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The Mission-Charity Dilemma: Fresh Perspectives from Paul's Practice

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On April 17, 2014, Jacques Doukhan read the paper, “The Tension of Seventh-day Adventist Identity: An Existential and Eschatological Perspective,” to inaugurate the Spring Symposium of ATS.¹ Doukhan argued that our name, “Seventh-day Adventist” not only describes “the components of our faith,” but “carries also a tension that makes in fact the essence of our identity.” Thus, the “Seventh-day” part of our name roots us in creation. It forces us to value and embrace concrete, earthly existence and to care for our planet and our bodies and to work for social justice. It defines us as “human, real, and present in this world.”

Thus, Adventists promote health and education and run a large network of hospitals and schools around the world. We have also created and run the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), which seeks to relieve human need around the globe; and a strong advocacy for religious liberty not only for us, but for all. These are not Public Relations strategies or tactics to impress others, win their favor, or to gain access for the gospel. They are simply an inherent part of our theology. They are an essential part of who we are.

¹ Jacques Doukhan, “The Tension of Seventh-day Adventist Identity: An Existential & Eschatological Perspective” (Paper presented at the Spring Symposium of the Adventist Theological Society, Collegedale, TN, 17 April 2014), 1; see also the published version of Doukhan’s article in this issue, “The Tension of Seventh-day Adventist Identity: An Existential and Eschatological Perspective.”

CORTEZ: MISSION-CHARITY DILEMMA

The “Adventist” part of our name, on the other hand, separates us from this world—and other religions—by insisting that salvation does not occur in the encounter with the divine in the sentimental or existential realm in the present, or in the personal subjective moment of translation at death, but requires the creation of a new world, a new body, and a new community in the future. It defines us as “holy and different in this world, . . . [and] as witnesses to the other city.”

Thus, we believe in a heavenly sanctuary and in the resurrection of the dead and a creation of a new world. We have a high view of Scripture and reject the historical critical methods of interpretation that deny Scripture’s power to predict the future. We preach about Daniel and Revelation and try to evangelize the world before the end.

Similarly, George R. Knight noted the tension that exists between mission and academic vision in Adventist education in a paper read in 2007 at a meeting of educational leaders and church administrators.² He argued that Adventist colleges were instituted in order to train missionaries. Nevertheless, Adventist education has struggled from the very beginning and throughout its history to find a balance between, on the one hand, the academic ideal of teaching the sciences and the liberal arts to prepare professionals recognized by society and secular institutions and, on the other hand, the teaching of the Bible and religion to prepare missionaries to advance God’s cause. He also noted that most non-Adventist Christian colleges and universities that were created with similar missional purposes later succumbed to the pressure and solved the tension by distancing themselves from their churches.³

Knight also argued later that the church experiences the same tension in the form of a polarity between the church’s apocalyptic vision and its social mission.⁴ Thus, a sector of the church focuses on preaching the beasts of Daniel and Revelation and the final events while another focuses on preaching a gospel of love and relieving the needs of those around them.

² George R. Knight, “The Missiological Roots of Adventist Higher Education and the Ongoing Tension between Adventist Mission and Academic Vision,” *The Journal of Adventist Education*, April/May (2008), 20-28.

³ Tunstead Butchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁴ George R. Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2008).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

He also notes that in its current situation Adventism is distancing itself dangerously from its apocalyptic vision, trying to remain relevant to society around us by ministering to its needs. He argued that this could have the same damaging effect that it had in mainline Christian religions who gave up their distinctive message and, ironically, lost their relevance.⁵

Doukhan and Knight study Adventism from different perspectives and use different language to describe its tensions, but arrive at the same conclusion. In their view, Adventism should not seek to solve the tension between an orientation towards the future and the world to come and an orientation to the present world and its needs. This may be uncomfortable or counterintuitive; yet, Adventists should not try to create a synthesis out of these elements or forge a compromise. Synthesis would be unacceptable because it would imply the destruction of the essential characteristics of both elements in order to create a third element that is different—just as the synthesis of highly flammable hydrogen and toxic oxygen produces water, which is neither flammable nor toxic.

A compromise would not be an option either, because it would limit and restrain both elements through the political demands of making concessions. Synthesis destroys the uniqueness of the elements and compromise suppresses them. Following this logic, we may suggest that Doukhan would even oppose finding a balance between these two elements because this would imply the neutralization of their forces.

