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# Some Thoughts on Nonconformity in the Adventist Ethos

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# Some Thoughts on Nonconformity in the Adventist Ethos

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Teresa Reeve

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“**I**n the world, but not of the world.” This saying was so much a part of my religious upbringing that until very recently I simply assumed it was a verbatim quote from somewhere in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Often heard in support of this maxim was the King James version of 1 Peter 2:9: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a *peculiar* people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light...” In the view of those who gave me religious nurture, the word *peculiar* indicated that we ought to be noticeably different from the world so that at a glance it could be seen that we serve a different Master.

In juxtaposition to this theme, the Great Commission of Matthew 24:14 (KJV), “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be

preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come” regularly rang out from the pulpit of church and campmeeting and Adventist media, calling us into sustained engagement with the world. The urgency of this commission was underlined by the strains of songs such as, “Lift up the trumpet and loud let it ring, Jesus is coming again” reminding us that His coming was even “at the door.” The twin emphases of separation from the world and commitment to mission were not unique to Western Canadian Adventists of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, tied together and underlined by fervent hope in the soon coming of Jesus, they have been key themes in Adventism since its beginnings in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The theological and practical dynamics of living nonconformity in a worldwide organization committed to mission are complex; but the tension is a potentially healthy and balancing one. This paper will discuss four aspects of Adventist life and thought which have contributed to the way in which this tension is dealt with: the Adventist historical experience, the shape of God’s grace, the normative nature of Scripture, and the relationship between distinctive Adventist theology and praxis. These four factors have together led Adventism to deal with the mission-separation tension primarily through calling people out in significant ways from their dominant culture, rather than seeking to reorient culture or to merge into culture or participate in the local civil religion.

### **Historical Roots of Adventist Nonconformity**

At the beginning, many of the commitments and behaviors Adventists considered essential to godly life and thought were shared with significant segments of Christianity, including the Pietistic, Anabaptist, and Revivalist traditions, all of which believed these ideas to be deeply grounded in Scripture. The particular religious environment in the American northeast out of which the Adventist church was born was the experience of the Second Great Awakening with its call to leave one’s lackadaisical world-conformed lifestyle and return to “true religion” in both inward conversion and outward behavior. Many of the specific behavior traits identified by these

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early 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian revivalists as essential in separating from the world were, and remain, an important part of Adventist lifestyle expectations. Examples that carry on, to a greater or lesser degree, into present day Adventist practice include the eschewing of such activities as dancing, card-playing, jewelry, Sabbath (Sunday) work and the use of tobacco and alcohol.

Adventist pioneers, however, also faced other experiences which separated them in fundamental ways from their spiritual forebears. For many in the revivalist era of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, William Miller's call to look more closely at Scriptural prophecies of the soon coming of Christ held a compelling force. Christians from all denominations flocked to hear him and threw their lives into the desire to "be ready for Jesus to come." This urgent hope only intensified the emphasis on reformation and separation from worldliness already present in the contemporary religious environment. Early advent believers were thus dismayed when many from their local churches did not share in their excitement about Jesus' soon coming. As the gulf intensified, many were mocked and disfellowshipped by their own church communities and inadvertently found themselves in a state of nonconformity not only relative to the "world" but also to those with whom they had previously enjoyed communion in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of these events, Millerites found themselves in nonconformity with the world and with many of their fellow Christians; and they sought to make sense of what was happening in light of previous reformations in the church during which sincere and biblically justified reformers, such as Martin Luther, Menno Simons, and John Wesley, had been rejected and persecuted by the established churches.<sup>3</sup> Seeking an understanding of their experience in Scripture, a growing number of Advent believers, especially following the Great Disappointment of 1844, identified with the loyal remnant that had remained faithful to God despite trouble and persecution throughout the centuries. In Revelation's descriptions of an eschatological remnant who were keeping "the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (12:17; cf. 14:12), they saw a portrayal of their own contemporary experience. They saw themselves as being called

to join in the proclamation of the message of Revelation 14:6-7 to "Fear God and give Him glory for the hour of His judgment is come." The mainstream churches, on the other hand, who not only consciously refused the message of Jesus' soon coming but also rejected Advent believers, came to be understood as the fallen Babylon of Revelation 14:8-10.<sup>4</sup>

