

Doing Justice to *Do Justice* | BY ROY BRANSON

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The appearance of the book *Do Justice* is an important event. That *Do Justice* has been published by an Adventist publisher may be as noteworthy as what its authors say. Signs Publishing of Australia convinced the president of an official Seventh-day Adventist organization (ADRA) to write the foreword to the book, and two general vice-presidents of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Ella Simmons and Lowell Cooper) to write articles for the volume—a volume that calls church members to become reforming activists in the public square.

Charles Scriven, who has headed two Adventist colleges, points out in his contribution, “Living Ahead,” that within his lifetime and mine, even intellectual leaders of the Adventist Church, such as F. D. Nichol and Raymond Cottrell, opposed efforts to “reform the social order,” regarding them as “political questions” that remained “strictly out of bounds for church and church agencies.” In 1965, when the Selma civil rights march galvanized people of conscience across the country—including some black Adventist leaders—Nichol and Cottrell articulated in the official church paper the dominant position of the denomination—condemnation of civil rights demonstrations as not being part of “preaching the everlasting gospel” and praise for a “more quiet and distinctively Adventist approach” to race relations (p. 80).

While a doctoral student, I joined Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Selma march to Montgomery, Alabama. Before and after, I studied the writings of Ellen White and other denomi-

national leaders in the context of the American Civil War and Reconstruction. To my astonishment, I discovered that early Seventh-day Adventists had identified with their fellow New England abolitionists at a time when most Americans considered them radicals on the race question. When I submitted an essay about this Adventist history to the *Adventist Review*, black Adventist leaders had to pressure the editors before my article was accepted for publication. Five years after the Selma march, when my essay was printed (in three installments), the editors of the *Adventist Review* carefully included an editorial expressing grave reservations about Adventists involving themselves in demonstrations, however peaceful.

Scriven is not the only contributor to *Do Justice* to invoke an Adventist heritage of concern for a more just society, a heritage largely forgotten by the 1920s until its recovery in the second half of the 20th century. Contributor Jeff Boyd, a leader of Tiny Hands, a Christian anti-trafficking organization, quotes an increasingly famous remark by Joseph Bates, one of the three founders of the Adventist Church: “All who embrace this doctrine of the second coming would and must necessarily be advocates of temperance and the abolition of slavery, and those who oppose this doctrine of the second advent would not be very effective labourers in moral reform.” He recalls Ellen White’s counsel to Adventist members regarding the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law: “The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master we are not to obey” (p. 52). As an Adventist who had waited in Selma with other

demonstrators when Martin Luther King refused to march against a court order of a federal judge, I was startled to read this admonition of Ellen White to defy a federal statute that had been voted by the U.S. Congress and signed by the President of the United States.

In his piece, Alex Bryan, senior pastor of the Walla Walla University Church, traces an 81-year-old Ellen White making her last trip across the United States from California to her final General Conference Session in 1909. In Nashville, Tennessee and Asheville, North Carolina she preached to both white and black members. In Huntsville, Alabama she told students and faculty at what is now Oakwood University that “birth, station, nationality or colour cannot elevate or degrade men,” and that those who “slight a brother because of his colour are slighting Christ” (p. 58). *Do Justice* tangibly demonstrates that however long it has taken, Adventist thinking—at least in some official quarters—has come to realize that it is part of Adventism’s heritage to regard change of our society as part of our ministry and mission.

The editors set the tone of *Do Justice* with this scene that opens the book’s introduction: During a sweltering Australian summer they convened a workshop for participants in a Youth Congress. They were not able to get many of the presumably Adventist young people to write Amnesty International letters on behalf of prisoners of conscience. Still, while packing up materials after the workshop, Nathan Brown and Joanna Darby ran across two letters from different Pacific nations describing poverty and injustice in the writers’ home villages. As the editors faced the enormity of injustice endured back home by two young members of their seminar, and the paucity of action by attendees to their seminar, “all our enthusiasm and good intentions seemed kind of wilted in the midday heat of the now-empty tent” (p. 2). This book has the feel to it that the editors came out of their experience determined to put together the best possible seminar on justice that they could provide young people attending Adventist youth congresses. They have succeeded.

The editors selected first-rate Adventist educators, preachers, and church administrators found in the United States, combined with creative writers and organizers from Australia—many affiliated with ADRA. The focus and tone of many of the writers is hortatory. The contributors seem to be responding to Jonathan Duffy, the president of ADRA International, when he turns his foreword into a call to improve individual character:

As individuals who make up God’s church, we must put our hands and feet to work for justice in this world. . . . Sometimes we feel like there’s nothing we can do as individuals to make a difference in this dark and broken world. But the truth is we can (p. vii).