In Doukhan's view, Seventh-day Adventists should focus both on this world and the solution to its problems, and in the world to come and the proclamation of its glories. The uniqueness and force of these two tendencies should not be destroyed through a process of synthesis, restrained through negotiation, or neutralized in the search for a balance. In the words of Doukhan: "the two dimensions have to be carried together and totally, because they are both categories of revelation." Thus, "The

⁵ Knight, *Apocalyptic Vision*, 7-27. See also Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

CORTEZ: MISSION-CHARITY DILEMMA

Seventh-day Adventist Church should not be defined to the right or to the left or even to the center; it should only be defined in tension, [as its name indicates] as ‘Seventh-day Adventist.’”⁶

Is this possible? Can Seventh-day Adventists be focused at the same time in this world and on the world to come? Do not the constraints of time and money demand negotiation and the search for balance? I want to suggest in this paper that a fresh look at Paul’s mission practices will provide important insights on how we can live this tension in our mission.

Paul is an interesting example because there has been a longstanding perception that Paul was not really interested in the poor. It is commonly suggested that Paul did not care much for the poor because he was expecting the imminent coming of Jesus. This is what L. J. Hoppe and Peter Davids argue:

Paul’s attitude toward the poor was probably colored by his expectations regarding the imminent return of Christ. The apostle’s belief that Christ’s return was near made dealing with socioeconomic problems at any great length unnecessary.⁷

[W]hen Paul discusses wealth and charity. . . , [he] lacks the sharp note of prophetic denunciation [that characterizes other figures of the Jesus-movement]... This may be due to the fact that. . . [his] imminent eschatology made social issues less important.⁸

Another suggestion has been that Paul only raised a collection for the poor in Jerusalem because of political reasons (Gal 2:10). Thus he considered the participation of believers in this collect as voluntary and, therefore, not essential to the gospel. Loader argues, for example, that:

Paul’s real concern was neglect of the community’s members, “not the needs of the poor in general.” And that Paul’s collection for the poor in Jerusalem was driven primarily by “theological political reasons,” rather

⁶ Doukhan, 11.

⁷ L. J. Hoppe, *There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 158.

⁸ Peter H. Davids, “The Text of Wealth,” in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity* (ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 355-84.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

than a genuine concern to meet the needs of the poor as a result of the gospel of the Jesus-followers. In Loader's estimate, "Paul gives no indication that addressing human poverty. . . was central to the gospel message."⁹

This assessment of Paul's practice raises some questions for us as Adventists. Does the imminence of Jesus' return make the work for the poor unnecessary or irrelevant? Do we engage in social work for political reasons? That is to say, is it our charity work a Public Relations strategy? Is it our purpose in doing charity simply to gain a favorable view from the public around us obtaining a favorable access for our message? Probably, the issue is summarized in the following question: Is addressing human need essential to the Adventist understanding of the gospel or ancillary to it?

In a fresh analysis of Paul's relationship to the poor, as evidenced in his epistles, Bruce W. Longenecker has suggested that addressing human need was in fact essential to Paul's understanding of the gospel. He suggests that Paul always promoted doing good to all, not only to fellow Christians, and that addressing human need was an evidence of true religion. I will follow closely his work and sources here.

Appeals to Care for the Poor in Pauline Literature

First, there are evidences that Paul's collection for the poor in Jerusalem was not the only such offering or effort in his ministry.

For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them *and for all others* (2 Cor 9:12-13, emphasis mine).

The first thing to note here is the fact that for Paul, the Corinthians' generous contribution was an external evidence, a concretization, of their

⁹ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 5; quoting W. Loader, *The New Testament with Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 68.

CORTEZ: MISSION-CHARITY DILEMMA

“confession of the gospel of Christ.” Thus, he considered “supplying the needs” an essential expression of the gospel. A second element worth noting is that the last phrase of the verse suggests that the Corinthians had contributed not only for this offering, but also for others.¹⁰

Galatians 6:10 is another important verse in this regard:

So then, as we have opportunity, let us *do good to everyone*, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (emphasis mine).

There are four aspects that are important to note in this passage. First, this passage climaxes Paul’s theological argument in the letter. It represents the ultimate outcome of Paul’s reflections. Paul frequently uses transitional particles, “so then” (ἄρα οὖν) to signal the conclusion or main point of a discussion (cf. Rom 5:18; 7:3, 25; 8:12; 9:16, 18; 14:12, 19; Eph 2:19; 1 Thess 5:6; 2 Thess 2:15).¹¹ In this case, v. 10 is the conclusion for what has been said from 5:13-6:10. In fact, the exhortation “do good to everyone” is probably an *inclusio* to the exhortation in 5:13 “through love serve one another.”¹² Secondly, the expression “let us do good” (ἐργαζώμεθα τὸ ἀγαθὸν) was virtually a “technical terminology in the ancient world for bestowing material benefits on others.”¹³ Paul is not referring here to a spiritual service for others, but to a material one. Third, the expression ὡς

¹⁰ Scholars have problems to accept the normal reading for this phrase because there is apparently no other reference to collections for the poor in the Pauline letters. For example, Ralph P. Martin comments that the expression “and for all others” (καὶ εἰς πάντας) “should strictly mean that the Gentile congregations raised money gifts for other churches and worthy causes other than the needs of the people at Jerusalem. But we have no knowledge of these actions. So we must take the phrase to be a general one in praise of the generous spirit that moves the readers,” Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40; Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 294.

