



The George Brown Story and Adventist Race Relations | BY BENJAMIN BAKER

Race relations in Adventism are a turbulent and often-ignored subject. More than sixty years have elapsed since the creation of regional conferences for the African American members, and the conferences endure although the surrounding culture has changed. What many Adventists may not know or remember, however, is that a black man was nominated to the presidency of the General Conference. The year was 1990, the place Indianapolis, Indiana. The Church was engrossed in debates over woman's ordination, tithe appropriations, leadership, and conference structure.

The Nominating Dilemma

Neal Wilson, the incumbent General Conference president, had held the post for twelve years and chose to submit his name for nomination once again. Wilson was highly respected by the constituents, and the Church had made significant progress under his leadership. After the nominating committee took several ballots, two candidates emerged as frontrunners: Neal C. Wilson and George W. Brown.

George Brown was born on January 11, 1924, in the Dominican Republic to an Antiguan father and Dominican mother. His native language was Spanish and he was a third-generation Adventist. Brown earned his bachelor's degree in theology from Caribbean Union College in 1948 and served successfully as a pastor and evangelist for a decade. He married Carla Brown in 1952, and the couple had four daughters. He received his master's degree in systematic theology and doctor of divinity degree from Andrews University. Brown held

numerous positions in the Inter-American Division, including the presidency of Caribbean Union College.

In 1980, Brown assumed the presidency of the Inter-American Division. For a decade, he provided extraordinary leadership, at once conservative and progressive. The division experienced unprecedented growth. He was known for his adroitness at reconciliation and unification.

The Nominating Committee had a decision to make, and the delegation voted decisively for Brown, 130 to 81.

Time for a Decision

A messenger was dispatched to find Brown. The 211 voting delegates were asked to stay in the room so that the choice would not be broadcast before Brown was notified. It took some time to find the nominee. The chair, Robert Folkenberg, then president of the Carolina Conference, and secretary, Benjamin Reaves, then president of Oakwood College, broke the news to Brown and urged him to accept. The sixty-six-year-old Brown was surprised. He asked for a day to think it over and promised to have an answer on Friday by 5:00 p.m.

Brown and his family went to a private place to talk the matter over. Brown describes this as "the most excruciating experience I have ever had." He was honored that the Church thought him the man to lead it, but he had serious issues to consider. He was nearing seventy years in age. His beloved wife of almost forty years was

ill. If he accepted the presidency, he would have to travel a great deal of the time, which meant that he would be away from his wife. Brown was in prayer and deep thought for much of the night and morning. Pressure came from all sides for him to accept.

The Breakthrough

During that gauntlet of a day of prayer and thought, Brown reached the conclusion that God was not leading him to accept the presidency. When he realized this, he recalls that a peace came over him and he could not be moved by any arguments or suggestions to the contrary. Brown announced his declension to the committee before 5:00 p.m. on Friday, as he had promised. Robert Folkenberg told the nominating committee: "A nightmare of nightmares has occurred. Elder Brown has decided not to accept."

The committee then selected Folkenberg for the presidency, but that is another story.

Although this critical episode has been largely forgotten, it is important to keep in mind that the Seventh-day Adventist Church nominated a black man to be the president of the world church eighteen years before the United States seriously approached the possibility. That 1990 General Conference Session was a breakthrough in race relations in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ■

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Who Is Our Neighbor Really? | BY VAUGHN NELSON