Though these events took place nearly two centuries ago, they continue to play an important part in Adventist identity and also in how Adventists relate to those outside their faith. Adventist schools, first established in the 1870's to protect children from worldly influence and prepare people for the Gospel work, now number 5,813 primary schools, 1,823 secondary schools, and 111 tertiary institutions worldwide.<sup>5</sup> While a smaller percentage of parents are now committed to Adventist education than was the case a few decades ago, research has demonstrated that the longer a young person is a part of the Adventist school system the more likely it is that he/she will remain an active member of the church.<sup>6</sup> Adventists have also been very careful about media consumption, traditionally avoiding, for example, novel-reading, worldly music, and attendance at theatres.<sup>7</sup> The ideal of country living, as an important means of separation from worldly influence, illustrates the continuing challenge of this tension, for the church still struggles to discover effective ways of ministering in an urban context. Their historical experience has also led Adventists to be especially wary of any temptation to use the state to accomplish religious ends. Generally in the past, this caution has extended to choosing to refrain from most forms of political involvement.<sup>8</sup>

Such practices of separation, growing out of the Adventist historical experience and their subsequent reading of Scripture, illustrate one factor in the strong ongoing Adventist commitment to nonconformity in relation to the world. Further, expectation of a future time of persecution just before the coming of Christ, based on their reading of the Synoptic Gospels and of Daniel and Revelation, continues to be a part of Adventist theology, reinforcing this ongoing ethic of separation.

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### Other Primary Factors Contributing to Nonconformity among Adventists Today

In addition to historical experience read through the lens of Bible prophecy, a second factor that can be seen to contribute to an Adventist emphasis on nonconformity with the world is one that is shared with all believers in Christ who have disciplined themselves to Him as their Master and Lord. Most fundamentally, it is God's grace through His Spirit that makes us new creatures, filled with the desire to know and please Him. While believers live in a fallen world at war in fundamental ways with God and His government, in an ongoing surrendered love-relationship with Christ, God's grace, rather than bent human desires, increasingly becomes the source and guide for the whole of the believer's life and thought.

A third factor at the core of Adventist nonconformity is the place of Scripture in Adventist thought and life. Whereas many denominations have moved away from reliance on Scripture and turned increasingly toward tradition and human reason, the vast majority of Adventists continue to read Scripture in accordance with the Reformation principles of *sola Scriptura* (the Bible as the final standard of truth and duty), *tota Scriptura* (all Scripture as inspired by God and thus fully authoritative), and *analogia Scriptura* (the harmony of Scripture). A commitment to accept all of Scripture—carefully understood through appropriate exegetical and theological means—as normative is seen as essential in avoiding the tendency to allow human thought and culture to determine one's understanding of God and His plan for our lives in relation to the world.

Several portions of Scripture have been particularly fundamental to Adventist nonconformity, in addition to those discussed earlier. The Law has been understood as an eternal expression of God's character and thus ever relevant to the Christian, whether in literal detail as in the Ten Commandments, in the principles behind the civil law, or in the ritual foreshadowing Christ's work through the sacrificial service and festivals.<sup>9</sup> The Old Testament experience of Israel and the repeated need for God to call His people apart from the nations is understood as instructive to the church today, in accordance with both the instruction of Paul (e.g. 2 Cor 6:14-18) and

with the end-time call of Revelation 18:4 to “come out of her my people.” The numerous parables of Jesus calling people to be ready for His coming have had especially strong resonance for Adventists, heightening their resolve to be ready to joyfully meet Him when He comes.

A final factor that might be recognized as playing a role in the ongoing Adventist ethic of nonconformity is the inseparable nature of theology and praxis in a number of Adventism's more distinctive beliefs. For example, the belief in the sacred nature of the seventh-day Sabbath is not fundamentally a concept to be believed so much as it is a space in time where living itself is reoriented. On the Sabbath, humans are invited to turn from the frantic and acquisitional pace of the world around them to rest wholeheartedly in the values and rhythms of the God of Creation. This is done together with one's family and the community of believers, as well as in solitude with Him. A *de facto* consequence of this kind of Sabbath-keeping is that many activities that take place during the Sabbath hours are thereby missed by Adventists. The fact that there are few other faith communities who gather for Sabbath worship on the seventh day adds some distance even between Adventists and the philosophical trends of other Christians.

The rejection of the Greek dualism between body and soul, which is evidenced doctrinally in the Adventist disavowal of immortality of the soul and an ever-burning hell, also has its natural working out in praxis. Because the body is understood to be inseparable from the soul, the way we care for our bodies has been an inseparable aspect of soul care and Christian discipleship. It is for this reason that Adventists not only carry on 19<sup>th</sup> century revivalist mores such as the avoidance of alcohol, but also have come to value healthy living as a spiritual practice including such activities as exercise and eating a healthy, vegetarian diet.