¹¹ Paul adds in 6:11-18 a summary of the argument in his own hand to end the dictation, as he often did. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 1993), 334. He did the same in 1 Cor 16:21-24; 2 Thess 3:17; and probably also in Rom 16:17-20; Col 4:18).

¹² Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 282.

¹³ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 142. He quotes the full analysis of this expression in Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 11-40.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

καίρῳ ἔχομεν, whether indicative or subjunctive,¹⁴ may be understood eschatologically (as long as we have time) or existentially (whenever we have time).¹⁵ The language in verses 6-9 of sowing and reaping on the one hand and corruption and eternal life on the other, suggests that the author is intending the phrase in an eschatological sense: as long as we have time, let us do good to all. Thus, doing “good” to the one who teaches would be a sowing that would result in the eschatological harvest of eternal life in the one who is taught (v. 6). Finally, the author explicitly states that we should do “good” to all. This is an expression of the gospel. Paul has argued throughout the letter that the redemption in Christ is for “all” regardless national, ethnic, sexual, cultural, social, and even some religious distinctions (Gal 2:16; 3:8, 22, 26-28). Therefore, since the gospel does not show partiality, its expression in good works should not show partiality but be extended to all.¹⁶

Similar exhortations to philanthropy are found towards the end of most of the Pauline letters. In 1 Thess 5:14, Paul exhorts the readers to “help the weak.” The weak probably refers to those who are “economically vulnerable,” which was the result in many cases of physical infirmities.¹⁷ In Rom 12:13, Paul exhorts believers to “contribute to the needs of the saints.” The word “needs” refers to material needs as the exhortation to hospitality suggests. In 2 Thess 3:11-15, Paul argues that even the abuse of the generosity of believers should not be used as an excuse for discontinuing acts of benevolence. Similarly, Paul exhorts the rich (1 Tim 6:17, 18) to be “rich in good works” and Christians in general to “devote themselves to good works” (Titus 3:14). Finally, in Acts 20:35, as he speaks to the elders in Ephesus he says that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” So, Paul normally includes an appeal to do “good” at the end of his letters.

¹⁴ The variant ἔχομεν is also very well supported.

¹⁵ See Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 282.

¹⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 283.

¹⁷ Paul uses the term “weak” in a context that suggests economic vulnerability (1 Cor 1:26-29; 8:9, passim; 9:22 [cf. vv. 12, 15-18]). Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 143-4.

**Galatians 2:10 and the Centrality of Caring for the Poor
in the Gospel**

Probably the most important passage regarding Paul's views on charity is his response to the request of the apostles in Jerusalem, whom he calls "pillars," in Galatians 2:9-10. The passage reads in the following way:

and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

In his analysis of this passage, Bruce W. Longenecker has shown that four important aspects of this passage have been misread. First, it is thought that the request to "remember the poor" had no real significance, but was an additional request unrelated to the main points of the debate.¹⁸ Second, the expression "poor" refers specifically to believers in Jerusalem (cf. Rom 15:26).¹⁹ Third, Paul fulfills the request by raising a collection for the poor that is attested in the Corinthian correspondence and Romans. Finally, it is from this request that Paul begins to take care of the poor in his own communities. In summary, it is considered that the request in Gal 2:10 to "remember the poor" was not central to the gospel that Paul is careful to defend but an additional petition that Paul is willing to fulfill because it was politically expedient.

In my view, Bruce W. Longenecker lays a strong challenge to this reading.

The Poor Does Not Refer Only to the Church in Jerusalem

It is not necessarily the case that Gal 2:10 consists in a request of financial help for believers in Jerusalem. It is true that the expression

¹⁸ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1979), 101; Larry Hurtado, "The Jerusalem Collection and the Book of Galatians," *JSNT* 5 (1979): 51; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 59.

¹⁹ Michael Goulder, "A Poor Man's Christology," *NTS* 45 (1999): 333; J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 207; Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 144; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 60.

