
Citizens of Two Worlds

Adventists and Social Responsibility

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For centuries Christians have argued about how they should relate to the life and issues of this present world. We continue to debate the application of Jesus' memorable metaphors of leaven, salt, and light to our experience as citizens of two worlds.

Should our moral values make a difference, not just in our own personal spirituality, but also in the society in which we live? Should we separate religious matters (such as worship) from "secular" matters (like socio-political involvement)? In our personal and communal outreach, must we choose between evangelism and service?

We have recently surveyed a cross-section of Seventh-day Adventists in the United States about the results of their religious commitment toward social issues. This study will soon be published in book form along with our analysis of its implications.

Although we are aware that this is a complex and sensitive subject, in this article we will review one area of our findings and relate it to the biblical teaching about the relationship between religious commitment and social involvement. It is quite likely that our comments will also be relevant to Adventists in other countries.

Two Perspectives

Our survey revealed that the religious experience of most American Adventists has little discernable impact on their socio-political attitudes. Like other contemporary evangelical faiths, we seem to have fallen prey to the privatizing influences of the culture at large, and have little to say to wider social concerns.¹ Our

morality has become almost exclusively personal and individualistic.

Christians have taken two basic approaches toward social issues. The first, the evangelistic perspective, maintains that our main task is winning souls to Christ. All church-related activities and programs are geared toward this goal. Most if not all social problems, according to this view, can be solved by transforming people's hearts. Christians who have a heightened expectation of Christ's second coming—like us—see social problems as part of the progressive deterioration of society that precedes the end of the world. This logic leads us to accept things as they are because these predicted events announce that Jesus is at the door.

The second view, the socially involved, criticizes the evangelistic wing of Christianity as being unfaithful to the radical demands of justice called for by the Scriptures. Christians who favor this perspective see themselves as stewards of the earth called to hold back the winds of destruction. Evil is perceived as entrenched within the institutions and structures of society. Thus, morality can be established only through active involvement in changing the structures that oppress the poor. The church should not merely alleviate suffering but also transform those institutions that cause the suffering.

Both of these views have scriptural basis and support in the Christian tradition. Either position, when taken to an extreme, assumes that one can separate spiritual and material concerns. Both spring out of a Greco-Platonic dualistic understanding

of reality and human beings. The narrow evangelistic mode grants the soul primordial value over the body—the heavenly over the earthly, the eternal over the temporary. The strict social-concern mode emphasizes the other side of the dualism—matter over spirit, society over the individual.

Seventh-day Adventists have been granted a fuller understanding of the nature of human beings, their purpose and destiny. In fact, it may well be our prophetic mission to exemplify and proclaim a wholistic understanding of reality and salvation. Our message, then, will maintain in dynamic tension the two partial views just outlined.

Reasons for Noninvolvement

A review of our denominational history reveals that early Adventism—like early evangelicalism²—was actively involved in social concerns. However, as a religious movement grows and becomes "successful," it tends to dilute the radical claims of the gospel, choosing instead to domesticate and spiritualize its message. Our study suggests that many Adventists have been effectively squeezed into the mold of the world that surrounds us (Romans 12:2, Phillips).

For at least four reasons most American Adventists tend to support the status quo. One of them is their strict application of the separation between church and state, which leads to noninvolvement in the political process. For some of us, the government represents a corrupt institution, a necessary evil, while the church's main task is the proclamation of

the gospel. Thus, getting involved in secular matters will only detract us from our real mission. However, this position is dangerous because it denies that human beings are essentially social creatures. The Bible asserts the wholistic nature of human existence. Persons are not divided into distinct and separate compartments, each unconnected to the whole.

The second reason logically follows the first—the response of neutrality. It is better to remain "neutral" than to risk getting involved in political and social matters that will jeopardize our mission. We have been pragmatic rather than consistent in applying moral principles.³ However, it is impossible not to take sides within a democratic society. A neutral position in reality supports the side of whoever wins in the contest for political power. At times the winning side might hold positions consistent with one's moral values; but most of the times the interests of wealth, power, and social privilege win. Moreover, a neutral stance assumes that the Bible has nothing to say about social and economic issues.