The vivid conviction of Christ's ongoing work of judgment and the imminence of His coming is also manifestly oriented toward praxis. The Adventist conception of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan views judgment not only as an evaluation of individual human lives, but also as a final demonstration for all time

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that God's ways are indeed infinitely good and right. Adventists thus see believers' actions of faithful separation from the world as being like "a city set on a hill" in a universal sense, a part of a larger theater of the universe in which He is about to complete the final act in the creation of an earth made new. In this view there is little impetus for seeking to redeem human culture.

The pragmatic nature of the Adventist ethos is only enhanced by the major percentage of space and emphasis devoted to practical matters by Ellen White, who continues to be an authoritative spiritual guide for most Adventists. Much of her writing involved testimonies to specific individuals regarding specific discipleship issues, as well as to church and parachurch entities ministering in areas such as education, medical work, family, and evangelism. The fact that the distinctive aspects of Adventism are not a standard part of the general Christian tradition has itself tended, through the years, to drive Adventists to Scripture for understanding and clarification rather than to religio-cultural tradition.

### Conclusions

As a result of their historical experience, appreciation of grace, understanding of Scripture, and theological commitments, Adventists are much more inclined, on a philosophical level, toward a critical stance toward culture, rather than toward either an easy acculturation with the world or a missional methodology of syncretism. Their emphasis on mission to prepare for and even hasten the Second Coming does, however, not allow them to engage in full retreat from the world.

Of course the very strengths which help Adventists avoid conforming or catering to culture *carte blanche* also bring with them corresponding challenges. As a conservative tradition with carefully delineated understandings of Scriptural truth and mores, hard-won by our pioneers, it is easy to cling to 19<sup>th</sup> century forms without considering their applicability and implications in the face of contemporary realities. One simple example is that while most Adventists will still not attend a movie theatre, they are often not as careful about the various forms of electronic media they bring into



their own homes. Another anomaly caused by attention to the letter rather than the spirit of past practices is the continued disapproval of traditional jewelry such as rings and necklaces, while elaborate brooches and watchbands (not to mention homes and cars) receive little notice. Separation and distinctiveness have too easily become ends in themselves, organized around self-chosen identity markers that allow groups to sideline other important issues, forgetting the God-centered reasons behind these differences. Such attitudes can allow people to slip into a kind of spiritual legalism and arrogance.

On the other side of the picture, both ongoing and periodic actions against the temptation to legalism are a significant part of Adventist community life. Voices both at the center and the margins of Adventism through the years have made it their mission to live and lead in a Christocentric manner that makes lifestyle a principled response to grace. Particularly powerful emphases in this direction were heard in certain eras, including the 1880's and 1950's and 60's, in response to a perceived drift in the opposite direction. As might be expected, the reaction against a perceived legalistic focus on the specific behaviors has at times led to an over-emphasis on justification by faith that leaves no room for the call to biblical discipleship. Overall, the pull in one direction or the other has functioned to provide checks and balances which help to draw the center of Adventism towards balance on these issues.

A challenge of a slightly different kind is the aging Adventist population in North America. While older Adventists continue to hold to traditional Adventist lifestyle mores, many among the "younger" generations, raised in an era of ubiquitous media presence and postmodernity, do not see the importance of separation from the world in the same way as their predecessors. It is easier, in the face of evidence of inconsistent standards, to loosen one's standards to the lowest common denominator than to seek the principles behind the standards and apply them consistently to the new context. In the post-modern era, the place of any church institution in determining one's values and lifestyle choices is often questioned. The increasing lapse of time between the early Adventist proclamation of an imminent coming and the present day has diminished the

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sense of urgency and the eagerness to forego cultural preferences in order to retain one's unique Adventist identity. Thus the drift away from traditional Christian lifestyle standards by many churches since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based in the argument that they are legalistic and distracting from what is really important, has not left Adventism unaffected.

Evidence of shifts in Adventist values in some circles includes acceptance and even celebration of military service, jewelry becoming almost the norm in some churches, and widespread acceptance of certain dietary choices once considered taboo. On the other hand, some young Adventists react to such trends by seeking to return to the thinking and values of the early Adventists, not always managing either to understand them clearly or to recognize their weaknesses. Bright spots include movements such as *The One Project* that have arisen among Adventist young people themselves to create a community of discipleship and mission that is vibrantly Christ-centered as well as actively submitted. The research of church entities such as the *Institute of Church Ministry* at the SDA Theological Seminary has also been very helpful by making it possible to address these issues in informed ways.

