

Time, Chance, and God's Designs

Reflections on Gorden Doss's Call for a Theology of Wealth and Poverty

By A. Gregory Schneider

Gorden Doss's article has driven me back to the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, the man said to be among the wisest of all. This particular bit of wisdom, however, I was reared to reject:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all. (Eccles. 9:11 KJV)

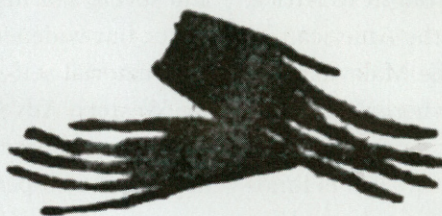
The Preacher's dark assessment of human striving underlines one of the most difficult of Doss's findings from Malawi: a fatalistic, even predestinarian folk doctrine of human wealth and poverty.

In the West, especially in the United States, we need to believe in the efficacy of our striving and in the moral power of our abilities. "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?" is a longstanding American aphorism bespeaking our bedrock belief that riches and favor do indeed go to individuals of understanding and skill. We live

in a culture of merit, and those of us with graduate degrees, upward career trajectories, and mortgages well paid down believe in our hearts that we got it all on the strength of our talents and virtues.

Here lie the reasons for our repugnance at Malawian fatalism. If the Malawians are poor due to God's decree, the logical corollary is that we are rich for the same reason. It means we wealthy Westerners did not earn our social status and creature comforts by means of our free and energetic action.

We must repress such a realization. It robs us of a major basis for self-esteem, that indispensable, indeed, sacred, state of mind without which psychic survival in the West seems impossible. To lose the sense that I earned it, is to lose our grip on that most precious of Western feelings: feeling good about myself.



North American Adventists are likely to have a similar discomfort with Malawians' worldview of limited wealth and the culture of envy it encourages. The people envied and censured in Malawian communities—the prosperous people—are likely to be the people chosen for the board of elders in North American Adventist congregations. Our well-to-do lay elders are models to the young people of our congregations of what they may, indeed must, strive for—not object lessons of greed and ill deeds.

We Westerners, then, are likely to deny validity to the Malawian perspective on riches or poverty and ask

Malawians give to family and fellow Adventists ... because the gift is the indispensable material embodiment of the bonds of blood and of the Spirit.

only the questions that will allow us to continue to feel good about ourselves: How may we improve their health and education but avoid allowing them to become dependent on hand-outs? How may we use our mission contributions not to encourage pre-Christian African fatalism, but rather to motivate these people to better themselves? How may we teach these people the virtues of deferred gratification, of competitive self-reliance and enterprise? When will they learn that God smiles upon industry and initiative and hard work? That God helps those who help themselves?

OK, I admit to having just crossed the line that divides summary from caricature—but not by much. In truth, I believe our Western capitalist culture makes it very difficult for us truly to believe in salvation by faith, except perhaps as a psychic nostrum for attaining the “good feeling” about ourselves that we need in order to compete effectively for economic gain and social prestige. Clinging to our capitalist coping mechanisms under the guise of religious faith makes it hard to hear the African “Other” who is also our Adventist brother. Yet the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, speaking out from the Bible Western missionaries brought to Africa, sides more with the African than with the American.

That is likely due to the fact that the Malawians, as did the Preacher, come from societies where subsistence agriculture is what 90 percent or more of the population does. Such people know that wealth is limited with about the same certainty they have about their feet pressing into the earth. That earth only produces so much, and its limited bounty must be carefully hus-

banded to see family and community into the next growing season. Rain falling upon the just and unjust alike, it makes sense to believe that one who prospers well beyond his neighbors must have done something illicit to gain his advantage.

Societies faced with such scarcity in their environments develop patterns of exchange that help distribute goods over wider regions so that groups deprived of rain or other sources of fertility by time and chance might still have their needs met. Even outright giveaways make sense in the long run, because eventually the rain or the soil will fail or blight or pest will attack

and one's own group will need to receive as it gave to others in earlier seasons. Its reality is that of a fragile “piggy bank,” to use Doss's metaphor, as surely, indeed more so, as reality in the United States is that of a limitless “faucet.” More so because even a capitalist system must depend on resources that are limited, though true-believing free-market fundamentalists will attempt to deny it.