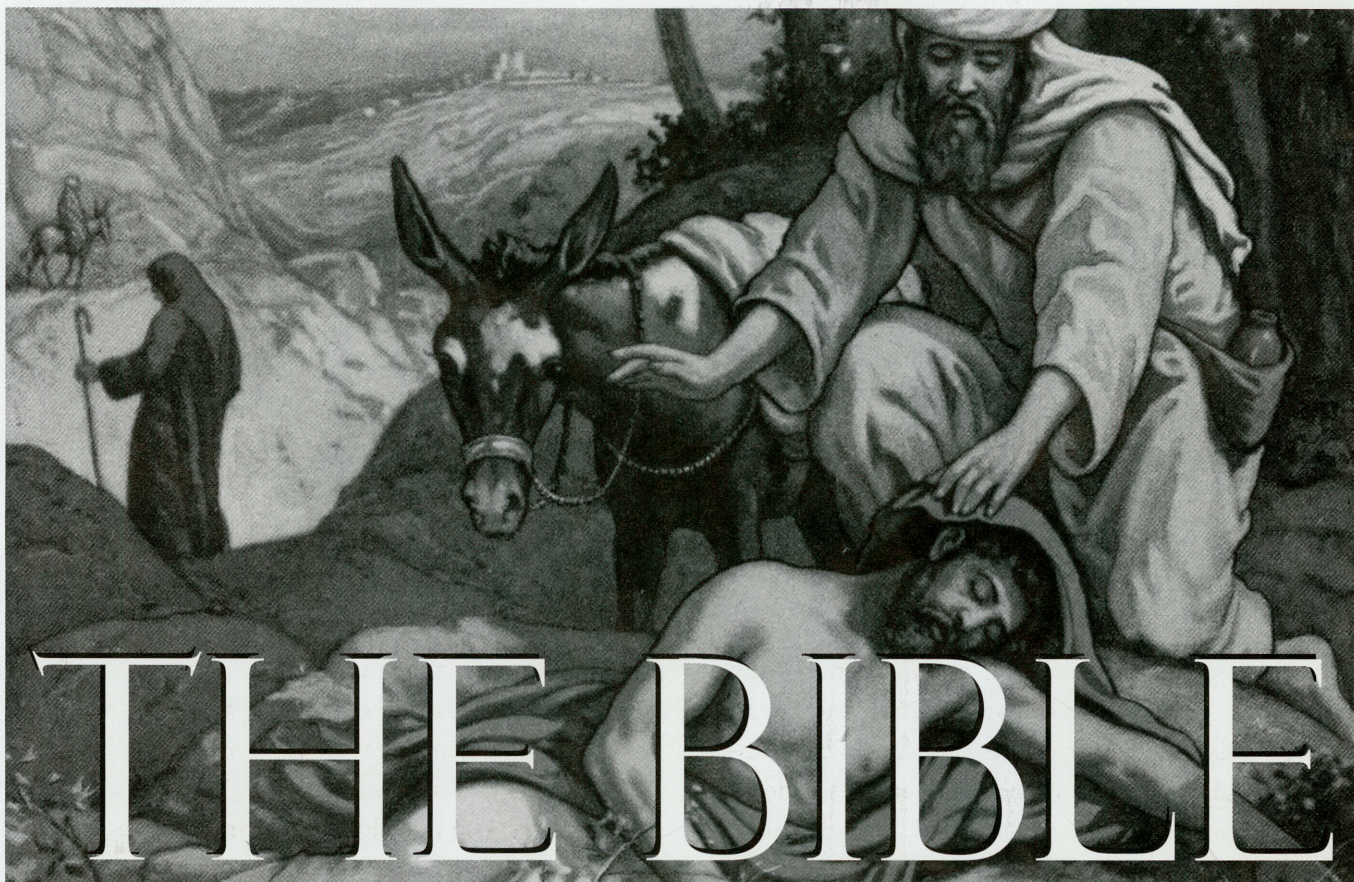
I recently preached a series in my church on some of the minor prophets. I chose to begin with Obadiah. When a colleague noticed the commentaries on my desk opened to Obadiah, he exclaimed, "You're not afraid of anything!" I rather enjoyed what may or may not have been intended as a compliment. But now in retrospect, it occurs to me that perhaps I should have felt a bit more trepidation toward Obadiah than I did.

I have a confession to make—especially to biblical scholars. Sometimes a preacher might experience the temptation to tweak a reading of a text for the sake of a good sermon. I think my sermon from Obadiah was

one of those (rare) cases.

Here's a refresher for those who don't read Obadiah for their morning devotions. In twenty-one verses, Obadiah the prophet brings the word of the Lord to the people—except in this case it's an oracle against a nation, Edom, to be exact. God's complaint against the Edomites begins at verse 10:

10 For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. 11 On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them. (NRSV)



Taken alone, these words of judgment against acts of violence and lack of concern for a neighbor in distress are irresistible fodder for a sermon on the Christian responsibility to stand in solidarity with our neighbors in times of need, even our global neighbors.

Upon further reflection, I am not sure this reading catches the thrust of Obadiah. It doesn't take a very nuanced reading of the rest of the book to get a different picture. In the end, the Day of the Lord will be a dark day for these Edomite neighbors and a day of vindication for God's own people. So much for solidarity. Honestly, I like this reading less.

In Obadiah's defense, his historical context is worth noting. The work most likely emerges from the exilic period. This was a time of absolute existential, theological, political crisis for the exiled Jews. In a sense, it is another exercise in prophetic theodicy. So perhaps hearing Obadiah trying desperately to answer the question "Where is God now?" gives us some patience with him. It's hard to ask too much in the way of altruism of a people in such turmoil.

Even given Obadiah's context, we may be uneasy with this reading of the prophet's response to the neighbors. Must we respond to crisis with a destruction of the neighbor? Perhaps we need to search for another biblical model of neighborly conduct.

Luke 10 may be the first place we turn when thinking about the meaning of being a neighbor. The Good Samaritan. Go and do likewise. The common reading of this parable renders it as an example parable. The (surprisingly!) good Samaritan becomes the model for the hearer/reader to go and likewise do acts of compassion for people—even people you don't like or who don't like you. This seems preferable to Obadiah's approach. Here we challenge ourselves to higher moral ground; we respond to crisis by becoming doers of good.

This is a popular parable, but its traditional reading is not necessarily the best one. As long ago as the 1970s, Robert Funk noted that a reading in which the reader models herself after the Samaritan who shows mercy requires a rather strange shift in the reader's sympathy—from robbed traveler to heroic Samaritan—that is not obviously intended. In fact, Jesus'

question to the lawyer—"Who was a neighbor to the man, the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan?"—suggests that the three passersby are parallel and the reader's sympathy is to remain with the beaten man in the ditch.