The historic strength of the call to come out of the world also means that Adventists' relationships to possibly neutral and positive aspects of culture have not always been carefully thought through. Adventist missiologists are among those who have thought deeply about these questions, recognizing and seeking to explore the place of contextualization in Adventist life and mission. The problem with seeing oneself as fundamentally in opposition to culture is not only that good things may be rejected along with the bad, but that one does not always recognize where one is, in fact, acting on the basis of culture rather than Scripture. While this is not a problem in areas where culture colors our lives in ways not circumscribed by Scripture, it can be significantly misleading when other actions and ideas are simply assumed to be Scriptural. Most Adventists have understood in a general way that human persons are shaped by factors of human nature and experience and by their culture and society; but fewer have explicitly considered the power of culture in their own

lives, or the possibility that these factors have the potential to both contribute to and to eclipse the work of God.

A further challenge for the world church is that for generations many missionaries, while seeking to avoid syncretization, did not adequately distinguish between spreading the Gospel and reduplicating conservative Western cultural and worship styles. An interesting side-effect of this is that, in an era of rapid global communication and transportation, individuals retaining a 1930's and 40's view of what it means to be Adventist are rubbing shoulders regularly with those in rapidly changing cosmopolitan cultures who have different interpretations. The resulting tensions are at times painful, but also help each group to look again at things they might otherwise have assumed.

The exciting growth of the church in the developing world has brought with it both joys and challenges.<sup>10</sup> In some places the church is growing so fast that it is very difficult to provide for adequate discipling. This is especially problematic when bringing souls into the church is treated with more concern than discipling them as members of the body. The church has attempted to respond creatively to this challenge by building up its institutions of higher learning to train leadership on each continent and providing numerous Bible training conferences to assist pastors in each of the world divisions in dealing with key issues faced in their local areas. On a more grass roots level, the church provides the Hope Channel, with educational and inspirational programming, to many areas of the world by satellite, and the journal *Adventist World*, which is sent monthly at no cost to members around the world.

In short, the Adventist Church as a whole remains committed to the basic view that the ways of the world are in fundamental opposition to the ways of God, and therefore to the task of calling all people to a true and life-shaping commitment to Christ and the full teachings of His Word. The rich interaction of cultures and ways of thinking within the church continues to pull us to think carefully about what things are fundamental principles of Adventist discipleship to Christ and which are tied to a particular culture and therefore expendable. First and foremost we recognize that the ongo-

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ing challenge and solution underlying such a vision is to continually seek to allow Christ to be the center, the ground, and reason for every distinction that is made. At the same time we seek to honestly understand in a more nuanced way the place that we have in culture, and that the culture has in us, and to deal both self-critically and faithfully with what we find.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The saying comes closest to John 17:15-18 (NASB): “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” (cf. also 1 John 2:15-17)

<sup>2</sup> In North America at that time, “the world” would have generally referred to a careless or a rejected Christianity, rather than to a secular or pluralistic culture or society.

<sup>3</sup> The earliest Adventist pioneers belonged to a variety of Christian denominations including the Methodist, Christian Connexion, and Baptist faith traditions. An important element in the identity formation of each of these groups has been stories of founding reformers who called for a re-emphasis or rediscovery of particular Scriptural truths, along with corresponding lifestyle changes, and who then found themselves and their message rejected by the mainstream of the church.

<sup>4</sup> This is an identification not unheard of among other reform movements of the time. For example, a group of American abolitionists, identified as “come-outers,” also took on the task of calling people out of the fallen Babylon identified as the mainstream churches. See Jordan Ryan, “Quakers, ‘Comeouters,’ and the Meaning of Abolitionism in the Antebellum Free States,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no 4 (Winter 2004): 587-608; William Lloyd Garrison, (1854), *No Compromise with the Evil of Slavery*. Speech presented to the Broadway Tabernacle, New York, NY.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers as of December 31, 2010. <http://www.adventist.org/world-church/facts-and-figures/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> Jerome Thayer, “Youth Retention Study Reanalysis,” Unpublished manuscript, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 2008c; Roger Dudley and V Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance*, (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1992), 247-249; Jerome Thayer, “The Impact of Adventist Schools on Students,” *Fourth Symposium on the Bible and Adventist Scholarship*, March 16-22, 2008. [http://fae.adventist.org/essays/iv\\_Thayer\\_Jerry.pdf](http://fae.adventist.org/essays/iv_Thayer_Jerry.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Development of more sophisticated and far-reaching forms of media in more recent years has challenged these simple rules. At the same time, even today this

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concern about the media includes, for many, a deep caution with regard even to the media of other Christian individuals and organizations.

<sup>8</sup> The one area where Adventists have traditionally been willing to get involved has been to advocate for religious freedom.

<sup>9</sup> This reverence for the law is not for the purpose of achieving one's salvation but for the instruction and discipleship of those already belonging to God.

<sup>10</sup> In some countries, growth has been successful to the point that Adventists have become a significant political factor, and increasing numbers holding significant public offices challenges our simple past political solution of remaining primarily uninvolved in government affairs.