Young activists within the Adventist community may come away from reading *Do Justice* disappointed. These pages include no in-depth, heart-stopping, life-changing analyses of discrimination against homosexuals, cultures of child abuse, violence against women, persistent poverty, or corporate degradation of the environment. Barring women from ordination is never mentioned as an example of injustice. There are articles that praise Amnesty International and its efforts on behalf of prisoners; Adventist Peace Fellowship; the Micah Challenge concerning world hunger; and PICO (People Improving Communities Through Organizing) National Network of faith-based organizations. But no articles express anger or come close to bitterness.

Nevertheless, activists can be warmed by voices in this volume. Harwood Lockton, a long-time faculty member at Avondale College, who has served in a variety of roles with ADRA Australia, makes an important distinction between service and advocacy in his essay, “When Doing Good Is Not Good Enough”: “As Adventists, we seem to be comfortable with charity and personal acts of compassion. . . . But perhaps if we had a greater collective focus on justice there might be a little less need for charity” (p. 129). Geoffrey Nelson-Blake, who is director of the national interfaith Community Organizing Residency, goes further. He declares that in addition to *service* and *advocacy*, believers serious about justice must commit themselves to *organizing*. “Organizing creates power for oppressed people to change the very systems of injustice that oppress them” (p. 139).

The 31 essays in *Do Justice* do provide a canon of biblical books calling for justice. In the New Testament, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, particularly the Beatitudes, rises in prominence above all other passages. Jesus’ ministry on earth—his attentiveness to the poor, his healing of the abandoned and vulnerable he encountered in his community—is seen as an exemplary life of justice.

The Old Testament prophets reverberate throughout the book. Kendra Haloviak-Valentine of La Sierra University declares that “those who take God seriously must take *just words* seriously: words like Amos’ call to ‘let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream’ ” (Amos 5:24, quoted on p. 14). Several authors

cite Micah's admonition to "do justice, and to love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Isaiah 58 is cited repeatedly. An important message of *Do Justice* is that prophets did not just look to the future; they deliberately provoked their own societies to help the orphan, the widow, and the immigrant *now* (a triad that appears 14 times in Scripture). If Adventism is a prophetic movement, true to the role of the Old Testament prophets, it will call the society within which it dwells to reform its ways. If Adventism is a prophetic movement it will call itself and the larger community surrounding it to embody the just and joyful society described in the glorious poetry of Isaiah and others of the prophets.

The authors of *Do Justice* also provide a silhouette of which Adventist teachings place justice at the core of the church's mission. These Adventist thinkers do not plunge into discussions of grace and works. Creation and the nature of humanity receive scant attention. The relevance of the Second Coming to justice is barely noted. In this book, the doctrine most often related to justice is the Sabbath. Even more than the weekly Sabbath, the authors demonstrate how the Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee are celebrations of liberation and justice, requiring rest for the land, freedom for slaves, and forgiveness of debts.

Do Justice suggests that a growing appreciation of justice and human rights as a part of Adventism's mission has coincided with our church's expanding understanding of the Sabbath. The achievement of Nathan Brown and Joanna Darby underscores the work that remains. How do Seventh-day Adventists relate the power and scope of the last word in our name to the urgent challenges of social justice? How does the remnant understand itself as God's prophetic avant-garde in the healing of the nations? ■

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Kellogg → continued from page 75...

tremendous respect, whereas his supersized ego, "go-it-alone" independence, and quirky commitments invite bemusement or disdain.

"Most people who know anything about Dr. Kellogg," writes Wilson, "are apt to associate him either with his most famous invention, the cornflake, or with T. C. Boyle's 1993 comic novel, *The Road to Wellville*,^[5] in which he was portrayed as a megalomaniacal quack." One of Wilson's goals "is to correct this caricature." Kellogg, Wilson opines, "emerges as less a quack and more an extraordinarily energetic innovator and activist . . . one of the precursors of today's 'health gurus' such as Deepak Chopra and Andrew Weil" (xii). In contrast to Chopra and Weil, however, Kellogg's views were shaped by the dual forces of 19th-century Christian physiology and Millerism, blended into an all-consuming, body-centric religion that, for Kellogg, evolved into the pseudoscience of race betterment. Few who have grown up in the Adventist tradition, however, have escaped the long reach of this indomitable high priest of "biologic living." ■

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References

1. Brian C. Wilson, *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and the Religion of Biologic Living* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2014).
2. The buildings that once housed the Battle Creek Sanitarium continue to dominate the Battle Creek landscape. Unable to survive the depression, the Battle Creek Sanitarium entered receivership in 1933. Eventually the physical plant was purchased by the federal government and today houses the Hart-Dole-Inouye Federal Center.
3. Richard W. Schwartz, *John Harvey Kellogg, M.D.: Pioneering Health Reformer* (Hagerstown, MD, Review and Herald, 2006).
4. On page 72, Wilson notes that "critics insisted on calling Kellogg's new theological position pantheism, that is, God and nature are one. Later, more precise critics would correctly label his position immanent theism or the doctrine of divine immanence (that is, God and nature are separate, but God is present in all of nature)."
5. T. Coraghessan Boyle, *The Road to Wellville* (New York: Viking, 1993).