The third reason is that many Adventists have adopted individualism as a basic value. This perspective assumes that each individual bears the major responsibility for his or her political, economic, and social problems. Thus many Christians equate political conservatism with religious orthodoxy.⁴ According to our findings, most American Adventists assume that capitalism is God's way of doing business. By implication, then, socialism is not. However, the tenets of economic individualism—reductionism, individual accountability, and benevolent self-interest—are secular values. To equate either capitalism or socialism with Christianity is to lose sight of the ideological transcendence of the gospel.

This emphasis on individualism allows members to get personally involved in diverse social or political issues. However, the church as

an official body, representing the worldwide community of faith, will refrain from taking a public stand on these issues. Such an approach does injustice to biblical teachings and may cause confusion. As Jan Paulsen has stated:

Activities that individuals engage in as an expression of Christian duty cannot be on a different order from those that the church sees as her mission. The situation is intolerable if individual Christians pursue social, ethical, and political matters that the church considers alien to her mission and nature. Rigid differentiation between Christian duty and the church's mission seems contrived and difficult to sustain.⁵

The fourth reason, which results from the previous factors, is a narrow emphasis on the evangelistic mode. Although Adventists espouse a wholistic view of human nature—that is, the inseparable integration of all spheres of life—our eschatological belief in the soon return of Jesus tends to

create a dualism that devalues earthly existence and exalts the future hope. Sometimes the proclamation of the Second Coming becomes "an excuse to shun ethical responsibility."⁶

Furthermore, individualism leads us to forget our dependence upon other members of the Christian community, the need to help our weaker brothers and sisters, and our responsibility to influence society at large.⁷

The Biblical Roots of Social Concern

Adventists uphold the centrality of Scripture as authoritative for instruction and moral guidance. The Bible does not speak of a remote God, unresponsive to human need, but rather of a God who feels deep concern toward His creation, leading Him to liberating actions on behalf of the most vulnerable in society. God is found in the midst of the most desperate of human experiences—suffering, pain, and death.

God reveals His character through His actions. His engagement in history proves that spiritual realities are inseparable from material realities. In the Old Testament we find Him using Joseph as a political figure to prevent mass starvation. God felt the pain of His people and sided with them against the oppressive Pharaoh. He instructed His followers to provide for the poor and orphans. He moved Nathan to confront King David with his covetousness. He empowered the desert shepherd Amos to condemn the powerful for exploiting the poor.

Commenting on the social principles outlined in the Old Testament, Ellen White wrote:

If men would give more heed to the teaching of God's Word, they would find a solution to these problems that perplex them. Much might be learned from the Old Testa-

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ment in regard to the labor question and the relief of the poor. In God's plan for Israel every family had a home on the land, with sufficient ground for tilling. Thus were provided both the means and the incentive for useful, industrious, and self-supporting life. And no devising of men has ever improved upon that plan. To the world's departure from it is owing, to a large degree, the poverty and wretchedness that exist today. If these principles were carried out today, what a different place this world would be.⁸

As we turn to the New Testament, we find God becoming fully human and completely identifying with human need. Jesus taught that to follow Him involves both alleviating suffering and bringing hope of eternal life. Those who maintain that Jesus' life and message did not have any social and political consequences fail to understand the biblical evidence.⁹ In His first public statement, Jesus connected His mission with the Old Testament call to social justice, quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, NIV; Isaiah 61:1-2).

By connecting His ministry to the prophetic tradition, Christ proclaimed His goal as the total restructuring of society. His followers were to be part of a new social order based on agape love—which is the foundation of His kingdom.

Jesus' actions show a ministry of inclusiveness, directed not only to the poor, outcasts of society, and women, but also to the rich. Jesus never accepted the status quo in any situation. When He visited the

rich, He called upon them to share their wealth. He responded to His disciples' grasping for power with lessons of servant-hood. In the final judgment, as Jesus explained in Matthew 25, God-walking will be considered more important than God-talking.¹⁰

A close examination of Jesus' life and ministry reveals a radical perspective that touches every dimension of human life with the power of the gospel. While Jesus did not identify with or endorse any of the contemporary Palestinian political agendas, His message and actions did threaten the social structures of the political and religious establishment.