“poor” in early Judaism did not refer only to persons in precarious financial situations, but also carried nuances of humility, obedience and piety. Qumran covenanters often referred to themselves as “the community of the poor” (1QH 5.1, 21; 18.14; 1QM 14.7; 1QpHab 12.3, 6, 10; see also Pss. Sol. 5:2, 13) and a branch of Jewish Christians would later call themselves “Ebionites” (אביוניִים), which literally means “poor ones.” Ephrem the Syrian (AD 306-373), Jerome (AD 329-420), and John Chrysostom (AD 347-407) understood this passage as referring to financial help to believers in Judea or Jerusalem.²⁰ Nevertheless, this understanding evident in the 4th and 5th centuries was not attested in previous references to Gal 2:10 in early Christian literature. Tertullian (Against Marcion 5.3; AD 207-208) does not see allusions here to a specific group in a specific location but a practice benefitting the poor in general as God did in his laws in the Old Testament. Similarly, Origen (Comm. Matt. 16.8.165-180) cites Gal 2:10 as referring to caring for the poor in general and Athanasius refers to it as a general admonition to Christians in general (H. Ar. 61.1.3).²¹ Furthermore, the claim that the Ebionites represented the line of a group or the group of Jewish Christian in Jerusalem that called themselves “the Poor” has been effectively contested by Leander E. Keck and Richard Bauckham.²² The Ebionites were, in fact, followers of a heretic named Ebion who later claimed to be the inheritors of Jesus’ earliest movement.²³

The Request Was that He Continued to Take Care for the Poor

It is most unlikely that Paul began to take care of the poor as a result of the request of the “Pillars” of Jerusalem. The Greek construction of the passage suggests that the request made to Paul was that they continued to remember the poor acknowledging Paul’s previous actions of care for them. The verb “remember” is in the present tense, which in this case probably carries a constative sense and should be translated “that we should continue

²⁰ See analysis in Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 169-70.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Leander E. Keck, “The Poor among the Saints in the New Testament,” *ZNW* 56 (1965): 100-129; Keck, “The Poor among the Saints in Jewish Christianity and Qumran,” *ZNW* 57 (1966): 54-78; Richard J. Bauckham, “The Origin of the Ebionites,” in *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature* (ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 162-81.

²³ See Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 170-73.

CORTEZ: MISSION-CHARITY DILEMMA

to remember the poor” (emphasis mine).²⁴ Note that Luke mentions how Barnabas had already sold a field to help those in need (Acts 4:36-37). The multiple exhortations to care for the needs of others in Paul’s letters suggests that taking care for the poor was an essential part of his ministry. It is also possible that the request of the “Pillars” was in the visit in which Paul and Barnabas brought relief to Jerusalem during the famine in the time of Claudius (Acts 11:26-30).²⁵

Our understanding of the meaning of the verb “remember” is intimately connected to our understanding of the last clause of 2:10: “which I was also eager [ἐσπούδασα] to do.” The verb σπούδαζω may be used to refer to a manner of action (“to act diligently”) or to a disposition (“to be eager to”).²⁶ Thus, Gal 2:10 could mean that Paul was—or became²⁷—“eager to help the poor” (disposition) or that he “had been diligently doing it.” The syntax allows both translations. The context suggests, however, that the meaning intended is the last one: Paul had already been diligently remembering the poor;²⁸ otherwise, it could be said that the pillars had “added” the “remembrance of the poor” to Paul’s understanding of the gospel. Paul is adamant that they added “nothing” to his gospel (v. 6).

Taking Care of the Poor Was an Essential Response of Faith

The request to “remember the poor” was not a final unrelated request to Paul but intimately connected to the argument about the gospel.

Galatians 2:6-10 is a single, very complex sentence. It seems clear, however, that verse 10 completes the thought begun in verse 6: “for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me. . . only that we should remember the poor.” In this sense, verses 7-9 are parenthetical statements that explain the main idea that the leaders of Jerusalem added nothing

²⁴ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 190-91.

²⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 1993), 113. See also D. J. Downs, “Paul’s Collection and the Book of Acts Revisited,” *NTS* 52 (2006): 50-70.

²⁶ BDAG 939; See Bruce W. Longenecker, 191-5.

²⁷ If we take the aorist as an ingressive aorist, Wallace, 558-9.

²⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 1993), 113. He considers that Paul’s encounter with the leaders of Jerusalem occurred on the occasion of the visit registered in Acts 11:27-30, where he and Barnabas delivered financial relief sent from Antioch.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Paul's gospel and mission. The emphasis made in verses 7-9—that Peter should go to the circumcision and Paul to the gentiles—explains the concern that the “pillars” of Jerusalem had. Why this concern?

