo argued that “a kind of ‘eschatological’ motive for ethics appears in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21), i.e., that death can overtake us by surprise.”<sup>86</sup> Although the eschatological factor is rarely the primary reason for social ethics, it is nevertheless given on occasions as an additional motif. For Kubo,

the significant factor in the discussion of the theology of the Second Coming, especially in the context of social ethics, is that “the eschatological motive is not an excuse to be unconcerned with ethics but an additional basis to be intensely more so.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, the Second Coming need not be an obstacle for the involvement in human rights but should become, although not necessarily the primary, at least an additional incentive for social ethics.

## Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists, together with other Christians, find a basis for human rights in the dignity and human worth found in the theology of Creation, in the nature of human beings created in the image of God, and especially in the understanding of the Kingdom of God in terms of present reality as well as the future expectancy. Beside this common theological basis for human rights, Seventh-day Adventists contribute to the understanding of the theory of human rights through such aspects of theology as: the importance of



*Woman Reflecting, 1919. Lithograph by Käthe Kollwitz*

the moral law in the present life of each believer; the equality that the theology of the Sabbath offers to all creation regardless of culture, time, or circumstances as a sign of the true liberation; the self-understanding of the prophetic community raised to bring the present truth to the contemporary world; and the Second Coming of Christ, which may not be the primary but certainly is additional incentive for justice, equality, and peace.

Other important aspects of Christian theology, such as soteriology and ecclesiology, would also throw a certain light on the subject but cannot be dealt with in the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that Christian theology, and Adventist thought within it, does make a substantial contribution to the understanding of human rights.

For the Christian, this understanding is not an academic theory. When accepted, it becomes her way of life. For the Christian, theory and practice are two sides of the same coin interwoven together, since the Christian believes that her salvation occurs only in her relationship with God. In her relationship to her fellow human being, this salvation is tested. John, in his first epistle, put this thought in a nutshell: "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:19-21). For the committed Christian, an understanding and practical application of human rights concepts are second nature. They are a natural consequence of his or her faith in a loving God, who desires that human beings love him and one another and even place the interests of others before their own (Matt. 22:37-39).

## Notes and References

1. See "Fundamental Belief 18," in *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), 232.
2. See, for example, C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law: Bampton Lectures in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 62-63.
3. Matt. 5:19.
4. Matt. 22:37-39; cf. Deut. 6:4-5.
5. See "Fundamental Belief 19," in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*.
6. Adventists believe that the Sabbath commandment is "a perpetual memorial of Creation" (Exod. 20:11-12) and that it points to the worship of the Creator as a special sign of loyalty (Rev. 14:7-12). Cf. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 255-58.
8. For example see Sakae Kubo, *God Meets Man: A Theology of the Sabbath and Second Coming* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978); Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1980); and Richard Rice, *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1985).
9. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 7.
10. Philo, *On the Creation*, cited in *ibid.*, 19.
11. See, for example, how Jack W. Provonsha illustrates this point by the use of "a black rock in the midst of the garden" as an inadequate sign for human beings in *A Remnant in Crisis* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1993), 86.
12. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 24.
13. *Ibid.*, 27.
14. Provonsha, *Remnant in Crisis*, 87.
15. Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest*, 194-95.
16. Rice, *Reign of God*, 370.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Charles E. Bradford, "The Sabbath and Liberation: With the Sabbath, No One Can Keep Us Down," in *Anchor Points* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1993), 28.
19. *Ibid.*, 29, 31.
20. *Ibid.*, 28.
21. *Ibid.*, 30.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 31.