Doss appears to have such true believers in mind when, using Williams's seven-part typology of Christian positions on wealth, he urges us to resist the temptation to fall into position two, wealth can only be created/earned, or position four, poverty is too complicated a problem to be solved. Both these positions become temptations, Doss implies, when our projects for changing African Others into Us are frustrated by hard economic and cultural realities. Both positions encourage us to throw up our hands in disgust or despair and thus abandon the global poor.

But abandonment, declares Doss, is unacceptable on both ethical and missiological grounds. He seems to favor, instead, a combination of positions six, charity, and seven, sharing, like his Malawian study participants, but widened to include position five, simplicity and material self-sacrifice for the sake of others. If we Western Adventists do not buck our own cultural currents and practice self-sacrifice, he warns, we will deprive the 85 percent of Adventists in the world's poor countries of essential material resources for carrying on the Church's mission.

Just as important, I would like to suggest, is the

Malawian insight that charity and sharing have symbolic value beyond any actual material comfort they provide. Malawians give to family and fellow Adventists even when they have little more than a handful of corn to give. They do so not because they believe the gift is likely to banish poverty but because the gift is the indispensable material embodiment of the bonds of blood and of the Spirit. It is the way to demonstrate that deprivation does not cut a poor person off from the living community or condemn her to inferiority and abandonment. Among Malawians, therefore, no matter how extreme their poverty, there is likely to be no homelessness. Here is another contrast with the United States, where homelessness abounds in the midst of extreme wealth.

The extremes of wealth and poverty within the U.S. economy echo even greater extremes in the global economy and raise a fundamental question about God's designs in offering salvation to humankind. When Doss recites the Great Commission, "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations and then shall the end come" (Matt. 24:14), what gospel does he have in mind? The question is not flippant, nor is an answer obvious.

There was in Rwanda, for instance, a Seventh-day Adventist gospel that led some Rwandese church members to be scrupulous about Sabbath observance even as they slaughtered their ethnic rivals. They asked their pastors whether it was good Sabbath keeping to continue the genocide on the seventh day or if they ought to rest from their labors. I was told this tale by a graduate of Maxwell Academy who was my student in a cultural anthropology course, a young man who had lost his father in the slaughter. It appears that fundamental social divisions fraught with huge moral and spiritual meanings were bypassed when the gospel was imparted to these Rwandese brothers and sisters.

This was not the first time Seventh-day Adventists have attempted to bypass social divisions in hopes of imparting a gospel they felt existed somehow above or beyond this world's structures of injustice. American Adventists bypassed the

color line in order to preach their end-time gospel to African-Americans in the era of Jim Crow. The resulting legacy of institutional and de facto segregation and ongoing racial tension in North American Adventism, like Adventist complicity in Rwanda's genocide, raises serious questions about the wisdom and integrity of a gospel framed in bypass mode.

Thus, when Doss asks us to construct a theology of wealth and poverty for the sake of furthering our Adventist end-time mission, we must ask in rejoinder what the function of such a theology is to be. Is it to bypass the inequities of the world economy for the sake of a gospel whose essence is somehow above such inequities and neutral to them? Or is it to declare a gospel that moves us to confront, resist, and, perhaps, transform the powers that create and sustain such inequities?

This is a stark, binary posing of the question, and perhaps Doss or others who specialize in Adventist missions have in mind a third way to an answer. Long years of contemplating "bypass gospels" have convinced me, however, that any gospel that is not a *social* gospel cannot be *the* gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of the Kingdom designed by God. In a globalizing world, such a gospel would move especially Christians in the rich countries to analyze and confront the principalities and powers that are creating and enforcing the economic inequity and social chaos that haunt Doss's writing. Confronting and transforming the powers are as much a part of God's designs as planting churches and building up his family of believers.

A. Gregory Schneider is a professor of behavioral science at Pacific Union College.