A Call to Conversion

Jesus' mission called for the inauguration of a new order diametrically opposed to the present order.¹¹ He also called people to conversion—a new beginning (John 3:3-7). When conversion takes place, all spheres of life—spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, economic, political—are touched by the renewing influence of the Spirit.

First-century Greeks were concerned about correct intellectual understanding; but early Christians were more concerned with the total transformation of outlook and behavior. Conversion is never ahistorical and abstract. People are always called in specific historical circumstances. They live out their conversion in history. While the experience is deeply personal, it is never private. In fact, "any idea of conversion that is removed from the social and political realities of the day is simply not Biblical."¹²

The goal of conversion is to help bring the kingdom of God into the lives of people in this world in anticipation of the New Earth to come. Conversion from idolatry is a recurring biblical theme. The idols of our time are quite similar to those of yesterday—wealth, power, pride,

pleasure. To turn to God is to turn our back on every modern idol and surrender all of life to Him. It also means a new beginning: "When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old has gone, and a new order has already begun" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NEB).

Conversion is not just the reordering of the inward self, but also a reordering of that self in relation to the social world. The significance of the story of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10) is that immediately after his conversion, he made reparations to those he had wronged. He also provided for the poor. Zacchaeus recognized that he had committed social sin and that his conversion required reparation to and reconciliation with those he had exploited. His conversion involved a reversal of roles from oppressor and thief to servant and giver. To turn to Jesus is to identify with Him in the world.

While conversion is entirely of divine origin, its implementation requires human cooperation. Under the leading of the Holy Spirit, Christians undergo a transformation that includes a change in outlook and relationships. Like Jesus, they identify with the poor and needy. And, like Him, they seek to liberate people from their spiritual and material poverty. In solidarity with suffering humanity, Christians find a deeper understanding of God. As Ellen White stated:

From what has been shown me, Sabbathkeepers are growing more selfish and they increase in riches. Their love for Christ and His people is decreasing. They do not see the wants of the needy, nor feel their sufferings and sorrows. They do not realize that in neglecting the poor and the suffering they neglect Christ, and that in relieving the wants and sufferings of the poor as far as possible, they minister to Jesus.¹³

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We need to become more informed about the intricate ways in which evil becomes institutionalized and legitimized even by religious values and institutions. This will allow us to decide and act wisely, on the basis of Christian principles. "The Church that educates for discipleship must also educate for citizenship."¹⁴

In a democratic society the political process can effect change in many areas of social concern, both nationally and internationally. At the same time we must look beyond the present, remembering that nothing in history, nothing human, can absolutely be relied on. Why? Because at its root human nature is selfish and corrupt. Thus, as Christians consider political involvement, they must assess carefully the intentions and pretensions of political platforms and personalities.¹⁵

True conversion, then, leads Christians to see themselves as citizens of two worlds, with responsibilities to both. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will learn to be faithful to the entire teaching of the Bible. We will seek to strike a dynamic balance between the present and the future. Thus, we will proclaim salva-

tion only in Christ, but will also assist in practical ways those who are in need. We will look forward to the perfection of the earth made new, but will also help to break the bondage of injustice on this earth.

NOTES

1. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 231.

2. See David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1977).

3. Michael Pearson, *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 51.

4. Richard Perkins, *Looking Both Ways* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1987), pp. 111-112.

5. Jan Paulsen, "Is Social Service Our Mission?" *Adventist Review*, (August 31, 1989), pp. 17-20; quotation from p. 20.

6. John Brunt, *Now and Not Yet* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1987), p. 15.

7. David O. Moberg, *Wholistic Christianity* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1985), p. 32.

8. Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1952), pp. 195-196.

9. See, for example, John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids,

Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972); and Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics, and Society* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

10. See Frederick Herzog, *God-Walk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

11. See Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982).

12. Wallis, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

13. White, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

14. John Coleman, "The Two Pedagogies: Discipleship and Citizenship," pp. 35-75 in Mary C. Boys, ed., *Education for Citizenship* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), p. 57.

15. See Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), pp. 151-195.

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