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24. Ezek. 20:10-12, 20.
25. Bradford, "Sabbath and Liberation," 32.
26. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 46. Cf. Kubo, "The Experience of Liberation," in *Festival of the Sabbath*, ed. Roy Branson, (Takoma Park, Md.: Association of Adventist Forums, 1986), 43-54.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid, 130-57.
29. This suggests also certain environmental rights.
30. Rice, *Reign of God*, 370.
31. Charles Teel, "Withdrawing Sect, Accommodating Church, Prophesying Remnant: Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Adventism," unpublished manuscript for the presentation at the 1980 Theological Consultation for Seventh-day Adventist Administrators and Religion Scholars, Loma Linda University, 1980.
32. Gen. 20:7.
33. Deut. 34:10.
34. Deut. 18:15ff.
35. For this division into four elements of prophetic ethics, I am indebted to Walter Harrelson. See his "Prophetic Ethics," in James E. Childress and John Macguarrie, eds., *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 508-12.
36. See, for example, Deut. 30:15-20.
37. Exod. 23:3; and Deut. 16:19-20.
38. Isa. 5:8.
39. Deut. 7:6-11.
40. Cf. 1 John 4:9-10.
41. Provonsha, *Remnant in Crisis*, 50.
42. Ibid., 50-51.
43. Though the theme of social concern is reflected throughout all prophets, three Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and seven Minor Prophets (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Malachi) illustrate this most emphatically.
44. Amos pointed to the following sins of the nation: exploitation and oppression of the poor (4:1; 5:11; 8:4-6), corrupt and degenerate religious practice (2:4, 6), corruption of justice and righteousness (5:7-10; 6:12), unnecessary riches (6:4), and neglect of God's law (2:8; 8:5). He saw a solution to these sins in repentance (4:12, 13; 5:4-13) and, consequently, if sins were not repented, in punishment and judgment (2:5, 13-16; 3:2; 5:25-27).
- Hosea termed prostitution (4:11-18), lying (4:2; 7:1), violence and murder (4:2; 6:8-9), robbery (7:1; 4:2), drunkenness (4:11; 7:5), idolatry (4:12; 8:4; 13:2), and rebellion against God (9:15; 13:16) the greatest sins of his time. His proposed solution was again repentance or destruction in God's judgment (5:1-14; 8:1-9; 14:1).
- Isaiah marked the sins of God's people of his time as idolatry (2:8), injustice (5:7; 59:8), bloodshed (59:7), rebellion (1:5; 57:4), neglect of widows (1:23; 10:2), heavy drinking (5:11; 28:1-7), and oppression of the poor (3:14-15; 10:2). Again, like other prophets, Isaiah saw the solution either in repentance and God's forgiveness, or in facing judgment, punishment, and destruction. Inevitably, Isaiah emphasized, Messiah will come and establish social justice in his millennial Kingdom.
45. Luke 7:22b.
46. Branislav Mirilov, "An Examination of the Response of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to Some contemporary Socio-Political Issues in the Light of the Two Distinctive Adventist Doctrines: A Comparison of North America and former Yugoslavia" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Birmingham) deals with the relationship of religious minorities

- from the perspective of the book of Revelation, comparing it with the experience of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in "An Examination of the Response," (1994).
47. Cf. Rev 2:2, 9-10, 13, 21-22; 12:1-7; and 13:4, 15-16.
48. Luke 4:18-21. Cf. Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, trans. Marguerite Wieser (London: SCM Press, 1961).
49. Matt. 4:23; 15:30.
50. O'Mahony, *The Fantasy of Human Rights* (Great Wakening: Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1978), 139.
51. Rice, *Reign of God*, 311.
52. Ibid.
53. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 22, 47.
54. Rice, *Reign of God*, 312.
55. Bacchiocchi, *The Advent Hope for Human Hopelessness: A Theological Study of the Meaning of the Second Coming for Today* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1986), 398.
56. Ibid., 399.
57. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 105.
58. Warren, *The Truth of Vision: A Study in the Nature of the Christian Hope* (London and Edinburgh: The Canterbury Press, 1948), 53.
59. Bacchiocchi, *Advent Hope*, 399.
60. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 98.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 99. Cf. Rice, *Reign of God*, 312.
63. Bacchiocchi, *Advent Hope*, 399-400.
64. Cf. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 97-104.
65. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), 84.
66. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 102-3.
67. Ibid., 103.
68. Rice, *Reign of God*, 346.
69. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 91.
70. Ibid.
71. See 1 Cor. 15:22.
72. Rom. 3:23.
73. Rom. 5:12.
74. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 92.
75. Ibid., 93.
76. Ibid.
77. Fison, *The Christian Hope: The Presence and the Parousia* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1954), 221.
78. Ibid., 4.
79. Brunner, *Eternal Hope*, trans. Harold Knight, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 30, cited in Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 93.
80. Colin Morris, *The Hammer of the Lord* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), 137-38.
81. Brown, "'Eschatological Hope' and Social Responsibility," *Christianity and Crisis*, Nov. 16, 1953, 147.
82. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 108.
83. Cf. Matt. 24 and 25.
84. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 106-11.
85. Luke 10:37.
86. Kubo, *God Meets Man*, 107.
87. Ibid.

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