Hence the answer to the lawyer's query about whom he must love as a neighbor is not a recommendation that the lawyer become a champion of good works, just as the Samaritan; rather, the answer is for the lawyer to recognize his own vulnerability and need of the neighborliness of the despised other, the outsider. We can imagine that these were much harder words for this lawyer, who surely craved the satisfaction of doing good works to a neighbor.

The lure to interpret the good Samaritan parable as a call to acts of compassion and altruism is strong. Although I would not go so far as one author as to call it narcissism, there does seem to be some self-interest in this reading. Identifying with (or even challenging oneself to become) the good Samaritan provides welcome relief from, say, the approach to neighborliness seen in Obadiah.

Whereas Obadiah's abandoned, beaten captives long for the final destruction of their passive, unhelpful neighbors, the reader of Jesus' parable escapes the role of victim by becoming the subject who does heroic good works for an undeserving "neighbor": heaping coals of compassion, as it were. To be an actor of compassion is to remain in a position of power and control without the dubious desire for retribution.

Icertainly do not intend to cast doubt over the altruistic life. And were this Lukan parable the lone foundation for Christian good works to the other (especially the surprising other), I would not tamper with it. But I assume we all can agree that compassion, service, and good works are fairly basic to the biblical witness. That established, I think Luke's parable pushes us toward another kind of response to the other.

This third approach to others does not manipulate the other to be either an object of my condemnation or an object of my heroics; instead, Jesus' parable invites the reader to remain in that altogether vulnerable position of receiving compassion and grace from the despised other.

I loosen my grasp on the very power to define who is my neighbor, who belongs. Being on the receiving end of neighborly compassion leaves a lot of initiative in the hands of the other. And that is risky.

I do not by any means intend to dismiss the prior two responses to neighbors. The confounding beauty of the canon is that all those responses are there, and we should not just throw them out.

- The eschatological vindication of the abused, beaten captives (to abstract a bit from Obadiah) is powerful in a context of oppression, disillusionment, and crisis.
- The initiative to become actors who specialize in compassion, even toward the most unlovable recipients, is desperately needed in the world (to borrow from Burt Bacharach).
- But we should not stop short of the message of Jesus' parable of the vulnerable victim who receives help from the outsider and must rethink his definition of a neighbor.
- Such vulnerability is, after all, at the heart of the gospel. God opens Godself in to the world. God includes the other. God invites us to participate in the divine life. And so God invites us as persons to such openness. And God calls us as a community, and yes, an institution, to wrestle with loosening our grip on power and control.

There is, of course, a sense in which every community has the right to determine what constitutes membership and belonging, to draw lines that divide those who are "in" from those who are "out." In a way, I suppose that is unavoidable. Postmoderns have shown the inevitability that saying something means saying not something else.

So, I suppose my appeal in the context of Adventism and community is not to abandon our communal identity or even to dispense with drawing boundaries. It seems that they are practically inevitable.

Rather, I wonder what it would look like for the Adventist community to become a reader of Jesus' parable that identifies with the beaten man in the ditch throughout the story. What would it mean to remain vulnerable to the good works of the Samaritan neighbor? What would it mean to relinquish some of the control over who becomes a neighbor (and hence an "insider")?

I have been bothered by a question asked of me this summer by two people very dear to me: "Does your school graduate real Adventist pastors?" My initial reaction to such a question is, "What in the world (literally) do you mean by a 'real' Adventist pastor?"

On the one hand, I recognize an institution's interest in having some semblance of consistency in its representation. But on the other hand, I wonder where the trajectory of these biblical models nudges us. As we ponder Jesus' wounded traveler in the ditch, who might turn out to be the shocking Samaritan who offers compassion to us, who offers wholeness and healing to us, who by that act of caring becomes a neighbor who belongs with us?

What would it mean to loosen our grip—if only a little—on deciding who becomes the neighborly insider? What if the other had some say in it? After all, is there anything more thrilling than someone saying, "I want in! I want to be a Seventh-day Adventist Christian"? And then who are we to dictate point-by-point, detail-by-detail exactly what inclusion means?

My reading of Obadiah was a bit forced because, as anyone who has spent much time with Scripture knows, it's hard not to do sometimes. It's difficult to resist the temptation to manipulate and control the text. It's hard and unsettling to let the text read you (me). Yet good scholars and pastors know that Scripture comes alive most when we have an openness to being touched and changed and ministered to by the text—even the strange, despised texts. Perhaps we are called to that same commitment to openness and vulnerability in our formation of community.

For me it is a great joy and privilege to be an Adventist. I have been richly blessed by belonging to the Adventist community. My hope and prayer is that as we continue to be readers of Scripture, we will continue to be challenged and to grow in our relationship with the other. May God give us the insight and the courage not only to be a people of compassion but also to be people who are open to the compassion and to the belonging of the surprising, unexpected other. ■

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