Provision for the poor was essential to the identity of Judaism and Christianity.²⁹ As Dunn asserts, “almsgiving was widely understood within Judaism as a central and crucial expression of covenant righteousness (Dan. 4:27; Sir. 3:30; 29:12; 40:24; Tob. 4:10; 12:9; 14:11).”³⁰ Indeed, it is possible in some cases to consider ‘almsgiving’ and ‘righteousness’ as synonymous.³¹ Thus, it seems that the insistence of the Jerusalem “pillars” on this point was necessary as a defense of the integrity of the gospel. Thus, Dunn suggests

What the ‘pillars’ asked for was that an obligation characteristically understood as a primary expression of Jewish covenant piety should be given high priority by Paul and Barnabas. And if they were indeed being treated as responsible for the Gentiles (see on 2:9), that would also imply that Paul and Barnabas should ensure that their Gentile converts shared the same concern.³²

Concern for and help to the poor, however, was not important for the Greco-Roman world.³³ Gillian Clark has asserted that,

No Roman cult groups, not even those that were primarily mutual groups, . . . looked after strangers and people in need. . . . Provision for the poor was not an ethical priority in Roman culture.³⁴

Thus, concern for the poor was an essential evidence of the authenticity of the conversion of the gentiles. It should have been difficult to dispute that their generosity was fulfilling the vision of Isaiah 58:

²⁹ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 108-34.

³⁰ J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Continuum, 1993), 112.

³¹ TDNT 2:196.

³² Dunn, 113.

³³ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 60-107.

³⁴ G. Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 23-24.

CORTEZ: MISSION-CHARITY DILEMMA

If you extend your soul to the hungry
And satisfy the afflicted soul,
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness,
And your darkness shall be as the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones;
You shall be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. (vv. 10-11).

It is not strange, then, that the first gentile convert, Cornelius, had been praised among Jews for giving “alms” to the people (Acts 10:2) and the offering that Paul would bring to Jerusalem (Acts 21:19-20) would also call forth expressions of praise among Jews. Caring for the poor was important for both Christian and non-Christian Jews as a solid evidence of genuine acceptance of the gospel by the gentiles.

Conclusion

We conclude, then, that it is most likely that Paul considered caring for the poor as being essential to the experience of the gospel. There was not in his mind a dilemma regarding the relationship between social relief and mission. Emphasis on one aspect did not detract from the other. Paul could conceive that emphasizing both was possible because he did not consider them as separate issues, but one.

As Doukhan and Knight suggest we are not to solve the dilemma between mission and charity. Instead, we need to focus on both. The Christian faith is defined by several dilemmas that don't have a solution. The most important example of them is Jesus Christ. He is both 100% God and 100% human. The incarnation is not the result of a process of synthesis, compromise, or balance. Jesus is both totally. This unresolved tension in the identity of Jesus Christ is transmitted to the church, which is the body of Christ, and to Scriptures that bear witness about Him. The church is both in this world, but not of this world (John 17). It experiences affliction in this world (John 16), but is already seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2). Scripture is 100% of divine origin, but is expressed 100% in history and human language. Adventist interpretation should not try to ameliorate this tension, but faithfully reflect it.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jesus' ministry was also a perfect expression of this dilemma. He healed, taught, and did good, but also preached the kingdom of God. There was no compromise in His purposes. Every healing action of Jesus was both a full expression of His interest in this world and an uncompromised expression of the power and hope of the kingdom of heaven.

Likewise, John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, came preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:1). Then he explained, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise" (Luke 3:11). Both Jesus and John the Baptist show that the hope in the kingdom of heaven is uncompromising in its concern for the world here and now.

Thus, if we follow the example of Jesus and John the Baptist, an identity of tension means that everything we preach and proclaim about the coming world should have an impact on our audience in a better way of life, better education, better health, better family and human relations, and better quality of life here and now. In this sense, every disconnection between our theology and our care for the world around us should be considered a betrayal of the essence of the gospel. On the other hand, every act of relief of human need, of care for social suffering, of interest in enhancing the quality of life around us should be just as much a part of our interest in their ultimate well-being and in the restoration of their relationship with the creator of the universe. In this sense, any disconnection between our care for human need and an interest in restoring the ruptured relationships with the Creator of the world would be considered a betrayal of the essence of love. The church should not be either a social welfare agency or a theological education program, but a transformation force that begins in theology and culminates in life.

In the same way, when it comes to Christian life, we do not believe in a compromise between faith and works, but in a life that is fully committed to faith, dependent on grace, and entirely and unapologetically expressed in works. This is a tension, we believe, that should never be solved.

CORTEZ: MISSION-CHARITY DILEMMA

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